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Desertion and Discontent in the East German Border Police, 1948-1959

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Desertion and Discontent in the East German Border Police, 1948-1959

A thesis presented in Candidacy for Departmental Honors in History

From The College of William and Mary in Virginia

By

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Note: In accordance with the data protection guidelines of the German Federal Military Archive, all personal identifying information of the people referenced in this work has been redacted, and all names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Introduction

What do these desertions show us?

They show us that these former border police do not understand what a great time we are now living in. They do not understand that we are building a happier and more beautiful future, in which peace and prosperity are supreme. They do not understand that in their desertion they are going from tomorrow to yesterday, where misery, unemployment, enslavement, and degradation of man and the cultures of peoples prevails. They do not realize that they have disgracefully abused the great trust that our people, our government, our party of the working class, and all peace-loving people have placed in them. They do not realize that they are becoming mean traitors to the working class and to our people – but our people will treat mean traitors as they should.

— “Arguments for the Fight Against Desertions in the East German Border Police”
 (“*Argumentation für den Kampf gegen Desertionen in der Deutschen Grenzpolizei,*”) *Hauptverwaltung Deutsche Grenzpolizei* (Central Administration of the East German Border Police), September 5 1952¹

In 1950, Otto was visiting his hometown when he fell in love with Sigrid, a young woman visiting from a town seventy kilometers away. The couple hailed from opposite sides of a recently divided Germany: Otto lived in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), while Sigrid lived in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). At this stage in German-German history, the two young states – each founded only a year earlier, in 1949 – were divided, but restrictions on

¹ Berichte und Statistiken über Desertionen, December 1951 – October 1953, Archivsignatur DVH 27/134532, Abteilung Organisation Nachweisführung, Kommando der DGP, Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv, Freiburg im Breisgau. “Was zeigen uns diese Desertionen? Sie zeigen uns einmal, dass diese ehemaligen Grenzpolizisten nicht verstehen, in welcher großen Zeit wir jetzt leben. Sie verstehen nicht, dass wir uns eine schönere und glücklichere Zukunft, in der Frieden und Wohlstand oberstes Gesetz ist, aufbauen. Sie verstehen nicht, dass sie bei ihrer Desertion vom Morgen ins Gestern gehen, dahin gehen, wo Not, Elend, Arbeitslosigkeit, Versklavung, Degradierung des Menschen und Kultur der Völker herrscht. Sie erkennen nicht, dass sie das grosse Vertrauen, welches unser Volk, unsere Regierung, unsere Partei der Arbeiterklasse und alle friedliebenden Menschen in sie gesetzt haben, auf das schändlichste missbraucht haben. Sie erkennen nicht, dass sie zu gemeinen Verrätern an der Arbeiterklasse und an unserem Volke werden, aber unser Volk wird gemeine Verräter so behandeln, wie es sich gehört.”

travel across the German-German border were not as draconian as they would become in later years. Sigrid was able to travel back and forth between East and West Germany using an *Interzonenpaß* (inter-zone pass). Otto, however, had no such permissions: he was an East German citizen and a member of the *Deutsche Grenzpolizei* (DGP), the East German Border Police.²

The *Grenzpolizei*, stationed along the 1,393 kilometer German-German border, was the human embodiment of the division between East and West and the sovereignty of the East German state.³ The DGP had originated in 1946 as a humble force tasked with overseeing the borders of the Soviet Zone of Occupation (SBZ), but in the years since – amid fomenting Cold War tensions, the increasing militarization of the border, and mounting travel restrictions for East Germans – its scope and political significance had rapidly expanded.⁴ The *Grenzpolizei* was now supposed to serve a dual paramilitary function: as the first bastion of defense in case of an attack from West Germany, and as a police force preventing the illegal flight of civilians across the border.⁵ A quote from a 1952 document from the Main Department of Politics and Culture (*Hauptabteilung PK*) illustrates the institutions' idealized, heavily politicized self-image: “Being a member of the German Border Police is a great honor and obligation. [...] We must show our comrades how strong and insurmountable the camp of peace, democracy and socialism is.”⁶ Obviously, as a member of the *Grenzpolizei*, carrying on a relationship with a woman from the West would create problems for Otto.

² Untersuchungsberichte über Desertionen (A-G), 1951 – 1952, Archivsignatur DVH 27/134539, Abteilung Organisation und Nachweisführung, Kommando der DGP, Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv, Freiburg im Breisgau.

³ Gert Ritter and Joseph G. Hajdu. “The East-West German Boundary.” *Geographical Review* 79, no. 3 (1989): 326–44. <https://doi.org/10.2307/215576>. 326.

⁴ Wilfried Hanisch, “Zur Entwicklung der Grenzschutzorgane in den Jahren von 1949 bis 1960,” in *Die Grenzen der DDR. Geschichte, Fakten, Hintergründe*, ed. Klaus Baumgarten and Peter Freitag. Berlin: Das Neue Berlin, 2005. 104.

⁵ Jochen Maurer and Gerhard Sälter. “The Double Task of the East German Border Guards: Policing the Border and Military Functions.” *German Politics & Society* 29, no. 2 (99) (2011): 23–39. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23744558>.

⁶ DVH 27/134532.

In contrast to the lofty self-conception of the DGP outlined in the *Argumentation*, however, Otto did not view himself as a loyal agent of the state with somber obligations to defend the “camp of peace.” In fact, prior to joining the DGP, he was notorious among locals for his “cunning” methods of helping people cross the border illegally – precisely the type of thing the *Grenzpolizei* was supposed to prevent. His father warned him against pursuing a relationship with Irmgard, pointing out that his career in the *Grenzpolizei* was at stake. His boss had given him an ultimatum: “Either the police or the girl!”⁷ Otto protested “that he wouldn’t let go of the girl, that he wanted to marry her, and that he would rather leave the police.”⁸ On May 8 1951, he bid his mother “auf Wiedersehen” and disappeared across the border to marry Sigrid. There, his file trails off.⁹

Otto was among 2.8 million individuals who left the GDR and resettled in the FRG between 1945 and 1961, and one of 165,648 who fled in 1951 alone.¹⁰ While crossing the German-German border in the post-Berlin wall era was a notoriously dangerous and risky venture, the relative porosity of the border during this early period meant that even “a slight economic or political pressure” could induce East Germans to flee West.¹¹ Many, like Otto, fled for personal rather than political reasons. But regardless of motive, all instances of “flight from the Republic” (*Republikflucht*) were of grave political concern to the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschland* (SED), which feared the economic and political consequences of this mass exodus.

⁷ DVH 27/134539. “Entweder die Polizei oder das Mädchen!”

⁸ DVH 27/134539. “Er gab mit darauf zur Antwort, daß er von dem Mädchen nicht lassen würde, daß er sie heiraten wolle und daß er lieber von der Volkspolizei wegginge.”

⁹ DVH 27/134539.

¹⁰ Henrik Bispinck, “‘Republikflucht’: Flucht und Ausreise als Problem für die DDR Führung,” in *Vor dem Mauerbau: Politik und Gesellschaft in der DDR der fünfziger Jahre*, ed. Dierk Hoffmann, Michael Schwartz, and Hermann Wentker. Reprint 2015. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009, 285; Lapp, Peter Joachim, *Grenzregime der DDR*, Aachen: Helios, 2013. 75.

¹¹ Bispinck, “Republikflucht,” 300.

Beginning in the early 1950s, the SED invested significant resources in hindering this movement through a buildup of border fortifications, the tightening of border controls, criminalization of *Republikflucht*, and increased restrictions on travel to the border zone – a process which culminated in the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961.¹² The *Grenzpolizei* was central to this effort. Armed and under orders to shoot at any *Grenzverletzer* (“border violators”), its members were on the front lines of the government’s battle against *Republikflucht*. As the severity of border fortifications and legal restrictions increased, so too did the paramilitary character of the *Grenzpolizei*, which culminated in its eventual subsumption into the Nationale Volksarmee (NVA), the GDR’s armed forces, in 1962.¹³

Until conscription to the NVA was introduced in 1962, the *Grenzpolizei* recruited personnel on a voluntary basis.¹⁴ One might assume that only the most ideologically zealous East Germans would choose to enlist in an institution whose obligations included firing at fellow citizens attempting to flee.¹⁵ Certainly, one would imagine, a career in the *Grenzpolizei* was not suited to those who themselves had intentions to desert. Yet as Otto’s case demonstrates, this was far from the case: throughout the 1950s, between 200 and 300 *Grenzpolizisten*, including officers, deserted to the West every year.¹⁶

A cursory peek into the files of the Command of the Border Police (*Kommando der Grenzpolizei*) reveals that the *Grenzpolizei* was a troubled institution from its inception. The DGP was consistently understaffed, falling short of its recruitment target by several thousand

¹² Bispinck, “Republikflucht,” 285.

¹³ Sälter, Gerhard, *Grenzpolizisten: Konformität, Verweigerung und Repression in der Grenzpolizei und den Grenztruppen der DDR 1952 - 1965: Konformität, Verweigerung und Repression und den Grenztruppen der DDR 1952 bis 1965*. Berlin: Ch. Links, 2009, 6.

¹⁴ Maurer and Sälter, “The Double Task of the East German Border Guards,” 26.

¹⁵ Peter Joachim Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, Aachen: Helios, 2013, 76. The obligation that border guards should fire at “border violations” attempting to flee, if they did not obey their order to halt, was introduced in 1952.

¹⁶ Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 70.

every year: towards the end of the 1950s, its personnel dipped to as low as 50% of its desired strength, reaching its target numbers for the first time in 1959.¹⁷ Conditions like deployment far from home, austere living conditions, long hours and social isolation made the job undesirable, and the anti-militarist sentiment common among East German youth in the late 1940s and early 1950s made them ill-disposed towards border service.¹⁸ The GDR implemented a set of demanding political and social prerequisites to ensure a loyal border guard – for example, those with first-degree relatives in the West, former Nazi party members, former Allied prisoners of war and generally “politically unreliable” people were all legally disallowed from serving in the *Grenzpolizei*.¹⁹ However, perennially struggling to meet its recruitment quotas, the *Grenzpolizei* “seldom had the option to be very picky” and was not able to maintain these qualifications in practice, and examinations of political reliability were forced to be cursory, allowing undesirable elements (particularly those with Western connections) to fall through the cracks.²⁰

The Party press liked to portray the *Grenzpolizei* as serving out of political conviction and devotion to the ideals of the SED, but in reality, the majority of *Grenzer* (border guards) enlisted for self-interested reasons.²¹ Voluntary recruits consisted of a motley crew of pragmatists chasing the benefits that service could offer. A significant portion of *Grenzpolizei* recruits were young men who had not completed school or vocational training, and joined the *Grenzpolizei* in the hopes of improving their career prospects and earning a decent salary.²² Some young men were enticed by the promise of a coveted spot at a university if they served for three years or

¹⁷ Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 328.

¹⁸ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 98.

¹⁹ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 125.

²⁰ Sagi Schaefer, 108, “At the Frontlines of the Cold War: Border-Guarding and the Practices of German Division,” *Journal of Modern European History / Zeitschrift Für Moderne Europäische Geschichte / Revue d'histoire Européenne Contemporaine* 16, no. 1 (2018): 105–25. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26407018>.

²¹ Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 328.

²² Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 104.

more.²³ Others recognized the opportunities for social mobility granted by border service, which was seen by the SED as proof of loyalty to the GDR.²⁴ As a result, the *Grenzpolizei* was constantly staffed by a large contingent of individuals who ranged from apathetic towards the aims of border service, to “politically unreliable,” to actively hostile towards the ideology of the SED.²⁵

This assemblage of ideologically unreliable recruits, combined with the less-than-desirable conditions of border service, meant that expressions of dissent and uncooperative behavior were endemic among the *Grenzpolizei* – the most extreme manifestation thereof being, of course, desertion. The prevalence of desertion was a constant source of anxiety for GDR authorities, who invested extensive effort into combating it: whether by continually revising the methods of political indoctrination, restructuring the logistics of *Grenzdienst* (border service) to make it harder to escape, or implementing a network of espionage within the ranks of the *Grenzpolizei* to sow mistrust and apprehend potential deserters before they could act. While the authorities, according to their rigid worldview, viewed traits from reading “pulp literature” (“*Schundliteratur*”) to listening to Western radio as grounds for suspicion, they hesitated to put excessive pressure on the *Grenzer* for their transgressions out of fear that they would resign, or worse – flee to the West.²⁶ Instead, they invested significant time and energy into devising strategies to combat, prevent, and punish desertion. The result was a bizarre status quo, whereby the infrastructure of the German-German border – the physical manifestation of the sovereignty of the German Democratic Republic, if not the Iron Curtain itself – was undergirded by a whole sub-infrastructure to keep its questionably loyal personnel from deserting to the enemy.

²³ Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 328.

²⁴ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 104.

²⁵ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 129 - 131, 138 - 140.

²⁶ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 135.

Since at least 1948, when the Grenzpolizei was still operating under the SBZ, the *Kommando der DGP* (Command of the Border Police) kept extensive files on deserters. These files contain hundreds of investigative reports meticulously examining individual desertions, including character evaluations on each deserter – their political consciousness, work ethic, disposition, and the nature of their personal relationships. The purpose of these files was to determine the cause of an individual’s desertion, to diagnose the phenomenon, and to make suggestions for preventing desertions in the future. When one reads these files between the lines, one gets the impression that – just as they enlisted in the *Grenzpolizei* for pragmatic, self-serving reasons – most of the *Grenzer* did not desert for expressly political reasons, or at least did not view their desertion as a principled act of resistance. Rather, most desertions were acutely personal, with motives ranging from escaping criminal charges to reuniting with family in the West. In short, they absconded from the *Grenzpolizei* with just as much disinterest, skepticism and stubbornness as they had joined it with.

The SED harbored little appreciation for such complexity, however. The SED (in this case, the *Hauptverwaltung der DGP* [Central Administration of the Border Police]) viewed both desertion from its armed forces and *Republikflucht* through a staunchly moralized political lens. Deserters were considered by the SED to be *Vaterlandsverräter* (“traitors to the fatherland”) and “traitors to the cause of socialism,” and even civilian *Republikfluchtlinge* were condemned as “criminals, saboteurs and agents.”²⁷ This prejudice colored the SED’s reportage of desertions and led to the demonization of even the most apolitical deserters. In their exhaustive searches for the “causes of desertion,” the DGP pinned the blame for desertion on everything under the sun: the

²⁷ Rüdiger Wenzke, “Die Fahnenflucht in den Streitkräften der DDR,” in *Armeen und ihre Deserteure: vernachlässigte Kapitel einer Militärgeschichte der Neuzeit*, ed. Ulrich Bröckling and Michael Sikora (Göttingen: Sammlung Vandenhoeck), 252; Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 361; Bispinck, “Republikflucht,” 290.

character flaws of individual guards, the insufficient curriculum of political indoctrination classes, the corrosive influence of their “Western connections,” a poor relationship between officers and their underlings, or even enticement by “dubious women from West Germany.”²⁸ In short, everyone and everything was to blame except the institution itself and a genuine dissatisfaction with life in the GDR. This worldview was consistent with what historian Mary Fulbrook describes as the “‘friend/foe’ mentality” that pervaded the East German regime:

Every sign of hostility to the state, every indication that people did not applaud and laud the actions of the rulers, that they dared to think differently, was crudely interpreted as the result of the activities of enemy agents, ‘hostile-negative forces’ working to undermine the GDR from within. Given this mental frame, it was very hard to accept that there might be genuine reasons for people to raise well-founded criticisms of the workings of East German communism.²⁹

Yet stepping out of the SED’s “ideological hall of mirrors”³⁰ and reading these reports against the grain – not according to their intended purpose as criminal legal documents or investigative reports with the end goal of preventing desertions, but as fragmented chronicles of the border guards’ everyday lives – provides an illuminating glimpse into the everyday experience of *Grenzpolizisten*. With their intimate details of the lives of individual *Grenzpolizisten*, complete with interrogations of their friends, family, neighbors and coworkers, these files serve as a kind of top-down “people’s history,” filtered through the warped perspective of the state. Additionally, the state’s character evaluations of deserters and their conclusions about their personal flaws provide an enlightening glimpse into the social, moral and political values of the East German state. This thesis dissects and contextualizes the stories embedded in these files to reconstruct the *Alltagsgeschichte* – a.k.a. the “the history of everyday life” – of the *Deutsche Grenzpolizei*.

²⁸ DVH 27/134532.

²⁹ Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship: Inside the GDR, 1949–1989*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995. 26.

³⁰ Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship*, 26.

The term *Alltagsgeschichte* is a form of historiography which examines areas of history through the lens of the day-to-day experiences of the people who experienced it. Historian Alf Lüdtke, who coined the term, defines *Alltagsgeschichte* as a methodology which necessitates “a more qualitative understanding of ordinary people's lives, both by investigating the material circumstances of daily existence [...] and by entering the inner world of popular experience in [...] all those contexts normally assigned to the cultural domain.”³¹ *Alltagsgeschichte* seeks a holistic appraisal of people, not only insofar as they produce “the collective action that ‘propels history forward,’” but “on the plane of microstructures, where it is possible to illuminate group-specific attributes and individual peculiarities[.]”³²

Alltagsgeschichte emerged in the 1970s as a movement among left-leaning historians in response to traditional German historiography, which they believed placed too much emphasis on “structural analysis” and “social science” rather than the material circumstances of daily life.³³ *Alltagsgeschichte* rose to prominence in the context of GDR historiography as a reaction to the “first wave” of GDR history, which took a “top-down, politically inflected, often morally accusatory and triumphalist approach” to the GDR, centered on repression and dissent.³⁴ *Alltagsgeschichte* practitioners questioned the supremacy of this approach, stressing the need for a historical methodology which facilitated “the study of history as the history of the individual development of human beings.” Employing *Alltagsgeschichte* allowed historians of East Germany to escape the black-and-white “domination/dictatorship” narrative of the GDR history

³¹ Alf Lüdtke, *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*. Edited by William Templar. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995. vii.

³² Alf Lüdtke and Harald Dehne, “Have We Come Any Closer to Alltag? Everyday Reality and Workers’ Lives as an Object of Historical Research in the German Democratic Republic,” in *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*, 116–48. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995. 122.

³³ Lüdtke, *The History of Everyday Life*, vii.

³⁴ Andrew I. Port, “The Banalities of East German Historiography,” in *Becoming East German: Socialist Structures and Sensibilities after Hitler*, ed. Fulbrook, Mary, and Andrew I. Port. Berghahn Books, 2015. 1.

and offer a more nuanced appraisal of East German society and culture, linking the personal to the political and granting agency to individual East Germans.³⁵

Closely bound with *Alltagsgeschichte* is the concept of *Eigen-Sinn*. Commonly rendered in English as “stubbornness,” *Eigen-Sinn* is defined by Alf Lüdtke as “willfulness, spontaneous self-will, a kind of self-affirmation, an act of (re)appropriating alienated social relations on and off the shop floor by self-assertive prankishness, demarcating a space of one’s own.” (Another, more concise definition: “putting up with political power to the degree that one must, while pursuing one’s own ends to the degree that one can.”³⁶) Originally used to describe factory workers’ agency within their workplace, *Eigen-Sinn* has been employed extensively in East German historiography since 1989 to describe East Germans’ ambivalent yet acquiescent relationship to their dictatorial regime.³⁷

Although the concept of *Alltagsgeschichte* (and the related concept of *Eigen-Sinn*) has been integral to East German historiography for decades, few scholarly works have applied this methodology to the *Grenzpolizei*. The most important scholarly sources on the East German border regime apply a top-down, institution-focused approach to the history of the *Grenzpolizei* which, while comprehensive, is largely not concerned with evaluating the mundane daily existence or the psychological inner workings of individual *Grenzpolizisten*.³⁸ Nor do many GDR *Alltagsgeschichte* anthologies highlight individual *Grenzer* as subjects of inquiry. This is partly owing to the small size of their force, but also to their reputation: Popular imagination of the East German *Grenzer* is dominated by stories of the notorious firing order (“*Schießbefehl*”) given to

³⁵ Lüdtke and Dehne, “Have We Come Any Closer to Alltag?” 122.

³⁶ John Eidson, “Compulsion, Compliance or Eigensinn? Examining Theories of Power in an East German Field Site.” In *Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology Working Papers*, 1–26. Halle/Saale: Max-Planck-Gesellschaft, 2003. 1.

³⁷ Lüdtke, *The History of Everyday Life*, 313-314.

³⁸ e.g. *Grenzregime der DDR, Im Dienste der Partei*, and *Die Grenzen der DDR*; see bibliography.

Grenzer and the resulting fatal shots (“*Todesschüsse*”) fired against *Grenzverletzter* – in particular, the notorious wall deaths (“*Mauertote*”), i.e. citizens killed by *Grenztruppen* while attempting to escape over the Berlin Wall. Accordingly, as historian Sagi Schaefer states, “Existing scholarship on inter-German border-guarding is overwhelmingly focused on documenting, understanding and deciphering the implications of the ubiquitous repression, violence and death along this border.”³⁹ When *Grenzpolizisten* do make appearances in studies of the history of everyday life in East Germany, it is most often as the villains in someone else’s *Alltag*.

These representations do not provide a holistic representation of the *Grenzpolizei*. The majority of the historical works dealing with the East German border personnel, including those that examine the contours of their “everyday life,” focus primarily on the border police after 1962, i.e. as part of the GDR’s armed forces.⁴⁰ This leaves a research gap in the scholarship on the *Grenzpolizei* in the “pre-Berlin Wall era” (1946-1961), during which the *Grenzpolizei* (despite acquiring an increasingly paramilitary character) was not yet an organ of the armed forces, conscription was voluntary, and crossing the border was more easily achievable. All of these qualities gave the *Grenzpolizei* a very distinct character from its later iterations. Similarly, scholarship on *Republikflucht* most often focuses on civilians or the intelligentsia, infrequently crossing over with *Grenzpolizei* scholarship. Thus, this era warrants a focused historical appraisal.

Significant inroads were made into the examination of the “everyday life” of the *Grenzpolizei* with the publication of *Border Policemen: Conformity, Refusal and Repression in*

³⁹ Schaefer, “At the Frontlines of the Cold War,” 106.

⁴⁰ e.g. *Halt – Staatsgrenze! Alltag, Dienst und Innenansichten der Grenztruppen der DDR* and *Dienst an der Mauer: Der Alltag der Grenztruppen rund um Berlin* by Jochen Mauer.

the GDR Border Police and Border Troops 1952 - 1965 (Grenzpolizisten: Konformität, Verweigerung und Repression in der Grenzpolizei und den Grenztruppen der DDR 1952 - 1965) by Gerhard Sälter, a researcher for the Berlin Wall Memorial. The volume contains the results of a research project, carried out from 2002 to 2007 by the Berlin Wall Foundation and sponsored by the Federal Foundation for Appraisal of the SED-Dictatorship, which traces the *Grenzpolizei's* transition from a police force in the postwar period to a branch of the military.⁴¹ The work's approach is unique, as Sälter devotes attention not only to the "structures" of the *Grenzpolizei* and the SED's imposition of military apparatuses onto the personnel, but also examines internal *Grenzpolizei* documents to chronicle the behavior, thoughts, and feelings of the *Grenzpolizei* over the course of this transition, particularly their motivations for serving at the border and the ways in which they expressed dissent.

Gerhard Sälter declares his intention to take a microhistorical approach to the *Grenzpolizei*, highlighting the individual experiences of rank-and-file *Grenzpolizisten* and their *Handlungsspielraum* ("room for maneuver") within the confines of the dictatorship.⁴² He laments that most scholarship on *Grenzpolizei* has portrayed them as one-dimensional "bad guys" ("*Schurken*").⁴³ He points out that there is a gap in research on the motivation of individual *Grenzpolizisten*, as the study of the border regime itself is an extremely young field. Most historians of the border regime have busied themselves with the technical details of the border fortifications, but have "rarely asked the question of why the border guards took part."⁴⁴ The

⁴¹ Bundesstiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur

⁴² Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 5.

⁴³ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 4.

⁴⁴ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 2. "Von ihnen wurde die Frage, warum sich die Grenzer daran beteiligt haben, selten gestellt."

exception is a plurality of literature from the perspective of generals and officers of the *Grenztruppen* – who, naturally, offer an incomplete window into *Alltag*.⁴⁵

Just as the first wave of GDR historiography – with its top-down, black-and-white narrative and focus on great personalities and events – demanded to be supplemented by the second- and third- waves, which introduced the methodology of *Alltagsgeschichte*, I argue that the first waves of scholarship on the *Grenzpolizei* and the *Grenztruppen* benefits from the incorporation of an *Alltagsgeschichte* approach. Telling the *Alltagsgeschichte* of the deserters among the *Grenzpolizei* is valuable because a complete understanding of the border regime is incomplete without a comprehensive appraisal of its personnel. But it is also valuable because, taken on their own terms, desertions among the armed organs of the GDR serve, in the words of historian Rüdiger Wenzke, as a “a barometer for the inner political state of the GDR.”⁴⁶ In their expressions of *Eigensinn* – the stubborn, indifferent, simultaneously political and apolitical pragmatism by which so many East Germans navigated their day-to-day lives – the deserted *Grenzer* are a microcosm of East German society, made all the more potent (and ironic) by their role in maintaining the border regime.

The seemingly contradictory phenomenon whereby a cohort of disinterested *Grenzpolizisten*, who remained ideologically unconvinced despite the SED’s best efforts, served as the bulwark of the politically charged German-German border, is paradigmatic of the peculiar relationship between rulers and ruled in the GDR. Historian Mary Fulbrook characterizes this relationship (in the context of broader East German society) as “a symbiotic mode of life [...] predicated on a form of *Anpassung*, a preparedness to go through the motions, to participate in

⁴⁵ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 2.

⁴⁶ “ein Barometer für die innere politische Verfassung der DDR.” Wenzke, “Die Fahnenflucht in den Streitkräften der DDR,” 253.

the rituals and acts of obeisance of everyday life—in short, a willingness to ensure that one actually has as easy a life as is possible under the given political conditions.” Though taking place under a dictatorship, this status quo is “neither a case of coercion, nor of consent,” but rather “a form of often unthinking—even unconscious—conformity, of co-operation with the often implicit rules of the game.”⁴⁷ Discontented *Grenzpolizei* exemplified this *Anpassung* when they performed border service absent any ideological conviction, while those who deserted broke with this mode of life, refusing to “play the game.”

This thesis poses several questions: what were the primary factors, both internal and external, that drove *Grenzpolizisten* to desert to the West? What do their desertions reveal about East German society more broadly? Furthermore, I will scrutinize the language, framing, and methods of reportage used in these files in order to answer the questions: what do the state’s analyses of the desertion problem reveal about the ideology and values of the SED and the relationship between the state and society? What do the administration’s proposed action plans for combating desertion reveal about the East German political project and the state’s conception of itself? In my quest to answer these questions, I seek to tell the “history from below” of the *Grenzpolizei* by examining case studies of individual *Grenzer* and placing them in conversation with one another, while also taking a “structural approach” to the *Grenzpolizei* by evaluating the internal documents of the institution – thus juxtaposing the *Alltagsgeschichte* of the *Grenzpolizisten* with the state’s conception of the *Grenzpolizei* and highlighting the tension between these narratives.

This thesis will employ eighteen primary sources from East German governmental institutions – primarily the *Kommando der DGP* (Command of the Border Police), but also the

⁴⁷ Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship*, 273.

Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (Ministry for State Security), under which the *Grenzpolizei* was briefly subordinated. I have selected these files as a representative sample of the more than 60 files in the Bundesarchiv which reference desertions among the *Grenzpolizei*. My primary sources date from 1948 to 1959. In choosing this timespan, I am narrowing my focus to the a distinct era of *Grenzpolizei* activity: shortly before the founding of the GDR (1949), but prior to the building of the Berlin Wall (1961), the subsumption of the *Grenzpolizei* into the *Nationale Volksarmee* (NVA) (after which the *Grenzpolizei* became the *Grenztruppen*, or “border troops”), and the introduction of involuntary conscription (1962). During this “pre-Berlin wall era,” the German-German border was relatively permeable, allowing for more frequent and even spontaneous flight to the West – 2,738,566 Germans were able to migrate from East to West between 1949 and 1961, compared to only 40,101 between 1961 and 1989 – and the makeup of the *Grenzpolizei* was shaped by its character as a voluntary police force; i.e. compulsory military service was not among factors contributing to discontent.⁴⁸

In doing so, I seek to contribute to existing research on the *Alltagsgeschichte* of the German Democratic Republic – and the institution of the *Grenzpolizei* in particular – by bringing archival sources to light. I also seek to expand the corpus of English-language literature on this topic, given that the majority of secondary sources on the East German border regime are in German. Finally, I seek to examine the “microhistories” of individual *Grenzpolizisten* by reassembling their stories from the fragmented material of the archive, re-evaluating them on their own terms, illuminating their desires, discontents, and turbulent relationship to border service.

⁴⁸ Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, “Statistiken,” *Chronik der Mauer*. Accessed December 9, 2023. <https://www.chronik-der-mauer.de/material/164693/statistiken>.

Chapter 1: Background

Chapter 1.1: Origins and Development of the East German Border

The story of the Border Police begins with the story of the German-German border. Following its defeat in World War II, Germany was divided into four zones of occupation, each governed by one of the four Allied powers. Initially, the borders between the zones were nothing more than administrative boundaries, and the division of Germany was assumed by much of the population to be a temporary measure.⁴⁹ During the turbulent immediate postwar period, millions of Germans – whether smuggling, foraging, buying goods, or visiting relatives – traveled freely from Zone to Zone.⁵⁰ However, the occupying powers soon became overwhelmed by this torrent of movement – particularly the influx of expellees from eastern territories of the Reich – and viewed the increase of border controls as a security imperative.⁵¹ For their part, the SMAD (Soviet Military Administration in Germany) established a “Forbidden Zone” in July 1945, imposing stricter curfews and residence and work permits in municipalities along the Demarcation Line, foreshadowing the border zone that would develop in the following years.⁵²

In September 1945, the Allied Control Council began delineating the borders between zones by issuing traffic regulations, limiting authorized border crossing to designated checkpoints, and requiring permission for inter-zonal travel.⁵³ These regulations would, ideally, establish the necessary political stability for post-war reconstruction by “restrict[ing] the

⁴⁹ Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 66.

⁵⁰ Jürgen Ritter, *Die Grenze: Ein deutsches Bauwerk*, Berlin: Ch. Links, 1997. 13. 1.6 million Germans traveled from the Soviet Zone of Occupation (SBZ) to the British Zone from October 1945 to June 1946. cf: Ritter, *Die Grenze*, 13.

⁵¹ Salter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 15.

⁵² Edith Sheffer, “On Edge: Building the Border in East and West Germany,” *Central European History* 40, no. 2 (2007): 307–39. 317; Hanisch, “Zur Entwicklung der Grenzschutzorgane in den Jahren von 1949 bis 1960,” 105.

⁵³ Hanisch, “Zur Entwicklung der Grenzschutzorgane in den Jahren von 1949 bis 1960,” 105.

movement of refugees, displaced persons, prisoners of war, and suspected war criminals.”⁵⁴ The disruptive effect of these constraints was keenly felt by normal Germans. Food and housing shortages were compounded by restrictions on the transport of goods, and people suddenly found themselves forced to prove “evidence of zonal economic necessity” to travel to places where they had gone freely only a few years before.⁵⁵

However, no one in 1945 could have foreseen that this litany of traffic controls would eventually become the notoriously impenetrable German-German border. The unfenced border, nicknamed the “*Grüne Grenze*” (“Green Border”), was still relatively easy to cross. Many people went back and forth on foot every day (even though this was technically illegal without a permit) for the most casual of reasons, “from dancing to berry-picking to visiting family.”⁵⁶ Administration of petty traffic was haphazard and unpredictable, and traffic officials were susceptible to bribery.⁵⁷ The vast majority of movement across the border between 1945 and 1947 took place without official permission,⁵⁸ and this was even accepted as an inevitability by the authorities: in 1947, police in Sachsen-Anhalt conceded that “it is impossible to prevent the illegal crossing of the border completely.”⁵⁹

Of course, the *Grüne Grenze* was not to last. Each of the Allied powers soon began increasingly imposing their political, economic and ideological systems onto their respective zones, which became proxies in the nascent Cold War.⁶⁰ Steps being taken towards the formation

⁵⁴ Sheffer, “On Edge,” 316.

⁵⁵ Sheffer, “On Edge,” 317, 320.

⁵⁶ Sheffer, “On Edge,” 321.

⁵⁷ Sheffer, “On Edge,” 315.

⁵⁸ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 16.

⁵⁹ Richard Baechler, “The Making of a Border: Policing East Germany’s Western Border, 1945-1952,” in *L’établissement Des Frontières En Europe Après Les Deux Guerres Mondiales: Actes Des Colloques de Strasbourg et de Montréal, Juin et Septembre 1995*, edited by Carole Fink, 199–214. Bern: P. Lang, 1996. 203.

⁶⁰ Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 68.

of a West German state and its rearmament put the SMAD on the defensive.⁶¹ The demarcation line became both an agent and a site of conflict, as political tensions spilled into the frontier and escalated into armed fire. By 1947, there were already civilian and police casualties on both sides.⁶² Each political flashpoint in the now-raging Cold War further drove the buildup of the border regime: in response to the currency reform debacle of 1948, the SMAD increased the strength of *Grenzer* along the Demarcation Line, and following the Berlin Blockade, Berlin became a “front city” in the Cold War, acquiring a border guard regiment of its own, the “Ring um Berlin” (“Ring around Berlin”).⁶³

Besides the escalating Cold War drama, several practical crises emerged which incentivized the SBZ to tighten its borders. The first was depopulation: between May 1945 and December 1948, a total of 732,100 people left the SBZ for the Western zones.⁶⁴ This was cause for alarm, as the Soviet Zone could not afford the consequences of a labor shortage: it was already economically weaker than its sister zones, and it needed to be able to pay reparations to the Soviet Union.⁶⁵ An additional headache for the administration was the flourishing black market resulting from the open border: Material shortages in the Soviet Zone and postwar “scarcity economy” facilitated a veritable renaissance in smuggling, as thousands of enterprising

⁶¹ Wilfried Hanisch, “Zur Entwicklung der Grenzschutzorgane in den Jahren von 1949 bis 1960,” in *Die Grenzen der DDR. Geschichte, Fakten, Hintergründe*, edited by Klaus Baumgarten and Peter Freitag. Berlin: Das Neue Berlin, 2005. 105.

⁶² Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 17.

⁶³ Torsten Diedrich, “Die Grenzpolizei der SBZ/DDR (1946-1961),” in *Im Dienste der Partei: Handbuch der bewaffneten Organe der DDR*, edited by Torsten Diedrich, Hans Ehlert and Rüdiger Wenzke, Berlin: Ch. Links, 1998. 204; Hanisch, “Zur Entwicklung der Grenzschutzorgane in den Jahren von 1949 bis 1960,” 115.

⁶⁴ Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 74, 68. This was in response to several factors: both the generally inferior economic condition of the Soviet Zone and repressive political measures being implemented by the SMAD and the nascent SED. (e.g. land reform and the persecution of political dissidents.) cf: Bispinck, “Republikflucht,” 288.

⁶⁵ Diedrich, “Die Grenzpolizei der SBZ/DDR (1946-1961),” 203.

Germans purchased goods in the West and resold them in the SBZ at a higher price.⁶⁶ As restrictive laws mounted, the border between East and West gained legitimacy through consensus: “Most residents chose to obey the law, out of fear or on principle, and simply didn't cross.”⁶⁷

In May 1949, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) was founded in the former Western zones. That October, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was founded in the former Soviet Zone. The Demarcation Line became the de-facto border between the two states.⁶⁸ During this period, disputes between the two young Germanies increasingly escalated into violence: 30 people were killed and 65 injured at the border between July 1, 1949 and December 31, 1950.⁶⁹ The border was still technically traversable, however: Many people were permitted to travel across the border for work, and 2,500 to 3,000 people crossed the border illegally every day. (Far from deterring “border violators,” mounting restrictions on border travel actually incentivized many Germans to cross illegally.⁷⁰)

This all changed on May 27, 1952 with the issuance of the “Police Ordinance on the Introduction of a Special Order at the Demarcation Line,”⁷¹ which effectively closed the border. (Although presented as a security measure, the primary aim of this ordinance was to prevent citizens from fleeing to the West.)⁷² The ordinance established a 10-meter “*Kontrollstreifen*”

⁶⁶ Hanisch, “Zur Entwicklung der Grenzschutzorgane in den Jahren von 1949 bis 1960,” 125. From June 1948 to July 1949, the *Grenzpolizei* arrested 214 “spies and saboteurs,” 2,418 “criminals,” 667 “large-scale traffickers” and 2,115 “smugglers,” in addition to confiscating tonnes of food and industrial goods. cf: Diedrich, “Die Grenzpolizei der SBZ/DDR (1946-1961),” 203.

⁶⁷ Sheffer, “On Edge,” 321.

⁶⁸ Hanisch, “Zur Entwicklung der Grenzschutzorgane in den Jahren von 1949 bis 1960,” 124.

⁶⁹ Diedrich, “Die Grenzpolizei der SBZ/DDR (1946-1961),” 207.

⁷⁰ From October 1949 to March 1950, 154,271 people were arrested for violating border regulations. cf: Diedrich, “Die Grenzpolizei der SBZ/DDR (1946-1961),” 207. In some districts, more people were registered as having been caught trying to cross illegally than having crossed legally. cf: Baechler, “The Making of a Border,” 211.

⁷¹ “Polizeiverordnung über die Einführung einer besonderen Ordnung an der Demarkationslinie”

⁷² Of course, this did not prevent *Republikflucht*: from now on, escapees simply left through the still-open exit route in Berlin. cf: Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 77.

directly along the border (anyone who entered this was liable to be shot); a 500-meter “*Schutzstreifen*” behind that, and a 5-kilometer-wide “*Sperrzone*” beyond that. To facilitate this, the government initiated an operation called “*Aktion Ungeziefer*” (“Operation Vermin”),⁷³ in which a total of 8,369 people⁷⁴ living in the “*Sperrzone*” who were considered “politically unreliable” (i.e. belonging to one of several vague categories, including “people whose reactionary attitude hinders the construction of socialism and poses a threat to order and security in the border area”⁷⁵) were uprooted from their homes and forced to move.⁷⁶ After 1952, petty border traffic – the everyday movement of “commuters, schoolchildren, relatives, and farmers with land on the other side of the border” – virtually came to a halt.⁷⁷ From now on, the divided Berlin, where East-West traffic was still possible, was the main point of escape for anyone who wanted to migrate West.⁷⁸ Laws making it harder to travel accumulated each year.⁷⁹

Once the border was closed, the political construct of *Republikflucht* (“flight from the republic”) began to emerge.⁸⁰ As previously mentioned, hundreds of thousands of people left the SBZ (and later the GDR) for the West every year, and continued to risk their lives to do so even after the border was closed.⁸¹ In the 1940s, the overburdened authorities accepted this as an inevitability, even a “relief from the problems of unemployment and the problem of providing basic necessities.”⁸² The 1949 constitution had even declared that “every citizen has the right to

⁷³ Diedrich, “Die Grenzpolizei der SBZ/DDR (1946-1961),” 209.

⁷⁴ as of June 18 1952. cf. Hanisch, “Zur Entwicklung der Grenzschutzorgane in den Jahren von 1949 bis 1960,” 132.

⁷⁵ Hanisch, “Zur Entwicklung der Grenzschutzorgane in den Jahren von 1949 bis 1960,” 132.

⁷⁶ Baechler, “The Making of a Border,” 203.

⁷⁷ Maurer and Sälter, “The Double Task of the East German Border Guards,” 27.

⁷⁸ Henrik Bispinck and Damian van Melis, *Republikflucht: Flucht und Abwanderung Aus der SBZ/DDR 1945 Bis 1961. Veröffentlichungen zur SBZ-/DDR-Forschung im Institut Für Zeitgeschichte*, Munich: De Gruyter, 2006. 55.

⁷⁹ Bispinck and van Melis, *Republikflucht*, 56.

⁸⁰ The term “*Republikflüchtling*” was first used in 1953. cf. Bispinck and van Melis, *Republikflucht*, 40.

⁸¹ Bispinck, “Republikflucht,” 285.

⁸² Corey Ross, “Before the Wall: East Germans, Communist Authority, and the Mass Exodus to the West.” *The Historical Journal* 45, no. 2 (2002): 459–80, 461.

emigrate.”⁸³ However, by the 1950s, the SED realized that this mass exodus was having devastating economic and political consequences.⁸⁴ It depleted the fragile young state’s labor force, leading to a “brain drain” as members of the professional class fled in great numbers.⁸⁵ But it was also a public relations nightmare. *Ostzonenflüchtlinge* became a powerful propaganda instrument for West Germany, who publicized their stories and portrayed them as “victims of totalitarianism.”⁸⁶

The state attempted to combat *Republikflucht* through various strategies. First, it was increasingly criminalized: in 1951, it became illegal to leave the GDR without turning in your *Personalausweis*; making “preparations” for flight became a punishable offense in 1954,⁸⁷ and a change in the passport law in 1957 made *Republikflucht* altogether illegal, punishable with fines or three years of imprisonment.⁸⁸ The second strategy was a series of carrot-and-stick measures intended to either entice *Republikflüchtlinge* to return, e.g. by promising them employment and housing upon return, or to incentivise potential fugitives to stay by improving various living and working conditions.⁸⁹ Third, the SED launched a full-scale propaganda campaign against *Republikflucht*, attempting to convince the population that those who fled encountered only “misery” and “homelessness” in the West.⁹⁰ The final strategy in this arsenal of countermeasures was reconnaissance and surveillance. In the 1950s, state institutions (particularly the

⁸³ “Die Verfassung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (7. Oktober 1949).” *Deutsche Geschichte in Dokumenten und Bildern*.

“Jeder Bürger ist berechtigt, auszuwandern.”

⁸⁴ Bispinck, “Republikflucht,” 290.

⁸⁵ Bispinck, “Republikflucht,” 296. By the 1960s, the GDR estimated the economic damage caused by Republikflucht as 2.5 billion marks annually. cf: Diedrich, Torsten, 317.

⁸⁶ Sheffer, “On Edge,” 331. The conspicuous wave of migration also hindered the GDR’s efforts to be internationally recognized. cf: Bispinck, “Republikflucht,” 285.

⁸⁷ Bispinck and van Melis, *Republikflucht*, 48.

⁸⁸ Bispinck and van Melis, *Republikflucht*, 48. This law also “increased the punishment for unauthorized border crossings, formally outlawed both the preparation and assistance of Republikflucht, and eased state confiscation of property belonging to illegal emigrants.” cf: Ross, “Before the Wall,” 462.

⁸⁹ Ross, “Before the Wall,” 461.

⁹⁰ Bispinck and van Melis, *Republikflucht*, 124.

Hauptverwaltung Deutsche Volkspolizei, the Ministry for State Security (*Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*, hereafter the Stasi) and the Department of State and Law at the Central Committee of the SED (*Abteilung Staat und Recht beim ZK der SED*) began obsessively surveilling the *Flucht- und Abwanderungsbewegung*, compiling numerous reports in which they attempted to discern the motives and causes of flight and make suggestions for prevention.⁹¹ The *Volkspolizei* and the *Stasi* kept a close watch on those they suspected of a *Fluchtmotive*, monitoring their contacts and keeping a lookout for suspicious moves like the sudden sale of an apartment or money being taken out of savings accounts.⁹² (Preventing *Republikflucht* became one central task of the *Stasi*, which was to steadily expand the scope of its surveillance in the following decade.)⁹³

Crucial to note is that people fled to the West for a plurality of reasons. Political, economic and personal motives for flight were inextricably intertwined – but for most emigrants, the decision to move West was an individualized, self-interested one, not a political one.⁹⁴ Reasons for “flight from the republic” were as numerous as the fugitives themselves. Many were simply seeking a better standard of living, enticed by West Germany’s *Wirtschaftswunder* (“economic miracle”) – in the language of GDR propaganda, *der goldene Westen* (“the golden West”) – which contrasted starkly with the GDR’s feeble economy. Some sought a new life after being dispossessed by the *Bodenreform* (land reform) or ruined by the GDR’s disastrous attempt at the collectivization of agriculture. Others still were attempting to escape criminal charges, reunite with family members, open their own business, pursue professional opportunities, or

⁹¹ Bispinck and van Melis, *Republikflucht*, 54.

⁹² Bispinck, “Republikflucht,” 293.

⁹³ Peter Joachim Lapp, “‘Hauptaufgabe’ Fluchtverhinderung,” Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, October 7, 2016.

⁹⁴ Bispinck, “Republikflucht,” 300.

even run away from unfavorable circumstances in their personal lives.⁹⁵ Between 1953 and 1961, only 14.2% of emigrants who resettled to the FRG were issued the Refugee Identity Certificate (*Flüchtlingsausweis*) category C, “political predicament” (*politische Zwangslage*).⁹⁶ Germans still thought in “national, pan-German terms” and did not necessarily conceive of their change of place – first and foremost, anyway – as a “betrayal of the GDR.”⁹⁷

This nuance was mostly lost on the SED, which was in the habit of denouncing dissenters of all stripes as “enemies of the state” (“*Staatsfeinde*”) – or worse, class enemies (“*Klassenfeinde*”) – and discrediting genuine manifestations of unrest as conspiracies orchestrated by the imperialist-capitalist West (“*Agententätigkeit*”).⁹⁸ Inevitably, *Republikflucht* became an inherently political and criminal act, subject to the SED’s one-size-fits-all lexicon of defamations. By 1951, the SED was demonizing fugitives as “criminals, saboteurs and agents.”⁹⁹ Associations with treason and criminality were supplemented by character attacks: the moralistic assertion that fugitives were “depraved,” “asocial,” or “work-shy,” as well as the rather patronizing accusations of “political ambiguity,” “false consciousness,” and “unenlightenment,” as if fugitives were incapable of thinking for themselves.¹⁰⁰

Furthermore, the paranoid, inward-looking worldview of the SED could not make sense of legitimate, homegrown criticism of the state, and so from the very beginning, *Republikflucht*

⁹⁵ Bispinck, “Republikflucht,” 290.

⁹⁶ Bispinck, “Republikflucht,” 300.

⁹⁷ Bispinck, “Republikflucht,” 302. “[T]rotz der Existenz zweier deutscher Staaten und der durch die Demarkationslinie eingeschränkten Mobilität noch ein gesamtdeutscher Arbeitsmarkt existierte. So war für die meisten DDR-Bürger Republikflucht auch ‘kein Verrat an der DDR, sondern nur ein geographischer Arbeitsplatzwechsel’, sie dachten in nationalen, gesamtdeutschen Kategorien.”

⁹⁸ Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship*, 137.

⁹⁹ Bispinck, “Republikflucht,” 290. “kriminelle Verbrecher, Saboteuren und Agenten”

¹⁰⁰ Bispinck, “Republikflucht,” 304. “In der Agitationsarbeit der Partei, in der Presse und im Rundfunk ist die auf die Auslösung der Republikflucht gerichtete Wühl- und Hetzarbeit des Gegners als Mittel zur Störung der Verwirklichung des neuen Kurses und zur Entfesselung einer chauvinistischen Hetze gegen die Sowjetunion und die volksdemokratischen Länder und die Deutsche Demokratische Republik zu entlarven.”

was conceived of as a deliberate conspiracy by the enemy. This blame-the-enemy framework became “the ritual centrepiece of official discourse on *Republikflucht* in the GDR, not only in official propaganda, where one might expect it, but also in internal classified correspondence”¹⁰¹ – indicating that the idea that *Republikflucht* was at least in part a conspiracy was a sincerely held conviction within the SED. In the 1953 document “Further Measures in the Fight against *Republikflucht*,” the Politbüro characterized the phenomenon as the result of “the enemy’s agitation and smear campaign aimed at triggering the flight from the Republic” through “chauvinist agitation.”¹⁰² Elsewhere, it was characterized as the result of an organized conspiracy of *Abwerbung* (“luring away”) on the part of the West German government, media, and businesses.¹⁰³ The notion that “family reasons” alone could account for a GDR citizen’s decision to flee the republic was considered implausible by the SED: every *Republikflucht* must involve some degree of ideological diversion.¹⁰⁴

It is within this context – the buildup of the German-German border, the emergence of the politicized concept of *Republikflucht*, and the state’s evolving responses to it – that the story of the *Grenzpolizei* unfolds.

¹⁰¹ Ross, “Before the Wall,” 463 - 464.

¹⁰² “In der Agitationsarbeit der Partei, in der Presse und im Rundfunk ist die auf die Auslösung der Republikflucht gerichtete Wühl- und Hetzarbeit des Gegners als Mittel zur Störung der Verwirklichung des neuen Kurses und zur Entfesselung einer chauvinistischen Hetze gegen die Sowjetunion und die volksdemokratischen Länder und die Deutsche Demokratische Republik zu entlarven.”

¹⁰³ Ross, “Before the Wall,” 463. “via letters or illicit flyers, sometimes through discussions with western agents in the GDR or while the ‘victim’ was in the West, and [...] via the West German media.”

¹⁰⁴ A 1954 report from the Central Committee argued: “A worker in the GDR who is ideologically steadfast does not move to his aunt or mother-in-law in West Germany for so-called ‘family reasons’, giving up his livelihood leaving the furniture standing. The functionary who believes in ‘family reasons’ is politically blind.” 22 SAPMO-BA DY30/IV2/I3/395, “Material für die Besprechung der Bezirksleitungen,” May 1954, 3. Quoted in Corey, “Before the Wall,” 465.

Chapter 1.2: Origins and Development of the *Grenzpolizei*

In 1945, to enforce the nascent border regime, each of the four occupying powers established police bodies, an authority granted to them by the Allied Control Council. Thus, the Soviet Military Administration in Germany (SMAD) was in charge of policing the Soviet Zone of Occupation (SBZ). Soviet Army soldiers comprised the first *Grenzer*, patrolling the Demarcation Line separating the SBZ and the American and British zones – a humble affair delineated by barbed wire and posts¹⁰⁵ – and warned the local population to stay away under pain of arrest.¹⁰⁶ Soon, local German police officers were recruited alongside them as “*Hilfskräfte*” (assistants)¹⁰⁷ – personnel whom historian Peter Joachim Lapp describes as “barely trained, wildly dressed and sparsely armed figures.”¹⁰⁸

In November 1946, the SMAD ordered the creation of the *Deutsche Grenzpolizei* (German Border Police),¹⁰⁹ which had an initial strength of 2,543.¹¹⁰ They were tasked with controlling traffic along the Demarcation Line, apprehending illegal border-crossers, and combating the (still-flourishing) black market trade.¹¹¹ Border service was a voluntary three-year long commitment, and young men from the ages of 18 to 25 were recruited as soldiers.¹¹² (In the

¹⁰⁵ Baechler, “The Making of a Border,” 203.

¹⁰⁶ Diedrich, “Die Grenzpolizei der SBZ/DDR (1946-1961),” 201; Baechler, “The Making of a Border,” 204.

¹⁰⁷ Hanisch, “Zur Entwicklung der Grenzschutzorgane in den Jahren von 1949 bis 1960,” 105.

¹⁰⁸ Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 66. “kaum ausgebildete, wild gekleidete und spärlich bewaffnete Gestalten als Begleiter von Sowjetsoldaten an die Zonengrenze, um ‘illegale’ Grenzgänger und ‘Schieber und Spekulanten’ aufzuspüren und festzunehmen.” Historian Peter Joachim Lapp argues that the implementation of German border guards contributed to both destabilization on the Demarcation Line and the increasing severity of the border regime. When Soviet Army soldiers were guarding the border, “it was easier for people to dare to negate it,” but the manifestation of East German Border police made the situation “much more confusing and dangerous, because the controls were expanded and there were more arrests.” cf: Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 68.

¹⁰⁹ Hanisch, “Zur Entwicklung der Grenzschutzorgane in den Jahren von 1949 bis 1960,” 105; This order was carried out on December 1, 1946, which was henceforth celebrated as “*Grenzpolizeitag*” (Border Police Day) and later “*Grenztruppentag*” (Border Troops Day). cf: Hanisch, “Zur Entwicklung der Grenzschutzorgane in den Jahren von 1949 bis 1960,” 104.

¹¹⁰ Baechler, “The Making of a Border,” 205

¹¹¹ Hanisch, “Zur Entwicklung der Grenzschutzorgane in den Jahren von 1949 bis 1960,” 107.

¹¹² Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 324.

beginning, its members were primarily transferred from the *Schutzpolizei*.)¹¹³ At this time, though, the DGP was still a humble outfit, “poorly equipped, poorly clothed and poorly housed.”¹¹⁴ Vehicles were sparse (private bicycles were the most frequently used method of transportation), rations were stingy, and uniforms and weapons were slapdash, issued by individual police departments.¹¹⁵ Organized in *Stützpunkte* consisting of 10 men responsible for 8 to 15 kilometers of border and lacking functioning telephone links between posts, they hardly had mastery over the border.¹¹⁶ As the border regime solidified, however, the *Grenzpolizei* increased in sophistication and authority. In 1947, the SMAD issued an order organizing them into departments, headquarters, and detachments (*Abteilungen, Kommandanturen* and *Kommandos*).¹¹⁷ Equipment, salary, rations, and living conditions improved: from 1948, *Grenzer* were housed in barracks, provided with vehicles, and issued their own firearms.¹¹⁸

When the GDR was founded in 1949, the *Grenzpolizei* acquired a heightened political imperative: they now had the task of safeguarding the borders of the young republic, not just policing traffic and repelling smugglers. The border acquired a deeper political significance, and the leadership of the GDR began to envision the *Grenzpolizei* not just as a police force, but as the first line of defense against a potential attack from the West.¹¹⁹ This intention was made explicit with the structural reorganization of the *Grenzpolizei* in 1951 and even more so with the closure of the border in 1952.¹²⁰ In 1952, the *Grenzpolizei* (now subordinate to the *Stasi*) was given the

¹¹³ Torsten, “Die Grenzpolizei der SBZ/DDR (1946-1961),” 204.

¹¹⁴ Baechler, “The Making of a Border,” 206.

¹¹⁵ Hanisch, “Zur Entwicklung der Grenzschutzorgane in den Jahren von 1949 bis 1960,” 108; Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 67.

¹¹⁶ Baechler, “The Making of a Border,” 206.

¹¹⁷ Diedrich, “Die Grenzpolizei der SBZ/DDR (1946-1961),” 203.

¹¹⁸ Diedrich, “Die Grenzpolizei der SBZ/DDR (1946-1961),” 205; Hanisch, “Zur Entwicklung der Grenzschutzorgane in den Jahren von 1949 bis 1960,” 116.

¹¹⁹ Diedrich, “Die Grenzpolizei der SBZ/DDR (1946-1961),” 211. The concept of a border guard unit with a military structure and function was based on the Soviet model.

¹²⁰ Diedrich, “Die Grenzpolizei der SBZ/DDR (1946-1961),” 208.

task “to protect the border population against armed attacks of all kinds.”¹²¹ Their militarization (on the so-called “Soviet model” of a militarized border guard) was reflected externally: they were issued Soviet rifle weapons, Soviet-style military uniforms, and military rank designations.¹²² Soviet “advisors” began working in the ranks of the Grenzpolizei that year.¹²³

However, the *Grenzpolizei*’s role as a military vanguard was only one half of their dual function.¹²⁴ Their most important task in practice – seeing as they never ended up having to repel any army advances on the border – was preventing flight to the West. This became central to the *Grenzdienst* in tandem with the increasing politicization of *Republikflucht* and with the closure of the border in 1952 – which, after all, was first and foremost an anti-*Republikflucht* measure. Whereas in 1946 the *Grenzpolizei* had been instructed to only use weapons in cases of self-defense,¹²⁵ guidelines in 1952 explicitly ordered them to “shoot at fugitives when an escape from the country could not be otherwise prevented.”¹²⁶ Border guards were incentivized to use violence, as officers frequently issued rewards for shooting and killing escapees, e.g. bonuses, promotions, or gifts like valuable watches.¹²⁷ The violent mindset engendered by the application of the paramilitary police force against fugitive civilians eventually reached its grisly logical conclusion by the time the *Grenzpolizei* became a military force in the 1960s: in 1962, the GDR’s Minister of Defense emphasized the necessity of convincing border guards “that border violators must always be treated as enemies (and) destroyed if necessary.”¹²⁸

¹²¹ Hanisch, “Zur Entwicklung der Grenzschutzorgane in den Jahren von 1949 bis 1960,” 133; Diedrich, “Die Grenzpolizei der SBZ/DDR (1946-1961),” 208.

¹²² Hanisch, “Zur Entwicklung der Grenzschutzorgane in den Jahren von 1949 bis 1960,” 134.

¹²³ Diedrich, “Die Grenzpolizei der SBZ/DDR (1946-1961),” 209

¹²⁴ Maurer, Jochen and Gerhard Sälter, “The Double Task of the East German Border Guards.”

¹²⁵ Diedrich, “Die Grenzpolizei der SBZ/DDR (1946-1961),” 204.

¹²⁶ Maurer, and Sälter, “The Double Task of the East German Border Guards,” 27; Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 75.

¹²⁷ Maurer and Sälter, “The Double Task of the East German Border Guards,”

¹²⁸ Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 118. “Sein Bericht gipfelte in der Forderung, alle ‘Grenzposten davon zu überzeugen, dass Grenzverletzer in jedem Falle als Gegner gestellt, (und) wenn notwendig, vernichtet werden müssen.’” Quote from “Protokoll der 12. Sitzung des NVR der DDR vom 14. September 1962.”

The *Grenzpolizei* underwent frequent reorganization as it found its footing, subordinate initially to local police forces in the SBZ “Länder” (states),¹²⁹ then to the Ministry of the Interior (1949 – 1952), then the Ministry of State Security (1952 – 1957), then the Ministry of Interior again (1957 – 1961).¹³⁰ The most important trend to observe amid this bureaucratic reshuffling is the *Grenzpolizei*’s steady expansion in numbers, strength, and scope of authority, reflecting its transformation into a paramilitary institution. Every major political development heralded upgrades for the Border Police: newer, shinier equipment; new military training and political indoctrination programs. When the Warsaw Pact was founded in 1955, for example, the SED began to transform the *Grenzpolizei* into a “heavily armed military force” that could defend the border in the case of war, amping up their military training accordingly.¹³¹ Walter Ulbricht summarized this transformation bluntly in 1955: “For a time, the border troops will continue to be called police, but they will have a military organization.”¹³² The personnel increased in accordance with these developments, from around 9,000 in 1948 to 38,000 in 1955 to almost 50,000 in 1961.¹³³ The militarization of the *Grenzpolizei* culminated in 1962, when the *Grenzpolizei* were rechristened the *Grenztruppen* (Border Troops) and subsumed into the *Nationale Volksarmee* (National People’s Army).¹³⁴

Underneath this superficial structural history of the *Grenzpolizei* lies another, more illuminating story: that of the constant tension between the SED’s aspirations for the *Grenzpolizei* as an organization and the reality of the organization’s systemic dysfunction.

¹²⁹ Maurer and Sälter, “The Double Task of the East German Border Guards,” 24.

¹³⁰ Maurer and Sälter, “The Double Task of the East German Border Guards,” 25. In 1955, authority over the *Grenzpolizei* was formally transferred to the GDR government following the dissolution of the Soviet Control Commission. cf. Maurer, Jochen and Gerhard Sälter, “The Double Task of the East German Border Guards,” 25.

¹³¹ Maurer and Sälter, “The Double Task of the East German Border Guards,” 28; Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 78.

¹³² Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 79.

¹³³ Diedrich, “Die Grenzpolizei der SBZ/DDR (1946-1961),” 203; Maurer, Jochen and Gerhard Sälter, “The Double Task of the East German Border Guards,” 28.

¹³⁴ Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 80.

Chapter 1.3: Problems of the *Grenzpolizei*

In just over a decade, the *Grenzpolizei* underwent drastic structural and functional changes, transforming from a ragtag volunteer police force to a heavily armed branch of the military. However, one core element of the *Grenzpolizei* was present from even before the founding of the GDR: the *Grenzpolizei*'s conception of itself as an inherently political institution, subordinate to the higher ideals of socialism in the workers' and peasants' state. An illustration of this vision can be gleaned from the introduction to the "*Anordnung über die Durchführung von Polit-Informationen u. Polit-Unterricht mit Pol. Angehörigen der Deutschen Volkspolizei*," a document issued to the officers responsible for "political education" in the *Grenzpolizei*:

In countries where imperialism reigns, the police are a tool for oppressing the working masses, a tool for maintaining the power of the capitalist monopolists. There it serves primarily to keep the masses down, to protect the exploiters from the exploited, to persecute the progressive forces and the workers' parties, which are the vanguard of the working people in the struggle against imperialism. [...]

The Anglo-American imperialists have formed a similar police force in the western zones of Germany and in the western sectors of Berlin along these lines. The members of the police in the western zones and western sectors of Berlin are selected from reactionary, military and fascist elements. [...]

The People's Police formed in the Soviet Occupation Zone of Germany is fundamentally different from the police of the imperialist states and from the police of the western zones of Germany.

The German People's Police is made up of the best, most honest people who are devoted to the cause of the people, workers and working intelligentsia. Its task is to defend the interests of the German people in the struggle to build a democratic, peace-loving Germany.

It is the armed force that consistently protects the anti-fascist democratic order from attacks by fascist-reactionary elements. It supports the social and economic achievements that have been and are being realized in the Soviet Occupation Zone. The People's Police must show the greatest vigilance and be ruthless in the fight against the class enemy of the workers and toiling peasants, in the fight against saboteurs and saboteurs and against

all anti-democratic illegal activity. It must protect the people's property from robbery and destruction.¹³⁵

The SMAD and the SED took care when recruiting the *Grenzpolizei* to curate a force which would live up to these ideals. The leadership of the first generation consisted exclusively of former KPD members who had proven themselves to be “convinced opponents of National Socialism,”¹³⁶ and 80% of the rank-and-file *Grenzer* were drawn from the working class – an intentional move to ensure the proletarian character of the force.¹³⁷ A concerted effort was made to recruit former Soviet prisoners of war, activists involved in the party’s official youth program, the Free German Youth (*Freie Deutsche Jugend*, or FDJ), or those who had otherwise promising ideological credentials.¹³⁸ Finally, the SED ensured the “leading role” of the party in the force by

¹³⁵ Dienstanweisungen, den Politunterricht und die Ausbildung betreffend, 1948 – 1949, Archivsignatur DVH 27/128779, Sekretariat des Kommandeurs, Kommando der DGP, Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv, Freiburg im Breisgau. “In Ländern, in denen der Imperialismus herrscht, ist die Polizei ein Werkzeug zur Unterdrückung der werktätigen Massen, ein Werkzeug zur Erhaltung der Macht der kapitalistischen Monopolherren. Dort dient sie in erster Linie der Niederhaltung der Massen zum Schutze der Ausbeuter vor den Ausgebeuteten, zur Verfolgung der fortschrittlichen Kräfte und der Arbeiterparteien, die die Avantgarde der Werktätigen im Kampf gegen den Imperialismus sind. Dort werden das Polizeiangehörigen vornehmlich aus den reaktionären Schichten der Bevölkerung geworben und die leitenden Angestellten der Polizei aus ehemaligen Offizieren, Grossgrundbesitzern und mittleren und höheren Beamtenkreisen. Sie erfüllen ihre Funktion als eifrige Beschützer ihrer Ausbeuterklassen. Nach diesem Muster ist von den englisch-amerikanischen Imperialisten eine ähnliche Polizei in den Westzonen Deutschlands und in den Westsektoren Berlins gebildet worden. Die Polizeiangehörigen in den Westzonen und Westsektoren Berlins werden aus reaktionären, militärischen und faschistischen Elementen ausgewählt. In leitenden Funktionen bei und faschistischen Elementen ausgewählt. In leitenden Funktionen bei der Polizei sind frühere Nationalsozialisten oder Leiter reaktionärer und terroristischer Organisationen eingesetzt. Es ist klar, dass eine solche Polizei gegen die werktätigen Massen der deutschen Bevölkerung und gegen die demokratischen Organisationen und gegen die Freiheit ist. Die in der SBZ Deutschlands gebildete Volkspolizei unterscheidet sich grundsätzlich von der Polizei der imperialistischen Staaten und von der Polizei der westlichen Zonen Deutschlands. Die Deutsche Volkspolizei setzt sich aus den besten, ehrlichsten und der Sache des Volkes ergebenen Leuten zusammen aus Arbeitern, werktätigen Intelligenz. Ihre Aufgabe ist die Verteidigung der Interessen des deutschen Volkes im Kampf um den Aufbau [eines] demokratischen, friedliebenden Deutschlands. Sie ist die bewaffnete Macht, die konsequent die antifaschistische demokratische Ordnung vor Angriffen von seiten der faschistischen-reaktionären Elemente schützt. Sie unterstützt die sozialen und ökonomischen Errungenschaften, die in der SBZ durchgeführt wurden und werden. Die Volkspolizei muss größte Wachsamkeit an den Tag legen und im Kampf gegen den Klassenfeind der Arbeiter und werktätigen Bauern, im Kampf gegen Saboteure und Diversanten und gegen jede antidemokratische illegale Tätigkeit schonungslos vorgehen. Sie muss das Volkseigentum vor Raub und Verderben schützen.”

¹³⁶ Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 324.

¹³⁷ Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 324.

¹³⁸ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 127.

establishing divisions of the SED and the FDJ within the *Grenzpolizei* in 1948. These organizations allowed the political apparatus to surveil, educate, and discipline border guards.¹³⁹

Meanwhile, those who were ideologically suspect were barred from the organization. In 1946, Erich Mielke disqualified former Wehrmacht and NSDAP members from border service. In 1949, Order 2/49 made having first-degree relatives in the West, having been a prisoner of war in the West, or plain “political unreliability” valid grounds for dismissal.¹⁴⁰ The implementation of this order saw 780 soldiers dismissed and 2,102 transferred on these grounds.¹⁴¹ New guidelines issued in May 1952 mandated an “anti-fascist and democratic attitude” for new recruits, excluding former NSDAP members and participants in other suspect organizations, and similar political reliability guidelines would be issued in coming years.¹⁴² In the 1950s, examinations of “political reliability” became routine, and criteria for “unreliability” only grew more stringent, with criteria as obscure as “liking to wear velour pullovers” or “reading pulp fiction” serving as grounds for suspicion.¹⁴³

From the very beginning, however, the ideal vision of the *Grenzpolizei* that the SED attempted to create clashed with reality. First of all, the slim pickings available for the *Grenzpolizei* made the ideal police force impossible to achieve. It proved extremely difficult not to hire anyone with *Westverbindungen* (connections to the West), for example, and although the stringent order 2/49 continued to apply in practice, it could not always be implemented as

¹³⁹ Giese, *Die SED und ihre Armee*, 33. “SED-Parteistrukturen.” The FDJ organization functioned as “the extended arm of the political apparatus in disciplining the border guards with the partly voluntary, partly forced participation of the teams and non-commissioned officers.” cf. Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 283.

¹⁴⁰ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 125.

¹⁴¹ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 126.

¹⁴² Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 127.

¹⁴³ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 128.

intended.¹⁴⁴ New hires frequently concealed their *Westverbindungen* during the hiring process.¹⁴⁵ A 1955 Stasi report complaining of the “bad personnel” (*schlechter Personalbestand*) in one *Grenzbereitschaft* reveals just how ubiquitous *Westverbindungen* were in the force: “Of the total strength of approx. 850 men: 350 have relatives in the West, 175 of whom have a connection [with these relatives], 80 are in correspondence [with them] and 20 [receive] visits from them.”¹⁴⁶

The background checks for new hires and the intermittent “political reliability” checks were often superficial, with the result that *Grenzer* with “undesirable” qualities frequently fell through the cracks: “Entire border departments were filled with teams whose loyalty to the DDR was questionable in the eyes of their superiors.”¹⁴⁷ (One soldier who deserted in 1953 provides an illustrative example of just how easy it was to conceal one’s political unreliability during the hiring process: “Jens committed falsification on the questionnaire by concealing a one-year prison sentence and 2-year stay in West Germany.”¹⁴⁸) Administrative reports from inside the *Grenzpolizei* abound with complaints that background checks during the hiring process had been superficial.¹⁴⁹ As for enforcing ideological steadfastness, this was complicated by the fact that border guards “could not be put under too much pressure, because there was always the risk that they would submit a request for dismissal or flee for the West.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁴ For example: in 1949, 27% of personnel had been soldiers in Allied captivity, while only 20% had been in Soviet captivity. cf: Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 126.

¹⁴⁵ For example: “[redacted] war vor seinem Eintritt in die DGP längere Zeit in Westdeutschland. Dies wurde in seinem Fragebogen verschwiegen.” cf: DVH 27/155680.

¹⁴⁶ Besondere Vorkommnisse, 1953, Archivsignatur DVH 27/135180, Abteilung Organisation und Nachweisführung, Kommando der DGP, Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv, Freiburg im Breisgau. “Von der Gesamtstärke von ca. 850 Mann haben: 350 Westverwandtschaft, 175 davon Verbindung, 80 Briefwechsel durch Angehörige und 20 Besuche durch Angehörige.”

¹⁴⁷ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 129.

¹⁴⁸ DVH 27/135180. “[redacted] hatte weiterhin Fragenbogenfälschung begangen, indem er eine einjährige Gefängnisstrafe und 2 jährige Aufenthalt in Westdeutschland verschwiegen hat.”

¹⁴⁹ e.g. “Mangelhafte Überprüfung bei der Neueinstellung. Die 3 GP-Angeh. hatten vor ihrem Eintritt in die GP einen schlechten Leumund und zum Teil starke Westverbindung.” cf: DVH 27/155680.

¹⁵⁰ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 135.

Moreover, despite relentless efforts by state organizations to recruit young people to the *Grenzpolizei* – especially the FDJ, which had a youth propaganda campaign so elaborate that it involved encouraging young women to recruit their male friends¹⁵¹ – the *Grenzpolizei* was constantly understaffed, typically only fulfilling 50 to 60 percent of its recruitment targets.¹⁵² Border service was simply unpopular, even compared to other organizations like the *Volkspolizei* (People’s Police), the *Kasernierten Volkspolizei* (Barracked People’s Police) and (later) the NVA, who competed to recruit the same demographic.¹⁵³

Those who joined the *Grenzpolizei* out of political conviction were a minority.¹⁵⁴ Rather, most of the young men drawn to the job were “those who had poor career prospects because they had not completed school or vocational training,” for whom “a decisive criterion for joining the *Grenzpolizei* was getting a good salary despite poor schooling, and being able to achieve [...] a respected social status.”¹⁵⁵ For those enduring the scant rations available in the postwar years, another perk of border service was that the barracks food wasn’t too bad.¹⁵⁶ Service at the border could serve as a career launchpad, as the loyalty to the GDR that it conveyed was a significant advantage in applying for jobs and apprenticeships.¹⁵⁷ Some even joined – most antithetical of all to the *Grenzpolizei*’s *raison d’être* – to use the position as a “springboard for desertion,” a significant concern for the Stasi.¹⁵⁸

Thus, instead of bleeding-heart fighters for the cause, the best the administration could hope for in its recruitment of the rank-and-file was “trustworthy young men who identified with

¹⁵¹ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 100.

¹⁵² Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 328.

¹⁵³ Voluntary service in the *Volkspolizei* and the *Kasernierten Volkspolizei* was more popular. cf. Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 98.

¹⁵⁴ Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 328.

¹⁵⁵ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 104.

¹⁵⁶ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 66; Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 116.

¹⁵⁷ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 104.

¹⁵⁸ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 139. “Sprungbrett für eine Desertion”

the SED regime or at least did not reject it.”¹⁵⁹ Yet even professed loyalty was suspect: since political conviction was desired as a motive, recruits were incentivized to tell recruiters what they wanted to hear. But the young men who joined the *Grenzpolizei* didn’t necessarily view their job through the same stringently political lens as the SED – nor did they always even view it as mutually exclusive with ambitions in the West. For example, at least one investigation of a deserted border guard revealed that he had signed up with the *Grenzpolizei* (at the encouragement of his relatives) because he needed enough solid career experience to get a good job in the West when he eventually fled the GDR.¹⁶⁰ Primary sources reveal a large cohort who performed their job with an ostentatious lack of enthusiasm and had taken the job simply because they needed some sort of employment.

The problems of an unruly personnel were compounded by the material conditions and day-to-day experiences of border service. Border guards were barracked far away from their families in remote border regions with scant housing and poor roads, “where they had to spend large amounts of time patrolling the countryside in bad weather.”¹⁶¹ Service lasted eight to twelve hours or more.¹⁶² Border guards often spent what little free time they had “engaging in abundant alcohol consumption in restaurants.”¹⁶³ Short staffing meant that border guards were overworked and perennially sleep deprived,¹⁶⁴ so much so that “falling asleep on post” was one of the most common disciplinary infractions, with 3,596 border guards disciplined for the offense in 1954.¹⁶⁵

¹⁵⁹ Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 328. “vertrauenswürdige junge Männer, zuzuführen, die sich mit dem SED-Regime identifizierten oder es wenigstens nicht ablehnten.”

¹⁶⁰ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 135.

¹⁶¹ Baechler, “The Making of a Border,” 206.

¹⁶² Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 69.

¹⁶³ Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 396. “in Gaststätten bei reichlich Alkoholgenuss.”

¹⁶⁴ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 190.

¹⁶⁵ DVH 27/128913 For reference: the *Grenzpolizei* had a total strength of 30,745 that year. cf: Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 100.

Throughout the following decade, the *Grenzpolizei* would be consistently marred by low discipline and morale, which manifested in a “catastrophic internal condition.”¹⁶⁶ Reports perennially complain of a “low socialist consciousness” and an overwhelmingly high rate of disciplinary infractions.¹⁶⁷ The five most prevalent disciplinary infractions in the second and third quarters of 1955 – “Waking offenses (mostly sleeping on post or leaving the post), exceeding leave, failure to carry out orders, unauthorized departure from the station, drunkenness, and damage to the reputation of the *Grenzpolizei*” – are representative of the general character of misbehavior: although they did not amount to an open protest, they amounted to a tacit refusal to participate in the mission of the organization, or at least to take it seriously.¹⁶⁸ As apolitical as refusing to take one’s job seriously may seem, these type of disciplinary infractions reflect a widespread disinclination to participate in the project of border service, which historian Rüdiger Wenzke argues (in the context of the GDR’s armed forces as a whole) amounted to an implicit “rejection of the political conditions in the GDR and the paternalism of the SED ideology.”¹⁶⁹

The local population in border towns frequently resented their presence – unsurprisingly, since they were charged with arresting “border violators” and confiscating goods.¹⁷⁰ While the relationship between the *Grenzpolizei* and the civilian population varied widely from place to place – 1952 saw the inauguration of the bizarre institution of the *Grenzhelfer* (“border-helpers”),

¹⁶⁶ Daniel Giese, *Die SED und ihre Armee: Die NVA zwischen Politisierung und Professionalismus 1956-1965*, München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2002. 34.

¹⁶⁷ Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 85.

¹⁶⁸ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 188. “Wachvergehen (zumeist Schlafen auf dem Posten bzw. Verlassen des Postens), Urlaubsüberschreitungen, Nichtsausführen von Befehlen, Unerlaubtes Entfernen von der Dienststelle, Trunkenheit and Schädigung des Ansehens der DGP”

¹⁶⁹ Wenzke, “Die Fahnenflucht in den Streitkräften der DDR,” 266. “ausgeprägten Abneigung gegenüber dem militärischen Dienst, den allgemeinen Zuständen in den einzelnen Einheiten und der Aversion gegenüber der besonders intensiven politischen Erziehung.” “Ablehnung der politischen Verhältnisse in der DDR und der Bevormundung durch die SED-Ideologie”

¹⁷⁰ Baechler, “The Making of a Border,” 208.

civilian volunteers who assisted the border police by patrolling their hometowns and keeping their eyes peeled for anyone trying to flee to the West – its unprofessional reputation appears to have preceded it in many cases.¹⁷¹ In Sachsen-Anhalt in 1947, for example, “Complaints abounded of Border Police taking bribes, helping people to cross the demarcation line, and behaving in a drunken or threatening manner.”¹⁷² Tensions between the *Grenzpolizei* and the local population intensified rapidly in many locations after the closure of the border in 1952.¹⁷³ One anecdote related by a *Gefreiter* in 1954 provides a telling insight into this often fraught relationship: While sitting in a restaurant with his comrades, he was approached by a group of workers who exclaimed “you scoundrels live on our money.” (The interaction escalated into a knife fight.)¹⁷⁴ Obviously, the *Grenzpolizei* being perceived as the vanguard of the workers’ and peasants’ state could not be taken for granted.

Rather than resolving itself, the chasm between the aspiration and the reality of the *Grenzpolizei* continued to grow as its scale and militarization increased. In the early 1950s, a negative attitude towards the remilitarization of Germany prevailed in the GDR, especially among young people, and many border guards resisted the increasing militarization of the *Grenzpolizei*.¹⁷⁵ Many members of the *Grenzpolizei* and the GDR’s other paramilitary organ, the *Kasinierte Volkspolizei* (Barracked People’s Police, the precursor to the NVA), had joined the force expecting to serve as a typical policeman, and were uncomfortable with the prospect of

¹⁷¹ Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 75

¹⁷² Baechler, “The Making of a Border,” 207.

¹⁷³ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 220.

¹⁷⁴ DVH 27/134554. “Wir saßen in der Gaststätte während dessen kamen einige Angehörige der Wismut herein und gingen auf uns zu und beschimpften uns in dem sie sagten, ihr Lumpen ihr lebt von unserem Geld. Der Gefr. [redacted] äußerte spielt euch nur nicht so auf. Daraufhin stürzte sich einer der Wismut mit gezogenem Messer auf den Gen. [redacted].”

¹⁷⁵ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 98, 74.

becoming a soldier in the brewing Cold War.¹⁷⁶ A 1955 Stasi analysis of desertions among all branches of the *Volkspolizei* reported an abundance of “pacifist tendencies, disengagement moods, negative stance against the increase in defense readiness and the measures of our government” in the force, resulting in numerous desertions and requests for dismissal.¹⁷⁷

As a result of both widespread discontent with border service and the numerous other personal and political push- and pull-factors that drove countless civilians to flee the GDR, many border guards deserted and fled to the West. The problem of desertion became apparent early in the *Grenzpolizei*'s existence (over 100 *Grenzer* fled to the West in July and August 1949 alone), and continued to pose a problem through the 1950s: a steady 200 to 300 *Grenzer* deserted to the West each year until 1961.¹⁷⁸ Many more potential desertions were thwarted at the planning stage: 69 border guards were arrested on suspicion of desertion (*Desertionsverdacht*) in the first half of 1956, for example.¹⁷⁹ Deserters were overwhelmingly from the rank-and-file.¹⁸⁰ A Stasi analysis of deserters in the first 6th months of 1955 is representative: 99 *Soldaten*, 35 *Gefreiter*, 4 *Unteroffiziere*, 4 *Offiziere*. The majority of deserters were between the ages of 18 and 22, the majority were from working-class backgrounds, and roughly half of deserters had only been in the force for one year or less, corresponding to the demographic of unreliable young recruits previously described.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁶ Friedrich Glaser, “‘Niemand von uns wollte wieder eine Uniform anziehen...’. Konflikte in der kasernierten Volkspolizei (Mitte 1948 bis Anfang 1952),” in *Befremdlich anders: Leben in der DDR*, edited by Evemarie Badstübner, Felix Mühlberg and Christel Nehring. Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag, 2000. 321.

¹⁷⁷ DVH 27/155680. “pazifistische Tendenzen, Entpflichtungsstimmungen, negatives Auftreten gegen die Erhöhung der Verteidigungsbereitschaft und die Maßnahmen unserer Regierung”

¹⁷⁸ Lapp, *Grenzregime der DDR*, 70.

¹⁷⁹ DVH 27/155680. For example, from June 1 1954 to May 31 1955, 145 members of the *Grenzpolizei* were arrested for *Desertionsverdacht* (on suspicion of desertion), according to the Stasi.

¹⁸⁰ Jochen Maurer, *Halt - Staatsgrenze! Alltag, Dienst und Innenansichten der Grenztruppen der DDR*, Ch. Links Verlag, 2016. 341.

¹⁸¹ Wenke, “Die Fahnenflucht in den Streitkräften der DDR,” 262; DVH 27/155680.

The *Grenzpolizei* was not the only paramilitary organization in the GDR plagued by desertions. Both the *Kasernierte Volkspolizei* and the *Volkspolizei* were faced with the phenomenon from their inception.¹⁸² Before the Berlin Wall was erected, reaching the West was so logistically easy that at least one border guard was able to literally desert by accident in 1953 (“presumably fell asleep drunk on the S-Bahn and went to West Berlin,” his file reads.¹⁸³) But the character of desertions in the *Grenzpolizei* was different. Whereas a typical East German had to carefully plan an escape to the West, the *Grenzpolizei*’s proximity to the border allowed them to do so impulsively. Some deserted from West Berlin, but many others simply ran or drove straight across the Demarcation Line, slipping away from their barracks with excuses as thin as “going to pick mushrooms.”¹⁸⁴ For members of the *Grenzpolizei*, desertion became a feasible solution to a wide variety of problems, from escaping punishment for theft to running away from a dysfunctional family. Many deserters could be described – like one border guard in 1948 – as having deserted with some degree of “youthful spontaneity.”¹⁸⁵

Party officials recognized the problem of desertion in its armed forces – particularly those “individual members of the border police who go over to the western zones and the western sectors of Berlin” – and immediately began developing mechanisms for diagnosing and combating it.¹⁸⁶ In 1949, Kurt Fischer, the President of the Ministry of the Interior and head of

¹⁸² Wenzke, “Die Fahnenflucht in den Streitkräften der DDR,” 252.

¹⁸³ DVH 27/135180. “Vermutlich in der Trunkenheit in der S-Bahn eingeschlafen und nach Westberlin gefahren.”

¹⁸⁴ Besondere Vorkommnisse, December 1957, Archivsignatur DVH 27/135183, Abteilung Organisation und Nachweisführung, Kommando der DGP, Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv, Freiburg im Breisgau. “[redacted] hatte sich von der Dienststelle abgemeldet mit der Bemerkung, er wolle Pilze suchen gehen.”

¹⁸⁵ Besondere Vorkommnisse, 1948, Archivsignatur DVH 27/134534, Abteilung Organisation und Nachweisführung, Kommando der DGP, Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv, Freiburg im Breisgau. “Lauf beliegender Vernehmung und dem Schlussbericht ist die Flucht des [redacted] nicht vorbereitet gewesen und es wird vermutet, dass [redacted] diese Tat aus jugendlicher Unvernunft begangen hat.”

¹⁸⁶ “Befehl 100/49 des Präsidenten der DVdI,” quoted in Martin Stief, *Desertion im geteilten Berlin: Bekämpfung von Fahnenfluchten aus den Reihen der Bereitschaftspolizei im Jahr des Mauerbaus*, Berlin: Der Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 2011. 18. “einzelne Angehörige aus der Grenzpolizei in die Westzonen und in die Westsektoren Berlins [...] übergehen,”

the *Volkspolizei*, issued Order 100/49, which mandated that every individual case of desertion be investigated in order to determine the “reasons” it occurred and to hold any “culprits” responsible.¹⁸⁷ Fischer clarified in no uncertain terms that desertion constituted treason: “Deserters are to be regarded, effective immediately, as traitors to the fatherland, as traitors to the people’s democratic or socialist state and its achievements; indeed, to socialism as a whole.”¹⁸⁸ Henceforth, desertion would be taken as both an act of treason and an ideological betrayal. To atone for their betrayal, deserters who returned were subject to criminal prosecution, usually convicted of espionage or political “incitement.”¹⁸⁹ With the 1958 Supplementary Criminal Law Act (*Strafrechtsergänzungsgesetz*), desertion became a criminal offense.¹⁹⁰

In the following years, the *Hauptverwaltung Grenzpolizei* issued additional orders which developed specific guidelines for desertion procedures (*Desertionsvorgängen*) and the mandatory investigative commission (*Untersuchungskommission*) that would accompany them.¹⁹¹ In their quest to pin down the motives and the character traits of deserters, these reports grew more elaborate over the years — thanks in part to the supplemental material provided by the *Stasi*, who infiltrated the *Grenzpolizei* at every level.¹⁹² (*Stasi* informants collected information on the “mood” in the *Kommandos* and on individual border guards, ranging from their political attitudes to “everyday gossip” regarding their personal lives, with a particular eye towards intentions to desert.¹⁹³)

¹⁸⁷ Stief, *Desertion im geteilten Berlin*, 20.

¹⁸⁸ Präsident der Deutschen Verwaltung des Innern (DVdI) und Chef der Deutschen Volkspolizei, quoted in Wenzke, “Die Fahnenflucht in den Streitkräften der DDR,” 254. “Die Deserteure gelten ab sofort als Vaterlandsverräter, als Verräter am ‘volksdemokratischen’ bzw. Sozialistischen Staat und seinen ‘Errungenschaften’, ja am Sozialismus insgesamt.”

¹⁸⁹ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 428.

¹⁹⁰ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 361.

¹⁹¹ DVH 27/134554.

¹⁹² Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 304. “Die Dienst Einheit des MfS, die für den Stab der Grenzbrigade zuständig war, unterhielt im Zeitraum 1955 bis 1958 mindestens 88 verdeckte Mitarbeiter.” The *Stasi*’s extensive infiltration of the *Grenzpolizei* lies outside the scope of this essay. cf: Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 293 - 360.

¹⁹³ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 312 - 315.

As soon as the *Grenzpolizei* began investigating desertions, it encountered the inherent difficulty in attempting to systematically analyze an individual's decision to desert – a deeply personal decision often made under duress. The difficulty was compounded by the fact that the individuals who deserted were often estranged from the leadership or fellow soldiers in their units. A 1955 Stasi report lists the eleven most common “Reasons for Desertion” that May:

1. Poor work of the district registrars
2. Wrong treatment by officers
3. Fear of punishment
4. Unknown reasons
5. Unwillingness to serve
6. Family reasons
7. Frequent dealings with women
8. Connection with the West
9. Seduction during service
10. Influence by RIAS [Radio in the American Sector]
11. Other hostile influence¹⁹⁴

Lists such as these illustrate the awkwardness of trying to quantify and compartmentalize the multifactorial decision to desert to the West. The functionaries of the *Stasi* and the *Grenzpolizei* administration were forced to grapple with the tension between the political and ideological connotations of desertion and the uncomfortably intimate portrayals of their subjects that emerged from their investigations. The reports they composed in the process of investigating and analyzing the desertion phenomenon, which reflect these tensions, will form the basis of the following chapters.

¹⁹⁴ DVH 27/155680. “1. Schlechtes Arbeiten der Kreisregistrierst. / 2. Falsche Behandlung durch Offiziere / 3. Angst vor Strafe / 4. Unbekannte Gründe / 5. Unlust zum Dienst / 6. Familiäre Gründe / 7. Viel Umgang mit Frauen / 8. Westverbindungen / 9. Verleitung während d. Dienstes / 10. Riasbeeinflußung 11. Andere feindliche Beeinflußung”

Chapter 2: “*Ich habe die Schnauze voll*”

He left behind a note on his backpack that said: “Comrades, don’t take offense. I couldn’t help it. I’ve had it up to here.”

— report investigating an *Oberwachtmeister* who deserted in 1948¹⁹⁵

With the words: “I’m leaving, I’m fed up,” he ran towards the sector border to desert, and thereby to betray his homeland.

— report investigating a *Gefreiter* who deserted in 1955¹⁹⁶

What did everyday life look like for the average border guard? For the *Grenzpolizei*’s officially sanctioned answer to this question, one could look to the organization’s official newspaper, *Der Grenzpolizist: Wochenzeitung der Grenzpolizei*, which was distributed among its personnel.¹⁹⁷ The newspaper is a typical propaganda publication: in between lengthy articles devoted to such communist landmarks as the USSR’s first satellite launch and the fortieth anniversary of the Communist Party, reports abound of the praiseworthy deeds of individual border guards. Three border guards nobly came into work on their day off and succeeded in ensnaring a *Grenzverletzer* (border violator); two corporals successfully arrested “two young car thieves” thanks to their “vigilance”;¹⁹⁸ a new recruit built a house for his police dog;¹⁹⁹ diligent comrades repaired 37 bicycles.²⁰⁰ Coupled with these reports are declarations of the *Grenzpolizei*’s values (“Love for our weapons is a patriotic feeling.”²⁰¹) and exhortations for

¹⁹⁵ DVH 27/134534. “Auf seinem Rucksack hätte er einen Zettel hinterlassen, darauf stand: Kameraden, nehmt es mit nich übel ich konnte nicht anders, mir stand es bis oben hin.”

¹⁹⁶ Desertionen von Angehörigen der DGP, 1955, Archivsignatur DVH 27/128913, Sekretariat des Kommandeurs, Kommando der DGP, Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv, Freiburg im Breisgau. “Mit den Worten: ‘Ich haue ab, ich habe die Schnauze voll,’ lief er in Richtung Sektorengrenze, um zu desertieren und damit seine Heimat zu verraten.”

¹⁹⁷ Kurt Frotscher, *Grenzdienst im Kalten Krieg*, Schkeuditz: GNN Verlag, 2001. 68.

¹⁹⁸ “So müssen Grenzer sein.” *Der Grenzpolizist: Wochenzeitung der Deutschen Grenzpolizei* (Berlin), March 26, 1959.

¹⁹⁹ “Korrespondenten berichten.” *Der Grenzpolizist: Wochenzeitung der Deutschen Grenzpolizei* (Berlin), January 15, 1959. 3.

²⁰⁰ “Korrespondenten berichten.” *Der Grenzpolizist: Wochenzeitung der Deutschen Grenzpolizei* (Berlin), March 26, 1959. 5.

²⁰¹ “Bis zur Vollkommenheit.” *Der Grenzpolizist: Wochenzeitung der Deutschen Grenzpolizei* (Berlin), March 26, 1959. 5. “Die Liebe zu unseren Waffen ist ein patriotisches Gefühl.”

border guards to become involved in the political issues of the day (“Every border guard [should be] a propagandist and agitator for the peace treaty proposed by the Soviet Union!”²⁰²), linking border service with politics, patriotism, and the higher aims of the state.

Yet in between these glowing reports and jingoistic exhortations are nestled voices of frustration and indications that not all was well. “There are a few border police officers,” admits Oberstleutnant d. J. Strauch, “who carelessly disregard their duties, who are undisciplined, who neglect vigilance and violate socialist legality. It has even been necessary to counter some of this serious disregard for the law through the means of criminal law.”²⁰³ Strauch is not the only officer complaining of undisciplined forces. *Unterleutnant* Klose states frankly: “Our company is not the worst, but unfortunately it’s not the best either. Although our border guards do an exemplary job on border duty and in special operations, there is still a lack of discipline. We are now making an effort to change that.”²⁰⁴ As Comrade Hausladen points out, this lack of discipline can have consequences: “Some border violators still manage to cross the border unchecked.” He goes on to tell the story of how five border guards were assigned to the nightly *Postenkontrolle*, but three left the area and wandered off, having deemed it unnecessary to keep an eye on the border at that time.²⁰⁵

²⁰² “Jetzt: Das große Gespräch.” *Der Grenzpolizist: Wochenzeitung der Deutschen Grenzpolizei* (Berlin), January 15, 1959. “Jeder Grenzer ein Propagandist und Agitator für den Friedensvertrag, wie ihn die Sowjetunion vorschlug!”

²⁰³ “Mit der Kraft des Kollektivs: Zur gesellschaftlichen Erziehung straffällig gewordener Grenzpolizisten.” *Der Grenzpolizist: Wochenzeitung der Deutschen Grenzpolizei* (Berlin), March 26, 1959. 5. “Es gibt aber noch einige wenige Grenzpolizisten, die sich leichtfertig über ihre Pflichten hinwegsetzen, die undiszipliniert sind, die die Wachsamkeit vernachlässigen und gegen die sozialistische Gesetzlichkeit verstoßen. Es war sogar notwendig, einigen erheblichen Mißachtungen der Gesetze mit den Mitteln des Strafrechts zu begegnen.”

²⁰⁴ Unterleutnant Klose. “Sozialistische Gruppe ist Vortrupp.” *Der Grenzpolizist: Wochenzeitung der Deutschen Grenzpolizei* (Berlin), March 26 1959. 5. “Unsere Kompanie ist nicht die schlechteste, aber leider auch nicht die beste. Obwohl sich unsere Grenzer im Grenzdienst und in Sondereinsätzen vorbildlich einsetzen, mangelt es noch an der Disziplin. Wir strengen uns jetzt an, das zu verändern.”

²⁰⁵ Genosse Hausladen. “Jeden Grenzdurchbruch verhindern.” *Der Grenzpolizist: Wochenzeitung der Deutschen Grenzpolizei* (Berlin), March 26, 1959. 3. “Noch immer gelingt es einigen Grenzverletzern, unkontrolliert die Grenze zu überschreiten.”

It seems striking that the structural failures of the *Grenzpolizei* are reported so candidly in their official publication. Yet the cautious, disgruntled editorials in *Der Grenzpolizist* about border guards “lacking in discipline” are only the tip of the iceberg of a systemic lack of discipline and cohesion in the force. Analyses on the “political-moral condition” of various *Grenzpolizei* units provide a more complete picture of this lack of cohesion in action. A representative example from a 1955 desertion report, for example, reads:

Anarchistic conditions prevail in the *Kommando*. The detachment leadership is not capable of running a detachment properly, and the comrades expressed that the detachment leadership is too lax in its educational methods. No disciplinary sanctions were imposed for service offenses such as sleeping on post, exceeding leave, exceeding off-duty hours, exceeding curfew, excessive alcohol consumption and other indiscipline. The disciplinary practice within this year shows a punishment rate of 8 comrades compared to a commendation rate of 45 comrades, although countless service offenses occurred and were known to the command leadership and were concealed from the superior office.²⁰⁶

The conditions in this *Kommando* were not unique. A perusal of the *Grenzpolizei*'s desertion files, wherein “anarchy” and “poor political-moral conditions” within a detachment are frequently diagnosed as the “cause” of desertion, yield numerous descriptions of this kind. The link between disciplinary infractions, low morale, and desertion that emerges in these reports paints a multifold picture: one of widespread dissatisfaction with border service, a systemically fraught relationship between officers and subordinates, and of a stubbornly apathetic cohort – ranging from unenthusiastic about border service to behaviorally volatile – that formed the corpus of the *Grenzpolizei*'s young recruits.

²⁰⁶ Besondere Vorkommnisse, 1955, Archivsignatur DVH 27/134561, Abteilung Organisation und Nachweisführung, Kommando der DGP, Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv, Freiburg im Breisgau. “Auf dem Kommando herrschen anarchistische Zustände. Die Kdo.-Leitung ist nicht in der Lage, ein Kommando ordnungsgemäß zu führen, und die Genossen brachten zum Ausdruck, daß die Kdo.-Leitung zu lasch in ihren Erziehungsmethoden ist. Dienstvergehen, wie schlafen auf Posten, Urlaubsüberschreitung, Dienstfreiüberschreitung, Ausgangsüberschreitung, übermäßiger Alkoholgenuß und sonstige Disziplinlosigkeiten, wurden in keiner Weise disziplinarisch geahndet. Die Disziplinarpraxis innerhalb dieses Jahres zeigt eine Bestrafungsziffer von 8 Genossen gegenüber einer Belobigungsziffer von 45 Genossen, obwohl unzählige Dienstvergehen vorgekommen sind und der Leitung des Kommandos bekannt waren und gegenüber der vorgesetzten Dienststelle verheimlicht wurden.”

What structural forces lay behind these “anarchic conditions,” and how were they perceived and experienced by the border guards themselves? To understand the discord within the ranks, one must first understand the social composition of the *Grenzpolizei*’s rank-and-file. Many young men who joined the *Grenzpolizei* came from disadvantaged social backgrounds, were poorly educated, or otherwise had difficulty fitting into society or holding a regular job. One border guard who deserted in 1955 is a representative example. According to his file, he dropped out of *Volksschule* at an early age, “could neither read nor write,” and “was severely developmentally delayed, and was therefore unable to follow the political and subject lessons properly.”²⁰⁷ He frequently got in trouble for “excessive alcohol consumption,” and “several times, he broke down on the road in his drunken state and had to be brought back to the *Kommando*.”²⁰⁸

Of a similar disposition is the soldier Ernst, who deserted in 1954 after he was caught stealing salami and other foodstuffs from the barracks kitchen and selling them on the black market with the help of his girlfriend. His *Offizier für Berechnung der Kader* wrote: “His parents described him to me as a drunkard and a good-for-nothing who only lasted a short time at one job and used their money to get through his immoral lifestyle.”²⁰⁹ Like many border guards who appear in the desertion files, Ernst struggled to hold a regular job. According to his parents, he “[had] an easy disposition and [liked] to avoid an orderly working relationship, which is evident from the fact that he is constantly changing jobs.”²¹⁰ A description of one border guard who

²⁰⁷ DVH 27/134561. “war in seiner Entwicklung stark zurückgeblieben und konnte somit dem Polit- und Fachunterricht nicht richtig folgen.”

²⁰⁸ DVH 27/134561. “es war bereits einige Male vorgekommen, dass er in seinem betrunkenen Zustand unterwegs liegen geblieben war und zum Kdo. zurückgebracht werden musste.”

²⁰⁹ DVH 27/128913. “Er wurde mir von seinen Eltern als ein Trinker und Taugenichts geschildert, der nur kurze Zeit bei einer Arbeitsstelle aushielt und sein sowie ihr Geld durch seinen unmoralischen Lebenswandel durchgebracht hätte.”

²¹⁰ DVH 27/128913. “leicht veranlagt und geht gern einem geordneten Arbeitsverhältnis aus dem Weg, was aus dem laufenden Wechsel seiner Arbeitsstellen ersichtlich ist.”

deserted in 1951 is representative of the general temperament of this cohort: “He saw [border] service as something forced, and he seems to have seen the *Volkspolizei* as a way out of his situation at the time; namely, unemployment.”²¹¹

Although they provide insight into the fickle relationship between unruly border guards and their job, however, the judgemental portraits produced by *Grenzpolizei* administrators demand to be read with a critical eye. For one thing, portrayals of obstinate border guards – terrible employees though they may have been – reflect an existing trope in the GDR: the stigmatization of individuals labeled “work-shy,” “asocial,” or “*Bummelanten*” (slackers).²¹² This strategy of defamation was characteristic of the SED’s attitude not only towards deserters, but towards *Republikflüchtige* in general: government reports frequently defamed people who fled to the West as “criminals,” “alcoholics,” “morally depraved,” “asocial” and “work-shy.”²¹³ As a social category, “asociality” was associated with everything from alcoholism to “political-ideological deviation,” making it a convenient framework within which to condemn individuals whose behavior disrupted the collective.²¹⁴

This stigma manifested in several archetypes of “asocial” deserter which show up repeatedly in desertion reports. One archetype, as previously described, was that of the “work-shy” or lazy border guard. Sometimes, the term shows up explicitly (e.g. “[Two deserters]

²¹¹ DVH 27/128913. “Er betrachtete unseren Dienst als etwas gezwungenes und er scheint die Volkspolizei tatsächlich als Ausweg aus seiner damaligen Lage, nämlich die Arbeitslosigkeit, gesehen zu haben.”

²¹² DVH 27/155680.

²¹³ Bispinck, “Republikflucht,” 304. “Eine dritte Möglichkeit, die anhaltende Abwanderung der eigenen Staatsbürger zu erklären, ohne die eigene Politik in Frage zu stellen, bestand darin, den Abwandernden selbst die Schuld zuzuweisen. Zum einen geschah dies durch ihre bereits angesprochene Diffamierung als ‘Kriminelle,’ ‘Saboteure’ und ‘Agenten.’ Darüber hinaus wurden den Abgewanderten im Nachhinein moralische Vorwürfe gemacht. So wurden republikflüchtig gewordene Mitglieder der SED in einem Bericht der Parteikontrollkommission wahlweise des ‘Alkoholismus’ bezichtigt oder als ‘moralisch verkommen,’ ‘asozial und arbeitsscheu’ charakterisiert.”

²¹⁴ Fulbrook, *The People's State*, 122; Lenski, Katharina, “The Stigma of ‘Asociality’ in the GDR: Reconstructing the Language of Marginalization,” in *After Auschwitz: The Difficult Legacies of the GDR*, edited by Enrico Heitzer, Martin Jander, Anetta Kahane, and Patrice G. Poutrusm 150.

were found to have been labeled work-shy elements prior to joining the *Grenzpolizei*.²¹⁵) Just as often, it shows up implicitly, as in this condemnation of an *Oberwachtmeister* who deserted in 1951:

His actions must be regarded as particularly reprehensible, because he shamelessly and unscrupulously abused the trust placed in him by society. As has only now been established, he did not join the *Volkspolizei* to actively help rebuild the German Democratic Republic, but to lead a comfortable and carefree life at the expense of the population. He carried out the work he assigned only reluctantly and without interest. When he realized that he had been recognized and that they were trying to get him to cooperate positively, he chose the path of least resistance and fled to the West, taking most of his clothing and equipment with him.²¹⁶

A second archetype that emerges in desertion reports is that of the outsider or loner deserter, often portrayed as mentally challenged. For example, one soldier who deserted in 1955 “was shunned at his station because of his behavior and very low mental level and awkwardness in the collective.”²¹⁷ A border guard who fled to the American zone where his fiancée was residing in 1948 was described in a similar manner: “[His] intellectual ability is below average. He participates in lessons with little interest. He does not have a sufficient command of the service regulations. [...] His on-duty and off-duty behavior was casual, unclean and incorrect.”²¹⁸ Such descriptions suggest a preponderance of restless and discontented recruits who failed to

²¹⁵ DVH 27/155680. “Bei den desertieren [redacted] und [redacted] wurde festgestellt, dass sie vor ihren Eintritt in die DGP als arbeitsscheue Elemente bezeichnet wurden.”

²¹⁶ DVH 27/155680. “Seine Handlung ist als besonders verwerflich anzusehen, weil er, dass in ihn gesetzte Vertrauen der Gesellschaft schmäählich und skrupellos missbrauchte. Wie erst jetzt festgestellt werden konnte, ging er nicht zur Volkspolizei, um aktiv am Wiederaufbau der deutschen demokratischen Republik mitzuhelfen, sondern um ein angenehmes und sorgenfrei Leben auf Kosten der Bevölkerung zu führen. Denn arbeiten die ihn übertragen wurden, führte er nur widerwillig und interesselos aus. Wie er feststellte, dass er erkannt wurde und das man versuchte ihn zur positiven Mitarbeit heranzuziehen wählte er den weg des geringsten widerstandes und setzte sich unter mitnahm des größten teils seiner bekleidungs- und ausrüstungsgegenstände nach dem Westen ab.”

²¹⁷ DVH 27/155680. “Auf seiner Dienststelle wurde er auf Grund seines Verhaltens und geistig sehr niedrigen Niveaus und Unbeholfenheit im Kollektiv gemieden.”

²¹⁸ DVH 27/134534. “[redacted] zeigt ein aufgeschlossenes und aufgewecktes Erscheinen. Sein geistiges Können steht jedoch unter dem Durschnitt. An den Unterrichtsstunden beteiligt er sich mit wenig Interesse. Die Dienstvorschriften werden von ihm nicht ausreichend beherrscht. Sein politisches Können und Wissen ist als gut zu bezeichnen und bei den bisher durchgeführten politischen Unterrichtsstunden und Diskussionen konnte ein gutes Wissen festgestellt werden. Sein dienstliches und außerdienstliches Auftreten war lässig, unsauber und nicht korrekt.”

integrate into the *Grenzpolizei* collective. At the same time, the implicit pathology with which their personalities were framed allowed the authorities to condemn deserters out of hand without interrogating the “push factors” – either in the *Grenzpolizei* or the GDR itself – that induced border guards to flee West.

Many deserters had had run-ins with the law before. Cases of “criminal” border guards are instructive: they demonstrate the oft-criticized insufficient background checks that led to the hiring of “unreliable” individuals, while the intimate character portraits that accompany them demonstrate the way the administration constructed “criminality.” The soldier Emil, who deserted in 1954, for example, was “already known as the leader of a gang of youths at the age of 16,” apparently notorious for stealing alcohol and cigarettes from stores in his hometown. His mother reportedly had a bad reputation for “hanging out with hooligans who were known to the criminal police.” (Somehow, “these points were not taken into consideration when hiring.”)²¹⁹ Another border guard who deserted in 1955, had apparently been the subject of criminal proceedings “only shortly before he joined the *Grenzpolizei*” because he “had stolen a bicycle from a workplace and sold it in the neighboring village.”²²⁰

Emil’s criminal behavior was blamed on his mother, who supposedly “attached no importance to her son’s upbringing and had no influence over him.”²²¹ Similarly, the actions of the aforementioned bicycle thief were portrayed as the result of a neglectful upbringing:

²¹⁹ Besondere Vorkommnisse, 1953 – 1954, Archivsignatur DVH 27/134554, Abteilung Organisation und Nachweisführung, Kommando der DGP, Abteilung Organisation und Nachweisführung, Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv, Freiburg im Breisgau. “bereits mit 16 Jahren als Anführer einer Bande von Jugendlichen bekannt, die in [redacted] laufend, besonders aus HO- u. Konsumgeschäften Sachen entwendeten (Zigaretten und Alkohol).” “Der Leumund der Mutter des [redacted] ist schlecht, da sie sich mit der Kriminalpolizei bekannten Raufbolden in der Wohnung abgibt.”

²²⁰ DVH 27/134561. “Lediglich kurz vor seinem Eintritt in die GP kam es zu einem Strafverfahren, da der Deserteur [redacted] ein Fahrrad auf einer Arbeitsstelle gestohlen hatte und dieses auf dem Nachbarort verkaufte.”

²²¹ DVH 27/134554. “Auf die Erziehung ihres Sohnes legte sie keinen Wert und hatte keinen Einfluß auf denselben.”

The father of Rudolf is more or less described as a work-shy element, while the mother is said to be hard-working. As a result of the husband's occasional excessive consumption of alcohol, there were often arguments bordering on divorce. As the youngest son, the deserter Rudolf was poorly raised at home, and could get away with a lot. As a result of his poor upbringing, he made criminal mistakes during his school years, which were repeated until he joined the *Grenzpolizei*. His father and the aggrieved residents of the village were too lenient on him.²²²

Taken at their word, these anecdotes of criminal and social outcast deserters suggest a certain cohort who contributed to the prevailing “anarchic conditions” in the *Grenzpolizei*: young men on the margins who joined the force as an effort to achieve a respectable status in society, but ended up bringing their personal disturbances into the workplace before quitting entirely. Equally, when read against the grain, these anecdotes reflect the tendency of the administration to deny agency to its deserters by zeroing in on their negative character traits to portray them as inherently incompatible with the ideal “socialist personality” (*sozialistische Persönlichkeit*), much less with becoming the ideal *Grenzpolizist*. The criticism they implicitly raised of the GDR and the *Grenzpolizei* by deserting to the West is not explored.

With the judgemental and accusatory framework of the investigators in mind, character portraits are worth interrogating on their own terms. The exceptionally wayward life trajectories and erratic behavior of certain deserters, while not representative of the *Grenzpolizei* as a whole, are emblematic of the socially maladjusted individuals that the chronically understaffed *Grenzpolizei* was often forced to recruit. *Gefreiter* Konrad, who deserted to the West in November 1954, is a useful example of an individual whose reckless behavior and violent outbursts should have made him unfit for any sort of employment, let alone border service. He

²²² DVH 27/134561. “Dieses ist dadurch bedingt, dass der Vater des [redacted] mehr oder weniger als arbeitsscheues Element bezeichnet wird, währenddem die Mutter [sic] arbeitssam sein soll. Infolge zeitweilig übermäßigen Alkoholgenusses des Mannes kam es häufig zu Auseinandersetzungen, die an eine Scheidung grenzen. Der Deserteur [redacted] als jüngster Sohn wurde im Elternhaus schlecht erzogen und konnte sich vieles erlauben. Infolge der schlechten Erziehung verfiel er bereits während der Schulzeit in kriminelle Fehler, die sich bis zum Eintritt in die GP wiederholten. Vom Vater und geschädigten Einwohnern des Dorfes wurde an ihm zu viel Milde[.] [...] Lediglich kurz vor seinem Eintritt in die GP kam es zu einem Strafverfahren, da der Deserteur [redacted] ein Fahrrad auf einer Arbeitsstelle gestohlen hatte und dieses auf dem Nachbarort verkaufte.”

constantly committed “operational and moral transgressions,” such as “the constant excessive consumption of alcohol and clashes with superiors and civilians, who Konrad threatened with an old rusty drum revolver while drunk.”²²³ Konrad’s antics fill several pages: he got into a drunken fight with the cook “because he believed he was being slighted when the food was being served,” during which he “went into the guardroom and smashed several coffee cups, and also got into an argument with the comrades of the *Wachgruppe* who were present.”²²⁴ Colleagues reported that he took every opportunity to get drunk, leaving him in a constant state of debt to the local tavern. According to a comrade, he once drunkenly broke into a farmers’ chicken coop and started “trying to tear the heads off of the chickens” (at which he “succeeded in one case.”)²²⁵

Yet even behavior as extreme as this was not grounds for dismissal. Instead, the leaders of the *Kommando* staged interventions with Konrad to urge him to change his behavior: “Responsible officers of the *Kommandantur* and the *Grenzbereitschaft* held discussions with the deserter Konrad several times about his immoral lifestyle and his constant drunken misdemeanors with the aim of educating him to a decent lifestyle.”²²⁶ The desertion report places the blame for Konrad’s desertion not on the erratic Konrad himself, but on the superiors who failed to rehabilitate him and to cultivate a more orderly atmosphere in the *Kommando*: “There was no persistent fight being led against immorality and misconduct. The deputy commissioner [...] did not always have the right tone when dealing with people. He has a choleric disposition.

²²³ DVH 27/134554. “dienstliche und moralische Verfehlungen”; “Die moralischen Verfehlungen zeigten sich im ständigen übermäßigen Alkoholgenuß und Ausschreitungen gegen Vorgesetzte sowie Zivil personen die [redacted] im angetrunkenen Zustand mit einem alten verrosteten Trommelrevolver bedrohte.”

²²⁴ DVH 27/134554. “da er glaubte, bei der Ausgabe des Essens benachteiligt zu sein”; “Daraufhin besah sich [redacted] in das Wachlokal und zerschlug dort mehrere Kaffeetassen und kam mit den dort anwesenden Genossen der Wachgruppe ebenfalls in Streit.”

²²⁵ DVH 27/134554. “Wo er zu einem Tanzvergnügen weilte in den Hühnerstall eines Bauern eindrang und versuchte den Hühnern den Kopf abzureissen was ihm jedoch nur in einem Fall gelang.”

²²⁶ DVH 27/134554. “Mit dem desertierten [redacted] wurden nachweisbar mehrmals durch verantwortliche Offiziere der Kdtr und GB über seinen unmoralischen Lebenswandel und seine ständigen Dienstvergehen in der Trunkenheit Aussprachen geführt, mit dem Ziel ihn zu einem anständigen Lebenswandel zu erziehen.”

[...] The disciplinary regulations were applied formally. This is demonstrated by an example where a comrade was punished with a day's detention for falling asleep at his post [...] without a proper investigation being carried out."²²⁷ The fact that the officers of Konrad's detachment attempted to rehabilitate him instead of firing him for his violent behavior is emblematic of the dire condition of the *Grenzpolizei's* staff shortage and the baseline of chaos which characterized many detachments of the organization.

Criminality was endemic to the *Grenzpolizei*.²²⁸ One *Stasi* report describes the *Grenzpolizei* as having 139 instances of "crimes" in the first quarter of 1956, of which the somewhat vague "crimes against personal property," "crimes against the state," "crimes against public property,"²²⁹ "assault by beating" are listed as some of the most frequent.²³⁰ The most visible of these "crimes" within the desertion files is theft, particularly of fellow border guards.²³¹ This problem was apparently so severe that the public prosecutor of the *Volkspolizei* advised in a 1954 letter "that every member of the German Border Police should keep his personal valuables (especially money) in a pouch with him at all times, as theft from comrades is still a major

²²⁷ DVH 27/134554. "Es wurde kein beharrlicher Kampf gegen Unmoral und Dienstvergehen geführt. Der PK-Stellvertreter [...] hatte nicht immer den richtigen Ton im Umgang mit den Menschen. Er ist sehr polterisch veranlagt. Die Disziplinarordnung wurde formal angewandt. Das zeigt ein Beispiel, wo ein Genosse wegen Schlafen auf Posten am anderen Tag mit einem Tag Arrest bestraft wurde ohne eine richtige Untersuchung zu führen."

²²⁸ To illustrate the frequency of crimes: According to an "Überbericht über den Zustand der Verbrechen in der Hauptverwaltung Deutsche Grenzpolizei für die Zeit vom 1. Oktober bis 31. Dezember 1954," "In dem Berichtszeitraum wurde gegen 97 Personen in 76 Vorgängen wegen begangener strafbaren Handlungen ein Verfahren angeordnet." cf: DVH 27/128913.

²²⁹ An illustrative example of "Aneignung von Volkseigentum": On October 11 1954, "stahlen [drei] Gefreiter [...] von der Grenzpolizeibereitschaft Halberstadt von einem [Lastkraftwagen], den sie zu bewachen hatten, Bekleidungsgegenstände, 22 Paar Handschuhe, 6 Unterhemden, 5 Unterhosen, 20 str. Seidenstoff, um sie sich anzueignen." cf: DVH 27/128913.

²³⁰ DVH 27/155680. "Verbrechen gegen das persönliche Eigentum"; "Staatsverbrechen"; "Verbrechen gegen das Volkseigentum"; "Körperverletzungen durch Schlägereien"

²³¹ DVH 27/155680. Even in comparison to the *Volkspolizei* and *Transportpolizei*, the *Grenzpolizei* was singled out by the *Stasi* for the frequency of theft within its ranks: "Auf Grund der Tatsache, daß in der Deutschen Grenzpolizei noch immer sehr viel Diebstähle am persönlichen Eigentum zu verzeichnen sind, ist es erforderlich, sofort mit der Unterschätzung dieser Verbrechen Schluß zu machen."

problem.”²³² Similarly common was embezzlement of police station funds and supplies, from clothing and kitchen goods to munition and weapons.

One of the most frequent “causes” of desertion, according to desertion reports and Stasi meta-analyses, is “fear of punishment” (*Angst vor Bestrafung*.) Numerous border guards who were guilty of infractions, ranging from “illegally crossing the border” to running complex smuggling operations out of the police station, crossed the border to escape the consequences of their actions.²³³ To provide a few representative examples: One border guard deserted in 1955 after his *Unterleutnant* threatened him with 10 years in prison for stealing items from the house of a farmer who fled the GDR.²³⁴ Another deserted in 1948 after being found guilty for embezzling 1,000 DM from the *Kommando*’s food budget.²³⁵ Yet another deserted in 1951 after being caught smuggling clothing and weapons he had received “in an official capacity” to sell them in the West.²³⁶ More than one individual deserted after breaking out of a detention cell that they had been locked in for a previous offense (in one case, by breaking the window;²³⁷ in another, because the responsible officer forgot to lock it.²³⁸) Reports of desertion preceded by theft also provide insight into the adversarial relationship that some border guards had to their job: In 1955, one *Soldat*, who apparently had a record of “ignoring orders and regulations,” stole 650 DM worth of stamps, 20 DM in cash and a pair of pants from four comrades in what he

²³² DVH 27/128913. “Die Kommandeure und besonders die Polit-Organe zu beauftragen, bei der erzieherischen Tätigkeit auf ihre Untergebenen darauf hinzuwirken, daß jeder Angehörige der Deutschen Grenzpolizei seine persönlichen Wertgegenstände (vorallen Geld) in einem Brustbeutel ständig bei sich aufbewahrt, da Kameradendiebstahlshandlungen nach wie vor einen Schwerpunkt bilden.”

²³³ DVH 27/128913. “illegaler Grenzübertritt”

²³⁴ DVH 27/155680.

²³⁵ Besondere Vorkommnisse, 1948, Archivsignatur DVH 27/134534, Abteilung Organisation und Nachweisführung, Kommando der DGP, Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv, Freiburg im Breisgau.

²³⁶ DVH 27/134539.

²³⁷ DVH 27/128913.

²³⁸ DVH 27/128913.

claimed in an interrogation was an intentional effort “either to be transferred from his station or to be released from the ranks of the German Border Police.”²³⁹

One “crime” – particularly prevalent prior to 1952, when there was still a significant amount of border traffic and the *Grenzpolizei* was still in charge of customs and the movement of goods – was corruption; specifically, taking bribes to help people cross the border illegally.²⁴⁰ In 1948, for example, it was declared that the *Hauptweibel* Stefan was “guilty of aiding and abetting illegal border crossing and of passive bribery, and should be arrested,” but his *Kommandoleiter* – who himself later fled to the West – refrained from making this arrest.²⁴¹ (Stefan escaped over the demarcation line via motorcycle; the party sent out to pursue him on bicycles could not catch him.) That same year, one *Polit-Wachmeister* fled to the West to avoid punishment after he was discovered to have taken a bribe of 10 boxes of cigarettes and 700 DM to abet an illegal border crossing from West to East.²⁴² This was reflective of a general tendency of border guards to “turn a blind eye” to prohibited border traffic, prioritizing convenience and their own judgment over the stated aims of their job.²⁴³

Besides punishing border guards through official channels, the higher echelons of the *Grenzpolizei* found themselves ill-equipped to deal with the criminality within its ranks. Unable to shake the political framework through which it viewed its aspirations for the *Grenzpolizei*, the SED tried to address petty criminality and misbehavior through this lens, often framing it as a failure of political training rather than as a social problem with complex roots. In a 1955 report

²³⁹ DVH 27/155680. “In seiner Vernehmung gab er an, daß er die Diebstähle deshalb beging, um entweder von seiner Dienststelle versetzt oder aus den Reihen der Deutschen Grenzpolizei entpflichtet zu werden.”

²⁴⁰ Hanisch, “Zur Entwicklung der Grenzschutzorgane in den Jahren von 1949 bis 1960.” This task was taken over by the *Amt für Zoll und Kontrolle des Warenverkehrs* in 1951.

²⁴¹ DVH 27/134534. “hat sich der Beihilfe zum illegalen Grenzübertritt sowie der passiven Bestechung schuldig gemacht und sollte festgenommen werden”

²⁴² DVH 27/134534.

²⁴³ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 219.

on the desertion phenomenon, the Stasi expressed distress at the fact that party members were among the offenders. To their horror, for example, 60% of offenders were members of the FDJ, which meant that the SED's efforts at molding young recruits into model socialist citizens had not consistently succeeded. The Stasi concluded: "The fact that the proportion of SED members involved in criminal activities is still too high is a sign that the party organizations are not yet waging a principled struggle against these phenomena."²⁴⁴

Rather than concluding that criminality and disciplinary infractions were a problem that transcended party lines, however, the SED chastised the failings of their own "party work" at educating comrades on the letter of the law. In response to the alarming prevalence of criminality, the Stasi advised, rather weakly, that "All members of the border police must be educated [...] to behave in a disciplined and polite manner."²⁴⁵ Like everything, this should be carried out through the ranks of the party: "[W]ith the support of the party and FDJ organization as well as the political bodies, it is necessary to carry out broad-based educational work with the aim of achieving a further reduction in crime."²⁴⁶ Unsurprisingly, these exhortations appear to have been ineffective: "Despite about a year of work by the prosecutors in the various branches of the Ministry of State Security, there has been no profound change in the state of crime over the past year."²⁴⁷

²⁴⁴ DVH 27/155680. "Immer noch sind die FDJ-Mitglieder mit 60% die am meist beteiligten Täter von den Verbrechen." "Der immer noch zu hohe Anteil der SED-Mitglieder an strafbaren Handlungen ist ein Zeichen dafür, daß in den Parteiorganisationen noch kein prinzipieller Kampf gegen diese Erscheinungen geführt wird."

²⁴⁵ DVH 27/155680. "Alle Grenzpolizei-Angehörigen müssen erzogen werden, sich besonders gegenüber Angehörigen anderer Volkspolizei-Sparten diszipliniert und höflich zu benehmen."

²⁴⁶ DVH 27/155680. "Schlussfolgerungen ergibt sich hieraus, die Notwendigkeit mit der Unterstützung der Partei- und FDJ Organisation sowie der politischen Organe eine breit entfaltete Aufklärungs- und Erziehungsarbeit zu leisten mit dem Ziel, eine noch weitere Senkung der Kriminalität zu erreichen."

²⁴⁷ DVH 27/155680. "Trotz etwa einjähriger Arbeit der Staatsanwälte in den verschiedenen Zweigen des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit ist am Zustand der Kriminalität des letzten Jahres noch keine tiefgreifende Änderung eingetreten."

A plurality of deserters are described in their files not as criminals or dissidents, but as obstinate, unwilling, or incapable employees. The sheer ubiquity of “unwillingness to serve” (“*Unlust zum Dienst*”) as grounds for desertion cannot be understated. Numerous desertion reports – especially from the 1940s, when desertion investigations tended to be less thorough – provide some variation of this brief and cryptic explanation for desertion: “Probable cause: expressed that he had no desire for police service.”²⁴⁸ Soon, a convention emerged of supplementing “*Unlust zum Dienst*” with colorful descriptions of the border guards’ personal shortcomings, as in this report from 1948: “The impression he made was unsympathetic. He was quite indifferent and superficial in the performance of his duties – in short, a policeman with a bad disposition.”²⁴⁹

What did “*Unlust zum Dienst*” look like in practice? More detailed investigations, which delve into the personalities and proclivities of individual deserters, provide ideas. For some border guards, *Grenzdienst* was not a patriotic duty, but rather just another job that they carried out reluctantly; their passions lay elsewhere. One *Gefreiter* who deserted in 1955 was described by a comrade as a man who cared little for his job, and “wasn’t involved in anything else here at the station other than looking after his horses and doing his border work with them.” Although he never mentioned wanting to go West, he frequently expressed, according to his comrade, “that only the horses kept him with the *Grenzpolizei*, and if he had to give them up, then he would also leave the *Grenzpolizei*, because he had no interest in anything else.”²⁵⁰ Similarly, another border

²⁴⁸ DVH 27/134534. “Vermutlicher Grund: hat sich geäußert, dass er keine Lust für den Polizeidienst hat.”

²⁴⁹ DVH 27/134534. “Der Eindruck, den er machte, war unsympathisch. In der Dienstauführung war er ziemlich gleichgültig und oberflächlich, kurz gesagt, ein Polizist mit schlechten Anlagen.”

²⁵⁰ Besondere Vorkommnisse, 1955, Archivsignatur DVH 27/134561, Abteilung Organisation und Nachweisführung, Kommando der DGP, Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv, Freiburg im Breisgau. “daß ihn nur die Pferde bei der Grenzpolizei halten würden und wenn er die einmal abgeben müßte dann ginge er auch von der Grenzpolizei weg denn für etwas anderes hatte er keine Interesse. [redacted] hat sich hier auf der Dienststelle auch an nichts anderen beteiligt als daß er seine Pferde gepflegt und damit seine Grenzarbeiten verrichtet hat.”

guard deserted because, as an aspiring sportsman, he “saw better future opportunities for his further development in the sport of boxing in the West.”²⁵¹

In some cases, escape to the West seemingly did not even occur to border guards until they joined the *Grenzpolizei*, whereupon they disliked the job so much that they desperately sought a means of escape. In 1955, the soldier Manfred confessed to his comrade, Jörg, that he wanted to desert to the West, and was looking for a friend to go with him. Jörg recalls: “I told him it would be senseless to go [West], and asked why he had joined the police in the first place when he was thinking about going [West]. He explained that he hadn’t known what it would be like to work for the police, and he didn’t like it here anymore.”²⁵² For others, the hostile and abusive social atmosphere they encountered in their *Kommando* pushed border guards to desert. In 1955, one young border guard, described as “developmentally delayed,” was “teased by the whole *Kommando*,” and once received a beating from an officer for staying out too late. “As a result,” his file reports, he became a loner, often indulged in heavy drinking, and deserted.”²⁵³ At other times, the unforgiving nature of the job seemed to spark an unfavorable comparison with members of the Western border regime, visible just beyond the demarcation line: the deserter Lothar, who reportedly “was listless in his service and often expressed that he had no desire to

²⁵¹ DVH 27/134544. “In politischer Hinsicht waren beide desinteressiert, was darin zum Ausdruck kommt, dass [redacted] sich u.a. Äußerte, dass er mit den Maßnahmen unserer Regierung sich nicht einverstanden erklärte und darüber hinaus für seine Weiterentwicklung im Boxsport im Westen bessere Zukunftsmöglichkeiten sähe. In der Beurteilung des ideologischen Zustandes ist festzustellen, dass beide in der Vergangenheit wenig Klassenbewusstsein gezeigt haben und vor allem in der gesellschaftlichen Arbeit unterdurchschnittliches leisteten.”

²⁵² DVH 27/134561. “Ich erklärte ihm, dass es sinnlos wäre, nach drüben zu gehen und fragte, warum er überhaupt erst zur VP gegangen ist, wenn er sich mit dem Gedanken trägt, nach drüben zu gehen. Er erklärte mit, dass er nicht gewußt hätte, wie der Dienst bei der VP ist und dass es ihm hier nicht mehr gefällt.”

²⁵³ DVH 27/155680. “[redacted] war ein Mensch, der in seiner Entwicklung geistig zurückgeblieben war. Deshalb wurde er vom ganzen Kdo gehänselt. Einmal bekam er sogar wegen einer Ausgangsüberschreitung Prügel. Das Ergebnis war, er wurde Einzelgänger, verfiel oft dem erhöhten Alkoholgenuß und desertierte.”

serve in the *Grenzpolizei*,” had complained that “the [West German] customs officers live better than us.”²⁵⁴

In cases where desertion was sparked primarily by the unrewarding qualities of the job itself, desertion files reveal as much about the shortcomings of the *Grenzpolizei*'s work environment as they do about the deserters themselves. One Stasi report file from February 1955 attributes a *Grenzer*'s desertion to the “bad conditions” in the Kommando: “The accommodations are cold and unclean and there is no drying room.”²⁵⁵ Others couldn't bear the long training sessions or being stationed far from home – one soldier expressed to comrades “that he wanted to go home and could no longer stand the separated life.”²⁵⁶ Another claimed in an interrogation “that service destroys private life.”²⁵⁷ Several deserters' files mention a desire to leave the force because they never had any time to sleep.²⁵⁸ An *Oberwachmeister* who deserted in 1951 expressed the wish (according to his stepmother) that he would rather work for the regular *Volkspolizei*, because their work was less difficult and they earned more money.²⁵⁹

“*Unlust zum Dienst*” was not always apolitical, however: In many cases, the discontents of living in the GDR and everyday personal troubles blurred together. Many desertion files depict individuals whose dissatisfaction with border service and turbulent personal lives are exacerbated by a frustration with the conditions of life in the GDR. One soldier who deserted in 1953 (from a *Kommando* which the *Abteilung Organisation und Nachweisführung* designated as

²⁵⁴ DVH 27/134561. “versah lustlos seinen Dienst und brachte desöfteren zum Ausdruck, daß er keine Lust um Dienst in der DGP hätte”; “die Zöllner besser leben wie wir.”

²⁵⁵ DVH 27/155680. “[...] weil im Kdo. schlechte Zustände herrschten. Es gibt kalte und unsaubere Unterkünfte, ein Trockenraum ist nicht vorhanden.”

²⁵⁶ DVH 27/134554. “dass er nach Hause wolle, und das getrennte Leben nicht mehr aushalten könne.”

²⁵⁷ Besondere Vorkommnisse, December 1957, Archivsignatur DVH 27/135183, Abteilung Organisation und Nachweisführung, Kommando der DGP, Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv, Freiburg im Breisgau. “daß der Dienst das Privatleben zerstöre.”

²⁵⁸ DVH 27/155680.

²⁵⁹ DVH 27/134539. Ultimately, this border guard made the decision to desert because he wanted to immigrate to America.

“politically and morally the worst Kommando in the area”) encapsulates the interconnectedness of these discontents.²⁶⁰ His description paints a melancholy portrait: “Torsten has shown a certain reluctance to carry out his duties in recent times. This was expressed in non-compliance with orders, unauthorized absence from the station, and excessive consumption of alcohol. As a member of the German border police, he felt deprived of his freedom and once said that freedom was only 10 meters away. His political and technical knowledge was average. He was uninterested in the training. He was not interested in the political issues of the day. He became less involved with women and more fond of alcohol.”²⁶¹ For border guards like Torsten, the parallel woes of alcoholism, a dreary job, and life under a dictatorship became inextricably intertwined.

Amid portraits of deserters described as having “no desire” for service, another recurring archetype emerges: that of the obstinate and uncooperative border guard who often acted in open defiance of his superiors. The description of the soldier Klaus, who deserted in 1954, is a representative example:

Klaus held negative discussions, especially about superiors. He was easily agitated, drank very often and a lot. He often left the station, sometimes even by vehicle. He showed a lack of interest in lessons, especially in political training. If he was called upon to answer questions, he made a mockery of the answers with his eloquence.²⁶²

²⁶⁰ DVH 27/135180. The border guard in question had previously been punished for “fahrlässigen Schusswaffengebrauch,” “Schlafen auf Posten” and “Trunkenheit und Dienstverweigerung.”

²⁶¹ DVH 27/135180. “[redacted] zeigte in der vergangenen Zeit eine gewisse Unlust in der Dienstdurchführung. Das kam zum Ausdruck in der Nichtdurchführung gegenüber Befehle, Unerlaubtes Entfernen von der Dienststelle, sowie übermäßige Alkoholgenuß. Er fühlte sich als Angehöriger der Deutschen Grenzpolizei seiner Freiheit beraubt und äußerte sich einmal, dass die Freiheit ja nur 10 m weit weg wäre. Seine politischen und fachlichen Kenntnisse waren durchschnittlich. An der Schulung war er uninteressiert. Für die politischen Tagesfragen interessierte er sich nicht. Mit Frauen ließ er sich weniger ein, umso mehr war er dem Alkohol zugetan.”

²⁶² DVH 27/134554. “[redacted] führte negative Diskussionen, besonders über Vorgesetzte. Er war leicht erregbar, trank sehr oft und viel. Von der Dienststelle entfernte er sich oftmals, manchmal sogar mit Fahrzeug. Im Unterricht, besonders an der politischen Schulung zeigt er mangelhaftes Interesse. Wurde er zur Beantwortung von Fragen aufgerufen, zog er die Beantwortung durch seine Redegewandtheit ins Lächerliche.”

Such reports, bristling with the contempt of officers for their uncooperative subordinates, cannot be taken to represent the sum total of a border guard's character. When read against the grain, however, they are suggestive of a hostile relationship between border guards and superiors. This rift was not universal: desertion files abound with reports of border guards who performed their job satisfactorily, even exceptionally, and "appeared in a positive light to superiors."²⁶³ But a plurality of desertion files indicate an antagonistic relationship between border guards and their superiors – whether implicitly, as in an officer's unfavorable description of a deserter, like that of Heinrich, or explicitly, as in the case of one *Oberwachtmeister* who deserted in 1951: "Kurt arrived disgruntled at his parents' house and told them that he no longer wanted to be a police officer, allegedly because he had had several arguments with his superiors."²⁶⁴ The frequency of such indications within desertion files suggest that this rift between superiors and subordinates was systemic.

Far from taking the side of the officers, the Stasi and the upper echelons of the *Grenzpolizei* often complained of officers who did not "get to know" their subordinates well enough and exerted their authority by punishing them with reckless abandon. In a 1955 report, the Stasi listed "lack of concern for subordinates and heartless behavior"²⁶⁵ on the part of officers as one of the primary causes of desertion, expressing concern that "disciplinary offenses are becoming more and more severe, and punishments are being carried out where sometimes none

²⁶³ DVH 27/134554. "trat gegenüber Vorgesetzte positiv in Erscheinung"

²⁶⁴ DVH 27/134539. "[redacted] kam verdrossen bei den Eltern an und erklärte denen, dass er keine Lust mehr zum Polizeidienst hätte, angeblich weil er einige Auseinandersetzungen mit seinen Vorgesetzten gehabt hat."

²⁶⁵ For example: "überhäufte und überspitzte Bestrafungen wobei das Strafmaß nicht in allen Fällen im richtigen Verhältnis zu dem begangenen Dienstvergehen steht" cf: DVH 27/155680.

would be necessary; this is largely due to poor leadership.”²⁶⁶ More than one border guard ran away after being beaten by an officer for disciplinary offenses like getting drunk on the job.²⁶⁷

This pattern was the result of a general alienation and disconnected relationship between officers and subordinates, the Stasi argued:

A large proportion of officers and non-commissioned officers only fulfill their duties one-sidedly. They train their subordinates without establishing relationships with them that are based on respect for human dignity.²⁶⁸

Criticism of incompetent officers and “errors in the relationship between superiors and subordinates” along these lines occur perennially throughout desertion files.²⁶⁹ In most cases, though, this poor relationship does not seem to have manifested in draconian punishment, or even open conflict. Most portraits of incompetent superiors describe them as simply estranged from their subordinates.

One common manifestation of estrangement between officers and border guards was officers’ supposed inability to recognize *Fluchtabsichten* (intentions to desert), whether because they had not kept an eye on the whereabouts of their subordinates, or because they had not established a close enough personal relationship with them to notice when something was amiss (or to take note of suspicious *Westverbindungen*.) When two border guards deserted in 1955, for

²⁶⁶ DVH 27/155680. “Mangelnde Sorge um die Untergebenen und herzloses Verhalten”; “Andererseits ist die politische Beeinflussung durch die Polit-Organen der VP-Offiziere nicht die geringste Voraussetzung zur Menschenführung besitzen. Die Disziplinarvergehen nehmen immer stärkere Formen an, so werden Bestrafungen durchgeführt, wo manchmal gar keine notwendig wären, das ist viel zurückzuführen auf die schlechte Menschenführung. So zeigt sich ein gleichgültiges Herangehen an den Dienst, Urlaubsüberschreitungen, ungenügende Disziplin usw.”

²⁶⁷ DVH 27/128913 “Der Deserteur [redacted] hatte sich während seines Ausgangs betrunken. Der Kdo-Leiter schickte 2 Genossen los um [redacted] zu holen. Dabei wurde [redacted] vom Uffz [redacted] geschlagen. [redacted] ging nicht ins Bett, sondern verschwand nach kurzer Zeit aus dem Kdo. Unterwegs sagte er dem Nachtwächter der MTS Voigtsdorf: ‘Ich bin ausgerissen, weil man mich geschlagen hat.’”

²⁶⁸ DVH 27/155680. “Ein großer Teil der Offiziere und Unteroffiziere erfüllen ihre Aufgaben nur einseitig. Sie bilden die ihnen Untergebenen aus, ohne zu ihnen Beziehungen zu bekommen, die auf Achtung der Menschenwürde basieren.”

²⁶⁹ DVH 27/155680. “Fehler im Verhältnis zwischen Vorgesetzten und Untergebenen”

example, the Stasi noted disapprovingly that “the *Kommando* leadership did not realize until 18 hours later that a guard had not returned from border duty.” Nor had they taken action when, eight weeks prior to the desertion, a *Gefreiter* notified his superiors that one of the comrades was trying to persuade him to desert.²⁷⁰

As for the prevalence of disciplinary infractions, alcoholism, insubordination, and general “anarchic conditions” in unruly *Kommandos*, this is frequently attributed to officers being “bad role models” for the young men under their command. “Some of the officers are very poor role models for their subordinates in a moral respect,” the Stasi complained in 1955; “they participate in drinking parties and frequently seek out female company.”²⁷¹ For example, when a soldier deserted in 1955 who was reportedly “very fond of alcohol and had affairs with questionable women,”²⁷² the *Kommando* investigation tied this back to the poor example set by the officers: “The *Kommando* leader [...] leads a reckless lifestyle. He consumes alcohol excessively and is running up debts. The political deputy [...] is not only arrogant, but also very fond of alcohol.”²⁷³ This consistent lambastment of officers, portrayed as irresponsible and disengaged in a manner not unlike their rank-and-file, suggests an atmosphere of laxity that pervaded many units of the *Grenzpolizei*. At the same time, by blaming officers and superiors for disciplinary infractions, the

²⁷⁰ DVH 27/155680. “Das zeigt sich am besten darin, dass die Kdo.-Leitung erst 18 Stunden später merkte, dass ein Posten nicht vom Grenzdienst zurückgekehrt ist. Verantwortungsloses Verhalten von verantwortlichen Offizieren zu gegebenen Hinweisen des Personalbestandes. Ca. 8 Wochen vor der Desertion meldete ein Gefreiter, dass [redacted] ihm zur Desertion veranlassen wollte. Die Kdo-Leitung erstattet der Kdtr. schriftlich Bericht, die ihrerseits keine Maßnahmen einleitete. Die Kdo-Leitung reagierte selbst nicht auf besondere Erscheinungen im Kdo.” As historian Gerhard Sälter notes, however, this apparent failure of officers to report suspicious behavior may have been because officers were disincentivized from drawing attention to the problems in their unit: they feared an increase in duties or lesser changes of promotion if they reported the full truth. cf. Sälter, Gerhard, *Grenzpolizisten*, 179.

²⁷¹ DVH 27/155680. “Ein Teil der Offiziere ist den Untergebenen in moralischer Hinsicht wenig Vorbild, sie beteiligen sich an Saufgelagen, suchen häufig und wechseln Frauenbekanntschaften.”

²⁷² DVH 27/155680. “sehr dem Alkohol neigte und sich mit fragwürdigen Frauen abgab”

²⁷³ DVH 27/155680. “Der Kdo-Leiter, Lt. [redacted], führt einen leichtsinnigen Lebenswandel. Er nimmt übermässig Alkohol zu sich und macht Schulden. Der Polit-Stellv., Ultn. [redacted], ist neben seiner Überheblichkeit stark dem Alkohol zugeneigt.”

state shifted the blame onto faulty individuals – implying that the system, if working as intended, would not produce disaffection and discontent.

Reports also criticize officers as being disengaged from their leadership roles and the political sentiments that should have underlied them. Listlessness on the part of rank-and-file border guards is often blamed on the “political inactivity” of their officers, who are criticized as lacking the core qualities of a socialist authority figure:

There are too few superiors who have the qualities of a socialist commander, who know that their subordinates are their class comrades, whom they have to train to become highly qualified soldiers and also to educate and develop into irreconcilable enemies against the warmongers and the enemies of the working class.²⁷⁴

Just like the unfavorable descriptions of unruly deserters written by officers, however, the wholesale condemnations of officers by the Stasi and the *Hauptverwaltung der Deutschen Grenzpolizei* must be taken with a grain of salt. “Poor leadership” was a convenient scapegoat when a cause could not be otherwise determined for an individual’s desertion, and enumerations of the individual failures of the officers in a *Kommando* provided ample fodder for the formulaic *Schlussfolgerungen* (“conclusions”) section of a desertion report. Moreover, it is dubious whether some of the Stasi’s more esoteric and ideological accusations – for example, that “some of the superiors adopt the manners of petty bourgeois and philistines and distance themselves from proletarian morality” – were meaningful contributors to lackluster discipline among the rank-and-file.²⁷⁵

²⁷⁴ DVH 27/155680. “Es gibt zu wenig Vorgesetzte, die die Eigenschaften eines sozialistischen Kommandeurs haben, die wissen, daß ihre Untergebenen ihre Klassengenossen sind, die sie zu hochqualifizierte Soldaten auszubilden und auch zu unversöhnlichen Feinden gegen die Kriegstreiber und die Feinde der Arbeiterklasse zu erziehen und zu entwickeln haben.”

²⁷⁵ DVH 27/155680. “Ein Teil der Vorgesetzten eignen sich die Manieren von Kleinbürgern und Spießern an und entfernen sich von der proletarischen Moral.”

Nevertheless, the epidemic of incompetent leaders and “poor role models” among the officers was far from a Stasi invention. Officers as “bad role models” is a recurring theme in the editorials of *Der Grenzpolizist*, indicating that the complicity of officers in the “anarchic conditions” was an open secret. A representative complaint, written by an officer, reads:

It is well known that smoking is not permitted in the training rooms; however, the comrade secretaries and political deputies did not comply with this ban. What’s more, they threw ashes and cigarette butts, orange peels, breakfast paper and apple scraps on the floor. I am of the opinion that these comrades did not act in an exemplary manner and set a bad example to our soldiers - not to mention their inconsiderateness towards our cleaning ladies.²⁷⁶

Many desertions likely took place in a unit marked by a similar disharmony between superiors and subordinates. The result of this arrangement can, to my mind, be most effectively summarized in this observation of one *Kommando* from which a *Gefreiter* deserted in 1951: “[T]he officers are more of a deterrent than an example and an incentive, and are more ridiculed than respected [...] by the young *Grenzpolizei* members of their unit.”²⁷⁷

Beyond the layers of grievance, prejudice, accusation, and deflection that color their narratives, desertion files reveal the internal climate of the *Grenzpolizei*: one defined by the inevitable friction between the ideal socialist border police and the unglamorous reality of the imperfect, self-interested individuals expected to staff it.

²⁷⁶ “Korrespondenten kritisieren: Keine Vorbildlichkeit.” *Der Grenzpolizist: Wochenzeitung der Deutschen Grenzpolizei* (Berlin), March 26, 1959. 5. “Bekanntlich ist in den Schulungsräumen das Rauchen nicht erlaubt; die Genossen Sekretäre und Politstellvertreter hielten sich jedoch nicht an dieses Verbot. Mehr noch: Sie warfen Asche und Kippen, Apfelsinenschalen, Frühstückspapier und Apfelreste auf den Fußboden. Ich bin der Meinung, daß diese Genossen nicht vorbildlich gehandelt haben und unseren soldaten ein schlechtes Beispiel gaben – ganz abgesehen von ihrer Rücksichtslosigkeit gegenüber unseren Reinemachefrauen.”

²⁷⁷ DVH 27/134539. “Durch völlige politische Inaktivität seitens des Kommandoleiters und falsche politische Maßnahmen in der Erziehung der Kader und im Verhältnis zur Zivilbevölkerung durch den Stellvertreter für politische Arbeit sowie erhebliche ideologische Unklarheiten, wirken die Offiziere eher abschreckend als beispielgebend und anspornend und werden von den jungen GP-Angehörigen ihrer Dienststelle mehr belächelt, als als Offiziere und Parteimitglieder geachtet.”

Chapter 3: Political Attitudes

“A number of members of the German border police have a poorly developed political awareness. They have often not yet clearly recognized the fundamental social changes that have taken place in our country, are still unenlightened about the role of the workers' and peasants' state and do not see the constantly intensifying class struggle.”

— Informational Report of the Main Department for Political Work of the German Border Police Headquarters, I. Quarter 1955²⁷⁸

“Every comrade must be educated to become an upright and true patriot, who clearly recognizes that desertion to the camp of the class enemy can only harm him and make him a traitor to the working class. However, this is only possible with good political education.”

— Conclusion of a 1953 desertion report²⁷⁹

The *Grenzpolizei* conceived of a strong ideological conviction on the part of individual border guards as integral to its function. A 1953 issue of the propaganda newspaper *Der Grenzpolizist* spells out the organization's *raison d'être* clearly: “The border police stand guard for peace, democracy and socialism.”²⁸⁰ The internal memos of the Central Administration of the *Grenzpolizei* leave no room for doubt regarding what the *Grenzpolizei*'s ideological foundation consisted of and how border guards were expected to relate to it in practice. To quote the 1952 “Arguments for the Fight Against Desertions in the East German Border Police”:

What does it mean to be a member of the German Border Police?

Being a member of the German Border Police is a great honor and obligation. Our working people, our brothers and sisters have placed their trust in us to protect and defend their peaceful work, our peaceful work of reconstruction, our socialist enterprises, against all attacks by warmongers. As border police, we protect the peace – and the better

²⁷⁸ DVH 27/128913. “Ein Anzahl von Angehörigen der Deutschen Grenzpolizei haben ein schwach entwickeltes politisches Bewusstsein. Sie haben oftmals die grundlegenden gesellschaftlichen Veränderungen, die sich bei uns vollzogen haben, noch nicht klar erkannt, sind noch unaufgeklärt über die Rolle des Arbeiter- und Bauernstaates und sehen nicht, den sich ständig verstärkenden Klassenkampf.” “Informationsbericht der Hauptabteilung für Politische Arbeit der Hauptverwaltung Deutsche Grenzpolizei, I. Quartal 1955”

²⁷⁹ DVH 27/134554. “Jeder Genosse muss zu einem aufrechten und wahren Patrioten erzogen werden, der ganz klar erkennt, dass eine Desertion in das Lager des Klassegegners ihm nur schaden kann und er damit zum Verräter an der Arbeiterklasse wird. Dieses ist allerdings nur bei einer guten politischen Erziehungsarbeit möglich.”

²⁸⁰ Frotscher, *Grenzdienst im Kalten Krieg*. 68. “Die Grenzpolizei steht auf der Wacht für Frieden, Demokratie und Sozialismus.”

we do our duty, the more steadfast we are; the less likely the warmongers will succeed in starting a new war. This is a very great trust that the working people place in us, and a great honor for every young person in whom our working people place this trust.

Show the comrades that they have to defend what has become dear to them.

We are defending our homeland; our companies, which we ourselves have helped to build. We are defending the economies of our working farmers, economies that belong to our fathers and where we have also worked with our own hands. We defend our cultural sites, where we spend wonderful hours of relaxation, where we draw courage and strength for our work. We protect the lives of our parents, our wives, children and siblings as well as those people who are peacefully working to build a bright future.²⁸¹

Such a lofty political consciousness within the ranks could not be taken for granted, however; it had to be actively cultivated. As historian Gerhard Sälter puts it: “From the SED’s point of view, political training for the border guards was because – despite the vetting and selection during recruitment – a large part of the staff did not agree with their politics[.]”²⁸² Thus, in order to achieve the requisite indoctrination of the border guards, the *Grenzpolizei* developed a vast, all-encompassing infrastructure of political indoctrination (*Politschulung*). In 1948, the party established an “Apparatus for Political Culture” (*Apparat für Polit-Kultur*) in all branches of the *Volkspolizei* in 1948,²⁸³ through which functionaries known as “politics and culture

²⁸¹ DVH 27/134532. Was heißt es, Angehöriger der Deutschen Grenzpolizei zu sein? Angehöriger der Deutschen Grenzpolizei zu sein, ist ein grosse Ehre und Verpflichtung. Unsere Werktätigen, unsere Brüder und Schwestern haben uns das Vertrauen gegeben, ihre friedliche Arbeit, unser friedliches Aufbauwerk, unsere sozialistischen Betriebe geben alle Anschläge der Kriegstreiber zu schützen und zu verteidigen. Wir als Grenzpolizisten, schützen den Frieden und je besser wir unseren Dienst tun, je standhafter wir sind, umso weniger wird es den Kriegstreibern gelingen, einen neuen Krieg vom Zaune zu brechen. Das ist ein sehr grossen Vertrauen, das die Werktätigen in uns setzen uns eine grosse Ehre für jeden jungen Menschen, dem unsere Werktätigen dieses Vertrauen schenken. Zeigen Sie den Genossen auf, dass sie das zu verteidigen haben, was ihnen lieb und teuer geworden ist. Wir verteidigen unsere Heimat, unsere Betriebe, die wir selbst mit aufgebaut haben. Wir verteidigen die Wirtschaften unserer werktätigen Bauern, Wirtschaften, die unseren Vätern gehören und wo wir ebenfalls mit unserer Hände Arbeit daran geschafft haben. Wir verteidigen unsere Kulturstätten, in denen wir schöne Stunden der Entspannung erleben, in denen wir Mut und Kraft schöpfen für unsere Arbeit. Wir schützen das Leben unserer Eltern, unserer Frauen, Kinder und Geschwister sowie diejenigen Menschen, die in friedlicher Arbeit an einer glücklichen Zukunft bauen.”

²⁸² Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 253. “Eine politische Schulung der Grenzer war aus Sich der SED notwendig, weil einerseits – trotz Überprüfung und Auswahl bei der Einstellung – ein grosser Teil des Personals mit deren Politik nicht einverstanden war und andererseits ihre sich aus dem Grenzregime ergebene Aufgabenstellung einen ideologischen Konsens mit der Linie der SED zu erfordern schien.”

²⁸³ Giese, *Die SED und ihre Armee*, 33 - 34.

leaders” (*PK-Leiter*), later *Politoffizieren* (political officers),²⁸⁴ led political lessons through the SED and FDJ organizations within the ranks while making sure that all orders complied with the SED’s guidelines.²⁸⁵ Upon the closure of the border in 1952, the apparatus of political training (now renamed “*Politische Abteilung*”) increased its scope and personnel: particularly accomplished soldiers were appointed as “agitators”; a *Politstellvertreter* (political representative) was appointed to conduct political training sessions every month.²⁸⁶ The tasks and bureaucratic structure of *Politschulung* became increasingly sophisticated with each passing year (in 1955, a school was founded to train political cadres; by 1957, an order mandated that all officers take part in the political education of their subordinates.²⁸⁷)

The intricacies of the SED’s various apparati for political education and their various structural reorganizations throughout the years lie outside the scope of this thesis. In any case, most important to note for the everyday experiences of border guards is that the apparatus of *Politschulung* subjected them to a regular barrage of propaganda, from lectures to group discussions to educational films, intended to educate them on topics from Marxism-Leninism to the German-Soviet friendship to the evils of the West German imperialists on the other side of the border.²⁸⁸ A 1948 document titled “On the Implementation of Political Instruction and Political Information with Members of the German People’s Police” illustrates how the administration conceived of *Politschulung*.²⁸⁹

The task of the commanders, the PK departments, the heads of political culture work, the party groups and the democratic organizations is to tirelessly arouse in the members of

²⁸⁴ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 254.

²⁸⁵ Giese, *Die SED und ihre Armee*, 33 - 34.

²⁸⁶ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 257.

²⁸⁷ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 257.

²⁸⁸ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 260.

²⁸⁹ DVH 27/128779. “Über die Durchführung von Polit-Unterricht und Polit-Informationen mit Polizeiangehörigen der deutschen Volkspolizei”

the police a deep hatred against fascism and reactionary ideology and against the policy of the rebellious imperialists who are preparing a new war against the USSR, the countries of the People's Democracy and against progressive humanity. The Anglo-American imperialists want to use West Germany as a deployment zone and the population as cannon fodder. [...]

It is particularly necessary to instill in the members of the police a feeling of friendly solidarity with the great SU and the countries of the people's democracies. It must be explained to them that the Soviet Union and the countries of the people's democracies are fighting against the imperialist camp for the freedom, democracy and national independence of the peoples.²⁹⁰

Any indication of a lack of political conviction among the *Grenzpolizei*, of which desertion to the West was viewed as the ultimate manifestation, was a grave concern for the administration. Because desertion was always viewed as stemming at least in part from a failure of political conviction on the part of the deserter, the collective, or both, almost every desertion report prescribed improvements in political indoctrination as a safeguard against future desertions. Accordingly, desertion reports almost always issued new and improved action items for various political lessons. A 1955 report on desertions from the *Sekretariat des Kommandeurs* commanded an “improvement of political education work not only by the political officers, but by all officers of the *Grenzpolizei*,” which entailed the following:

- Fight against pacifism and pessimism
- Educate personnel to be patriotic, but at the same time to hate the enemies of our workers’ and peasants’ power

²⁹⁰ DVH 27/128779. “Die Aufgabe der Kommandeure, der PK-Abteilungen, der Leiter der Politkulturarbeit, der Parteigruppen und der demokratischen Organisationen besteht darin, unermüdlich in den Polizeiangehörigen einen tiefen Hass zu erwecken gegen Faschismus und reaktionäre Ideologie und gegen die Politik der aufständigen Imperialisten, die einen neuen Krieg gegen die UdSSR, die Länder der Volksdemokratie und gegen die fortschrittliche Menschheit vorbereiten. Die englisch-amerikanischen Imperialisten wollen Westdeutschland als Aufmarschgebiet und die Bevölkerung als Kanonenfutter benutzen. [...] Es ist besonders notwendig, bei den Polizeiangehörigen das Gefühl der freundschaftlichen Verbundenheit mit der grossen SU und zu den Ländern der Volksdemokratien zu erziehen. Man muss ihnen erklären, dass die SU und die Länder der Volksdemokratien den Kampf gegen das imperialistische Lager für die Freiheit, Demokratie und die nationale Unabhängigkeit der Völker führen.”

- Constant lessons, lectures and meetings are held in the subordinate departments by senior officers of the main administration to strengthen the self-confidence of the GP members and to smash enemy agitation.²⁹¹

Did this apparatus of political education consistently succeed at penetrating the border guards' hearts and minds? Historian Gerhard Sälter suggests that it did not. His holistic examination of the *Grenzpolizei* files found that border guards frequently tried to skip their political lessons, and in some units, political lessons “came to a complete standstill.”²⁹² Border guards frequently “stubbornly repurposed” the lessons; for example, by taking the opportunity of a group discussion about the German-Soviet friendship to complain about their experiences in Soviet captivity.²⁹³ Moreover, the instructors leading political lessons – sometimes political officers, but often officers or ordinary soldiers – were “not always at the political and intellectual level of their tasks.”²⁹⁴ As a result, investigators frequently complained of political lessons being conducted in a formulaic, dispassionate, or superficial manner.²⁹⁵ According to one report on a political training in 1954, a border guard retorted to the platoon leader giving a lecture on the issue of the “Oder-Neiße peace border”: “[T]hat is all very good what you are telling us, but be honest, you don't believe in it yourself.”²⁹⁶

Many desertion files reveal the ambivalent and resentful attitudes that border guards had towards their political education. After two *Soldaten* deserted from the *Grenzbereitschaft*

²⁹¹ DVH 27/128913. “Verbesserung der politischen Aufklärungsarbeit nicht nur durch die Politoffiziere, sondern durch alle Offiziere der DGP”; “Kampf gegen Pazifismus und Pessimismus / Erziehung des Personalbestandes zum Patriotismus, aber gleichzeitig auch zum Hass gegen die Feinde unserer Arbeiter- und Bauernmacht / Ständige Lektionen, Vorträge und Besprechungen durchführen in den nachgeordneten Dienststellen durch leitende Offiziere der Hauptverwaltung zur Stärkung des Selbstbewusstseins der GP-Angehörigen und zur Zerschlagung der feindlichen Agitation.”

²⁹² Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 265 - 266.

²⁹³ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 265.

²⁹⁴ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 267.

²⁹⁵ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 267.

²⁹⁶ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 267. “Das ist ja alles ganz gut, was Du uns erzählst, aber sei doch ehrlich, Du glaubst ja selber nicht daran.”

Oschersleben in 1955, for example, “the comrades expressed at an FDJ meeting that political work is dry and uninteresting.”²⁹⁷ From lesson plans alone, it is not hard to surmise why the *Grenzer* might feel this way. A collection of “service instructions concerning political education and training” for 1948-1949 describes the hour-by-hour schedule for a day dedicated to training: wake-up time at 6:00 a.m., 6 hours and 40 minutes of lessons in “political information” (*Polit-Informationen*) and lights-out at 11:00 p.m.²⁹⁸ One can picture a room full of border guards listening drowsily to lectures on themes such as “historical development of law and the police” “situation after the collapse of 1945 and the significance of the Potsdam resolutions in relation to law and the police,” “*Urkommunismus*” and the fall of the Weimar Republic.²⁹⁹ Rather than molding border guards into “socialist personalities,” such lessons may have only added to the stressors of border service, such that many border guards felt similarly to one *Wachmeister* who deserted in 1952: “He said that he was fed up with the border service, that it was too strict and that there was too much talk and teaching of politics.”³⁰⁰

Some desertion reports blame desertions on the insufficient political convictions of border guards themselves. For example, a 1948 report of a deserted border guard reads:

The political attitude of Wolfgang was not a democratic progressive one. He engaged in propaganda with a strong Western orientation, which could always be inferred from his words. From the above statements it can be seen that Wolfgang did not have the tools to be a good democratic People’s Police officer and was therefore unacceptable for our People’s Police.³⁰¹

²⁹⁷ DVH 27/155680. “brachten die Genossen in einer FDJ-Versammlung zum Ausdruck, dass die politische Arbeit trocken und uninteressant ist.”

²⁹⁸ DVH 27/128779. “Dienstabweisungen, den Politunterricht und die Ausbildung betreffend”

²⁹⁹ DVH 27/128779. “Entwicklung neuer Rechtsgrundlagen,” “Geschichtliche Entwicklung des Rechts und der Polizei,” “Lage nach dem Zusammenbruch nach 1945 und die Bedeutung der Potsdamer Beschlüsse in Bezug auf Recht und Polizei”

³⁰⁰ Untersuchungsberichte über Desertionen, Namen H - L, 1951 – 1952, Archivsignatur DVH 27/134544, Abteilung Organisation und Nachweisführung, Kommando der DGP, Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv, Freiburg im Breisgau. “Er sagte, dass er die Schnauze vom Grenzdienst voll habe, der Dienst wäre zu streng und es würde zuviel von Politik gesprochen und gelehrt.”

³⁰¹ DVH 27/134534. “Die politische Einstellung des [redacted] ist keine demokratische fortschrittliche gewesen. Er betrieb eine stark westlich orientierte Propaganda, die auch stets aus seinen Worten zu entnehmen war. Aus obigen

At times, these insufficient political convictions are framed as the result of an individual's poor character, as with a border guard who deserted in 1948:

Gerhard always gave the impression of a lax and tired person. His official duties, which he had to fulfill, were not always satisfactory. Due to his weak and unstable character, he could not be fully utilized. As far as is known, Gerhard's family relationships were so broken that he considered divorcing his wife. It is not known whether he was partly to blame for these circumstances. Gerhard's political attitude was not a democratic, progressive one. He engaged in propaganda with a strong Western orientation, which was always evident from his words. It can be seen from the above that Gerhard did not have the tools to be a good democratic *Volkspolizei* officer and was therefore unacceptable for our *Volkspolizei*.³⁰²

Post-facto criticisms of individuals as inherently ideologically unfit for service allowed the administration to absolve itself and its structures from blame for the desertion phenomenon. However, such statements are the exception rather than the rule; the administrators of the *Grenzpolizei* acknowledged implicitly that they could not expect ideological perfection from their rank-and-file. Accordingly, the majority of desertion reports place the blame for an individual or a *Kommando*'s insufficient political consciousness on the apparatus of political education. "In many cases, the party organizations do not adequately fulfill their great tasks in educating and developing young people to become true patriots of our homeland," bemoaned the Stasi in 1955. "The educational work is carried out in a formal and formulaic manner. Orders are insufficiently explained. The comrades are not convinced of the strength of the world peace

Ausführungen ist zu ersehen, dass [redacted] das Rüstzeug für einen guten demokratischen Volkspolizisten nicht besaß und somit für unsere Volkspolizei nichttragbar war."

³⁰² DVH 27/134534. "[redacted] machte zu jeder Zeit den Eindruck eines laschen und müden Menschen. Seine dienstlichen Aufgabe, welche er zu erfüllen hatte, waren nicht immer zufriedenstellend. Er konnte auf Grund seines schwachen und haltlosen Charakters nicht hundertprozentig eingesetzt werden. Soweit bekannt ist, die Familienverhältnisse des [redacted] sehr zerrüttet gewesen, so dass er sich mit dem Gedanken trug, sich von seiner Frau scheiden zu lassen. Ob er an diesen Verhältnissen einen Teil Schuld trug, ist nicht bekannt. Die politische Einstellung des [redacted] ist keine demokratische fortschrittliche gewesen. Er betrieb eine stark westlich orientierte Propaganda, die auch stets aus seinen Worten zu entnehmen war. Aus obigen Ausführungen ist zu ersehen, dass [redacted] das Rüstzeug für einen guten demokratischen Volkspolizisten nicht besaß und somit für unsere Volkspolizei nichttragbar war."

camp and the invincibility of our cause.”³⁰³ Just as it fell to officers to mold their subordinates into upstanding young men, it became the task of the political educators to make sure border guards adhered to the party line.

What was the prevailing political orientation among the border guards who deserted to the West? It cannot be said that every deserter expressed himself as a political dissident.³⁰⁴ In many cases, such as that of a *Polit-Wachtmeister* who deserted in 1949, a deserter’s “political attitude” is judged to be stellar: “Johann has been very interested in political life despite his youth and has shown in training and discussion hours that his political attitude corresponds to the line of the SED.”³⁰⁵ Overall, however, the Stasi was not entirely inaccurate when it observed in 1955 that “in almost all cases of desertion, it was found that the deserters were not convinced of the strength of the world peace camp, of the invincibility of our cause.”³⁰⁶

In my observation, this lack of conviction most often manifested not in open dissent, but in a general lack of enthusiasm for the political project of the *Grenzpolizei*.³⁰⁷ The “political attitude” of a border guard who deserted in 1951 is typical: “He was politically interested but

³⁰³ DVH 27/155680. “Die Parteiorganisationen erfüllen in vielen Fällen ungenügend ihre großen Aufgaben in der Erziehung und Entwicklung der jungen Menschen zu wahren Patrioten unserer Heimat”; “Die Erziehungsarbeit und Aufklärungsarbeit wird formal und schablonenhaft durchgeführt. Befehle werden ungenügend erläutert. Die Genossen werden nicht von der Stärke des Weltfriedenslagers und der Unbesiegbarekeit unserer Sache überzeugt.”

³⁰⁴ A 1955 report on desertion claimed that, despite the desire state of political consciousness in the *Grenzpolizei*, “Es gibt genügend Beispiele dafür, daß die jungen Genossen politisch eine klare Linie haben.” As an example, a young “applicant” is quoted as declaring: “Ein Deserteur ist einige Grade schlechter als ein Agent, der vom amerikanischen Geheimdienst zu uns geschickt wird. Entsprechend schwerer wie der Agent muss der Deserteur auch bestraft werden.” cf: DVH 27/128913

³⁰⁵ DVH 27/134535. “[redacted] ist trotz seiner Jugend am politischen Leben sehr interessiert gewesen und hat in Schulungs- und Diskussions-Stunden gezeigt, daß seine politische Einstellung der Linie der SED entspricht.”

³⁰⁶ DVH 27/155680. “Bei fast allen Desertionen ist festgestellt worden, dass die Desertieren nicht überzeugt waren von der Stärke des Weltfriedenslagers, von der Unbesiegbarekeit unserer Sache. Das hat seine Ursache darin, dass man der gegnerischen Propaganda nicht einmal auf der Dienststelle Einhalt gebietet.”

³⁰⁷ At times, the supposedly alarming “political discussions” that make their way into *Grenzpolizei* reports indicate not a lack of political know-how, but a disinclination to take politics seriously. In 1959, for example, a group of comrades got into an argument about whether or not to rearrange the furniture in their accommodations. The opposing parties called themselves “NATO” and “the Warsaw Pact,” while the comrade who wanted nothing to do with this debate was designated “independent Switzerland.” cf: DVH 27/135343.

lacked ideological clarity and firmness.”³⁰⁸ One *Gefreiter* who deserted in 1948 “showed no interest in the democratic structure in discussions with his colleagues”;³⁰⁹ a *Polizei-Wachmeister* who deserted in 1949 “showed little interest in current political events.”³¹⁰ The soldier Günther expressed an aversion toward politics on principle, to which many members of his generation could likely relate: “When asked about political problems, he explained that he wanted nothing to do with politics, as it had already brought about two world wars, and he was opposed to a new war.”³¹¹

Desertion reports often reflect border guards who appear alienated from the ideology underlying border service, engaging with it only performatively. A representative example is *Gefreiter* Rutsche, who deserted in 1954. He performed his service “satisfactorily,” disciplined only once for falling asleep at his post, and worked in a *Kommando* whose “political and moral condition” was judged as “sufficient,” but his superiors caught on to his half-hearted political engagement and the “negative discussions” he held behind closed doors: “Although his participation in political education is well regarded by the department management, the members of the *Kommando* judge him to be duplicitous (*Doppelzüngler*). He read a lot, had a good general education, and good theoretical political knowledge, but he only made a positive appearance in class and to his superiors. Among comrades, he made negative remarks and had an inhibiting effect.”³¹²

³⁰⁸ DVH 27/134539. “Klassenbewusstsein schwach entwickelt, politisch zeigte er sich interessiert, zeigte aber keine ideologische Klarheit und Festigkeit.”

³⁰⁹ DVH 27/134534. “zeigte auch in Diskussionen mit seinen Kollegen keine Interesse an dem demokratischen Aufbau”

³¹⁰ Besondere Vorkommnisse, 1949, Archivsignatur DVH 27/135179, Abteilung Organisation und Nachweisführung, Kommando der DGP, Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv, Freiburg im Breisgau. “zeigte wenig Interesse am politischen Tagesgeschehen.”

³¹¹ DVH 27/155680. “Zu politischen Problemen angesprochen erklärte er, er wolle nichts mit Politik zu tu haben, da selbige schon 2 Weltkriege hervorbrachte und er sich gegen einen neuen Krieg wehrt.”

³¹² DVH 27/134554. “Obgleich seine Mitarbeit im Politunterricht von der Dienststellenleitung gut eingeschätzt wird, beurteilen ihn die Angehörigen des Kommandos als Doppelzüngler. Er las sehr viel, hatte eine gute

Similarly duplicitous was the SED *Unteroffizier* Wilhelm, who jumped out the window and disappeared into “thick fog” in 1948: “Politically he showed a socialist attitude, but due to the material that was found” – the first and second volume of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* as well as “several documents and letters incriminating him” – “this seemed to be only the means to an end.”³¹³ Notably, Wilhelm was not the only border guard who harbored latent Nazi tendencies, nor the only one who furtively harbored a copy of *Mein Kampf*. One *Gefreiter* remarked of his comrade, who deserted in 1954, “You could tell that he was still influenced by his fascist upbringing. This is expressed in the fact that he drew swastikas on his blotting paper – consciously or unconsciously, it is not known.”³¹⁴ (It is not hard to imagine that many men of his generation were similarly influenced by their “fascist upbringing,” as many of the young men who joined the service in the late 1940s and early 1950s had previously belonged to the Hitler Youth.)

A pattern emerges in files of *Grenzer* who mastered the art of “covering up his real opinion with practiced figures of speech,” to quote a description of one *Feldwebel* who deserted in 1953.³¹⁵ *Gefreiter* Werner, who deserted in 1955, was described as “very variable” by his colleague: “Once, he led negative discussions, [but] suddenly he changed his mind and started discussing the policies of our party and government in a positive way.”³¹⁶ Another *Gefreiter* pretended to express bewilderment and disapproval at those who would flee the GDR, before he

Allgemeinbildung und gute theoretische politische Kenntnisse, trat aber damit nur im Unterricht und gegenüber Vorgesetzten positiv in Erscheinung. Unter den Genossen diskutierte er negativ und wirkte hemmend.”

³¹³ DVH 27/155680. “Politisch zeigte er eine sozialistische Einstellung, doch schien dies auf Grund des vorgefundenen Materials nur das Mittel zum Zweck zu sein.”

³¹⁴ DVH 27/134554. “Man merkte ihm an, dass in ihm noch faschistische Erziehung wirkte. Das kommt darin zum Ausdruck, dass er, bewußt oder unbewußt, ist nicht bekannt, auf sein Löschblatt Hakenkreuze zeichnete.”

³¹⁵ DVH 27/134554. “Von Seiten der Schwiegereltern des [redacted] erfolgte eine ständige negative Beeinflussung, welche ihn schnell ergriffen hatte, er es aber gut verstand, durch geübte Redensarten seine wirkliche Meinung zu vertuschen.”

³¹⁶ DVH 27/134561. “sehr verschieden”; “Zu dem Auftreten des [redacted] muß ich sagen, dass er sehr verschieden war. Einmal führte er negative Diskussionen, wie die o.a. Plötzlich änderte er seine Meinung und begann positiv über Politik unserer Partei und Regierung zu diskutieren.”

himself deserted in 1955: “In many conversations and discussions with him during the trip, I had the impression that he felt positively about the development of the GDR. [...] During conversations about desertions, he said that he couldn’t understand these people who were leaving for the West, because they had much better opportunities for work and development in the GDR.”³¹⁷ Even formal professions of loyalty, such as membership in the Party, were no guarantee against desertion: 67.2% of deserters in 1954 were part of the FDJ and 6.6% were members of the SED.³¹⁸ This is unsurprising, as many East Germans – both in the *Grenzpolizei* and in civilian life – joined the party and performed their ideology as a means of career advancement rather than out of conviction.³¹⁹

It is impossible to discern what portion of the *Grenzpolizei* held dissenting political opinions about the GDR, and what the most commonly held attitudes would have been. There would have been little incentive to express such opinions openly in an organization where “everyone was spying on everyone.”³²⁰ As a result, few clearly articulated critiques of the state surface in desertion reports. Reports of desertion often imply that comrades had qualms with the GDR without fully explaining what it was they objected to. For example, it was said of a *Gefreiter* who deserted in 1953 that “The reason he gave for his defection was that he did not agree with the ‘eastern zone system.’”³²¹ Many other reports accuse deserters of “leading negative discussions” (*negative Diskussionen führen*) among their comrades without specifying the nature of these discussions.³²² A 1954 letter from the public prosecutor of the *Volkspolizei*

³¹⁷ DVH 27/128913. “In vielen mit ihm während der Fahrt geführten Gesprächen und Diskussionen, hatte ich den Eindruck, dass er positiv zur Entwicklung der DDR stand. [...] Bei Gesprächen über Desertionen brachte er zum Ausdruck, dass er diese Menschen, die sich nach dem Westen absetzen nicht begreifen kann, weil sie in der DDR doch viel bessere Arbeits- und Entwicklungsmöglichkeiten hätten.”

³¹⁸ DVH 27/128913.

³¹⁹ Sälter, Gerhard, *Grenzpolizisten*, 279.

³²⁰ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 396. “jeder bespitzelt jeden”

³²¹ DVH 27/135180. “Als Grund seines Überlaufens gab er an, mit dem ‘ostzonalen System’ nicht einverstanden zu sein.”

³²² DVH 27/155680.

mentions, cryptically, that there has been an increase of “negative discussions” among comrades since the death of Stalin and expresses concern about “rumors” circulating among the population – but no insight into their contents is provided.³²³

Occasionally, desertion reports do provide detailed descriptions of border guards who explicitly criticized the GDR. The soldier Uwe, for example, carried out “disintegration work” (*Zersetzungsarbeit*) in his Kommando: “He glorified the conditions in West Germany to other comrades. [...] He also discussed that the information in our press about West Germany did not correspond to the facts.”³²⁴ In particular, according to a comrade, Uwe insisted “that everything they say here about unemployment in West Germany is a big hoax.”³²⁵ Outbursts of political criticism often surfaced in moments of lowered inhibitions: in 1954, one soldier reportedly deserted “because he insulted party officials while drunk, and was expecting a punishment.”³²⁶ A 1954 report on the “causes of the lack of discipline” in the *Grenzpolizei* provides deeper insight into what “negative discussions” may have looked like. Three soldiers were quoted as expressing the sentiments:

“I won't touch a carbine, because the Soviet Union only wants world power.”
 “We don't need a national armed force in the GDR; it's a clear demonstration to the West that we are for peace.”
 “You can talk to the [Western border police.] They're also Germans doing their duty out of social necessity.”³²⁷

³²³ DVH 27/128913.

³²⁴ DVH 27/134554. “Gegenüber anderen Genossen verherrlichte er die Verhältnisse in Westdeutschland. Trieb dadurch Zersetzungsarbeit im Kdo und brachte es schließlich soweit [redacted] zur Desertion zu überreden. Ferner diskutierte er, dass die Angaben in unserer Presse über Westdeutschland nicht den Tatsachen entsprächen.”

³²⁵ DVH 27/134554. “dass alles was man hier über Arbeitslosigkeit in Westdeutschland erzählen würde grosser Schwindel sei.”

³²⁶ DVH 27/134554. “weil er im angetrunkenen Zustand Parteifunktionäre beleidigte und auf eine Bestrafung rechnete.”

³²⁷ DVH 27/128913. “Ich fasse keinen Karabiner an, weil die SU auch nur die Weltmacht will.” / “Wir brauchen in der DDR keine nationalen Streitkräfte, damit dokumentieren wir anschaulich dem Westen, dass wir fuer den Frieden sind.” / “Man kann ruhig mit den Stumm-Polizisten sprechen. Es sind auch Deutsche, die aus sozialer Notlage ihren Dienst verrichten.”

These arguments – although more explicitly political than the typical discontents in desertion reports – express an anxiety towards mounting Cold War tensions and a rejection of militarization that echoes the border guard who “wanted nothing to do with politics.” The report attributes these opinions to the “work of the enemy, which is increasingly focused on weakening the operational readiness, discipline and morale of the German border police” and accuses the comrades of parroting arguments from the *Radio im amerikanischen Sektor* (Radio in the American Sector, hereafter RIAS).³²⁸ But hearing such arguments on the radio would likely only have amplified an existing strain of pacifism and resistance towards remilitarization that was already common in the *Grenzpolizei* – one that frequently makes its way into the files. (This strain of pacifism was encapsulated by a *Volkspolizei-Wachtmeister* in 1952 who expressed, according to a local farmer, that “if the *Grenzpolizei* were trained as a military unit, he wouldn’t participate, and would rather go to the West.”³²⁹)

Not all border guards expressed their unorthodox opinions so diplomatically. One file from 1959 describes an uncommonly emboldened political dissident: a soldier, Friedrich, who declared his intentions to desert to the West after his service was over. Friedrich’s profile bears many of the hallmarks of descriptions of troublesome border guards: “To characterize Friedrich, it must be said that he was extremely lazy and constantly tried to avoid the work that had to be

³²⁸ DVH 27/128913. “Arbeit des Gegners, der sich immer mehr auf die Schwächung der Einsatzbereitschaft, Disziplin und Moral der Deutschen Grenzpolizei konzentriert, nicht genügend Rechnung getragen. Das zeigt sich darin, daß es noch immer einzelne Genossen gibt, die RIAS-Argumenten glauben und sie in unseren Reihen diskutieren.”

³²⁹ DVH 27/123544. “Er sagte einmal, wenn die Grenzpolizei als Militärische Einheit ausgebildet würde, würde er nicht mitmachen und dann lieber nach dem Westen gehen. Als ihn meine Mutter daraufhin ermahnte doch nicht so laut zu sprechen, sagte er, ‘das können sie ruhig hören.’” This quote is taken from a testimonial given by a farmer whom this *Volkspolizei-Wachmeister*, in addition to another comrade, often visited in order to listen to RIAS on the radio. The above quote was underlined in red pencil. Three days after this interrogation took place, the *Wachmeister* himself was interrogated.

done in the company. He refused to do any social work and did not submit to the collective.”³³⁰ Like many others, he was accused of “excessive consumption of alcohol.” He behaved “very vulgar and uncomradely” among his fellow soldiers and often started verbal arguments in which he insulted his interlocutors as “pigs, dogs, criminals, et cetera,” on account of which he was “unpopular” in the *Kommando*.³³¹ Like many other border guards, he mastered the art of duplicity: “in the presence of superiors,” he was “very reserved.” Towards his fellow soldiers, however, “he openly and constantly expressed his mistrust of our workers’ and peasants’ state and insulted the comrades with the foulest words when they tried to convince him of the strength and stability of the German Democratic Republic.”³³²

An exploration of Friedrich’s *Hetzreden* (inflammatory speech) regarding the GDR is instructive.³³³ He refused to join the FDJ with the protest, “I’m not going into that pile of rubbish!”³³⁴ He spoke freely of his intentions to migrate to his uncle in West Germany, where workers “live well, and could even afford a car.” His comrade Helmut argued against his glorification of the West, “pointing out that West German workers were constantly threatened

³³⁰ Besondere Vorkommnisse, 1959, Archivsignatur DVH 27/135343, Politische Verwaltung, Kommando der DGP, Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv, Freiburg im Breisgau. “Zur Charakterisierung des [redacted] muss noch gesagt werden, daß er äusserst arbeitsfaul und ständig bemüht war, sich von den anfallenden Arbeiten in der Kompanie zu drücken. Er lehnte jegliche gesellschaftliche Arbeit ab und fügte sich nicht dem Kollektiv.”

³³¹ DVH 27/135343. “Schweine, Hunde, Verbrecher usw.”; “Gegenüber den Soldaten benahm er sich sehr ordinär und unkameradschaftlich. [...] Aufgrund seiner Verstocktheit und seines unkameradschaftlichen Verhaltens war er unter dem Personalbestand nicht beliebt.”

³³² DVH 27/135343. “Im Beisein von Vorgesetzten, war er sehr zurückhaltend, gegenüber den Soldaten jedoch er offen und ständig sein Mißtrauen gegenüber unserem Arbeiter- und Bauern-Staat zum Ausdruck und beschimpfte die Genossen mit den übelsten Worten, wenn sie ihn von der Stärke und Beständigkeit der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik überzeugen wollten.”

³³³ DVH 27/135343. “Am 30.10.1959 sagte [redacted] zu dem Gen. [redacted], daß er nach dem Westen geflüchtet wäre, wenn er gewusst hätte, daß er sich für seine Hetzreden einmal verantworten muss.”

³³⁴ DVH 27/135343. “In den Gammelhaufen gehe ich nicht rein!”

with unemployment and had to work holiday shifts.”³³⁵ Helmut told Friedrich to open a newspaper and see for himself, but Friedrich would not be convinced: everything printed in GDR newspapers, he said, was “nonsense and communist propaganda.”³³⁶ (Helmut’s attempts to “enlighten” Friedrich “about the Soviet Union's peace and disarmament proposals” were similarly unsuccessful.³³⁷)

The record of Friedrich’s treasonous remarks makes reference to an array of specific political events and issues generally unprecedented in the files of the *Grenzpolizei*. Not only did Friedrich scorn the GDR or make the case that life was better in the West – he also predicted the state’s violent overthrow: “Stop with your nonsense. The regime in the GDR won’t last much longer anyway, and by raising the standards the workers, who are already all mutinous, will finish it off.”³³⁸ The demise of the GDR, Friedrich prophesied, would take the form of a violent repeat of the infamous rebellion of June 17th, 1953, during which “there would then be a ‘collapse’ and the ‘communists would all be hanged.”³³⁹ Regarding the anti-government uprisings that occurred in Hungary in 1956, Friedrich expressed the anti-Soviet opinion that “if the Russians had not intervened unjustifiably at the time, things would have turned out

³³⁵ DVH 27/135343. “Er sagte zum Gen. [redacted], daß er einen Onkel in Westdeutschland habe, den er bald schreiben will, daß dieser ihm seinen Platz in Westdeutschland frei hält, denn nach seiner Entlassung aus der DGP will er zu ihm gehen. Auf die Frage des [redacted], warum er dies tun will, sagte [redacted], daß die Arbeiter in Westdeutschland gut leben würden und sich sogar ein Auto leisten könnten. Der Gen. [redacted] versuchte, den [redacted] diese Meinung zu widerlegen, indem er ihn aufzeigte, daß dem westdeutschen Arbeiter ständig die Arbeitslosigkeit droht und er Feierschichten leisten muss. [redacted] entgegnete darauf, daß man in Westdeutschland immer Arbeit bekommen würde, wenn man will. Seiner Meinung nach leben die Menschen in Westdeutschland besser als wir in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik.”

³³⁶ DVH 27/135343. Als [redacted] sagte, dass ihm [redacted]. das nicht beweisen kann, wurde ihm erklärt, daß er sich einmal eine Zeitung zur Hand nehmen soll um sich selbst davon zu überzeugen. [redacted] erwiderte hierauf, was in unseren Zeitungen steht sei alles ‘Quatsch und kommunistische Propaganda.’”

³³⁷ DVH 27/135343. “Gen. [redacted] machte den Versuch, den [redacted] über die Friedens- und Abrüstungs Vorschläge der Sowjetunion aufzuklären, was jedoch erfolglos war, da sich [redacted] nicht belehren liess.”

³³⁸ DVH 27/135343. “Hör auf mit Deinem Quatsch, das Regime in der DDR hält sich sowieso nicht mehr lange und durch Hochschrauben der Normen machen sich die Arbeiter fertig, die sowieso schon alle meutern.”

³³⁹ DVH 27/135343. “Er äußerte weiter, daß es ‘in der DDR nicht mehr lange so weiter gehen würde, denn der 2. 17. Juni 1953 stünde schon vor der Tür. Es gäbe dann eines ‘Zusammenbruch’ und die ‘Kommunisten würden alle aufgehängt.’”

differently in Hungary.”³⁴⁰ As his recurring spats with Helmut demonstrate, he went so far as to issue a wholesale condemnation of communism itself:

In another conversation, Friedrich asked Comrade Helmut whether Helmut would shoot his parents if they took part in a fascist coup attempt. When Comrade Helmut answered in the affirmative, Friedrich insulted him, saying, “You're a pig, but you ‘communists’ are all like that. You would shoot your own parents for money.” He also called Comrade Helmut a “communist pig” and a “red dog.”³⁴¹

These utterances from a border guard, obviously anathema to the values of the *Grenzpolizei*, seem puzzling at first glance. Why would a firebrand dissident like Friedrich voluntarily enlist for border service? To answer this question, something that Friedrich expressed during *Politschulung* may be instructive: “He declared that he only wants to be a follower [*Mitläufer*] and intends to exclude himself from everything.”³⁴² In other words, even a virulent anticommunist who was set on immigrating to the “golden West” and buying a car was able to compartmentalize his political opinions and take on border service as if it were just another job. Friedrich is only one individual whose remarks among comrades had the misfortune of being put to paper – but given the skill with which border guards are said to have concealed their “true opinions,” it is likely that other members of the *Grenzpolizei* shared his sentiments.

Far more common than specific critiques of the East German political system are expressions of general political fatigue, restlessness, or a yearning for a different life. Often, escape to the West is invoked not as a shift of political allegiance, but a means to escape a turbulent personal life, in which the unpleasant job of border service is the final straw. This

³⁴⁰ DVH 27/135343. “Wenn die Russen damals nicht unberechtigterweise eingegriffen hätten, wäre die Sache in Ungarn anders ausgegangen.”

³⁴¹ DVH 27/135343. “In einer anderen Unterhaltung fragte [d]er [redacted] den Gen. [redacted], ob [redacted] auf seine Eltern schießen würde, wenn diese sich an einem faschistischen Putschversuch beteiligen würden. Als Gen. [redacted] diese Frage bejahte, beschimpfte ihn der [redacted] mit den Worten, ‘Du bist ein Schwein, aber Ihr ‘Kommunisten’ seid alle so. Ihr würdet für Geld eure eigenen Eltern erschießen.’ Weiterhin bezeichnete er den Genossen [redacted] als ein ‘Kommunistenschwein’ und einen ‘roten Hund’.”

³⁴² DVH 27/135343. “Er erklärte, daß er nur ein ‘Mitläufer’ sein will und beabsichtigt, sich von allem auszuschließen.”

feeling can be most simply encapsulated by one expression which, whether paraphrased or directly quoted, appears more frequently in the files than any singular political grievance: “*Ich habe die Schnauze voll*” (“I’m fed up.”) One soldier, Olaf, faced a variety of difficulties which likely induced him to run away: “His parents’ relationship is broken, because his father is allegedly having affairs with other women,” and he had few prospects for education, since he had dropped out of school after the sixth grade. Olaf invoked West Germany as a realm of possibility and new beginnings: “at least you’re free over there.”³⁴³ He tried to convince his fellow soldier Herbert to run away with him. Herbert recalls: “He justified this by saying that he was fed up, and that at least over there I would be free; I can do what I want there.”³⁴⁴

The file of one border guard, Linus, paints a poignant picture of another border guard who wanted to run away to the West to escape his gloomy prospects. One night, on the way home from a dance event, the young man – described in his files as a “hermit” (*Einsiedler*) and a “quiet, withdrawn person” – launched into a drunken outburst.³⁴⁵ His comrade recalled:

Linus tore himself away from us and tried to head straight towards the border, saying: ‘everything is shit, everything sucks, I don't feel like it anymore, I'm off.’ But we brought him back and took him to the station, i.e. to bed. [...] After he made the remark about running away, we tried to explain to him that he wouldn’t be any better off in the West, and that he should put it out of his mind. He didn’t give us a clear answer, but mumbled things to himself in his drunken state that we didn’t understand.³⁴⁶

³⁴³ DVH 27/134561. “die Verhältnisse seiner Eltern sind auch zerrüttet, da sein Vater angeblich Verhältnisse mit anderen Frauen unterhält”; “daß man drüben wenigstens frei ist.”

³⁴⁴ DVH 27/134561. “Am 20.6.55 gegen Mittag befand ich mit [redacted] allein auf der Stube. Bei dieser Gelegenheit sagte er zu mir, daß er abhauen will. Er begründete das damit, daß er die Schnauze voll hat und weiter noch dort drüben bin ich wenigsten frei, dort kann ich machen was ich will.”

³⁴⁵ “ruhig, verschlossener Mensch”

³⁴⁶ DVH 27/134561. “[...] riß sich [redacted] von uns los und wollte querfeldein in Richtung Grenze wobei er sich äußerte - alles Scheiße, habe keine Lust mehr, ich haue ab. Wir holten ihn jedoch wieder zurück und brachten ihn zur Dienststelle, d.h. zu Bett. Nachdem er die Bemerkung über das Abhauen machte, versuchten wir ihm klarzumachen, dass es ihm im Westen nicht besser gehen würde und dass er sich dieses aus dem Kopf schlagen sollte. Er gab darauf keine klare Antwort sondern murmelte in seinem angetrunkenen Zustand eigene Dinge vor sich hin, die wir nicht verstanden.”

Similarly restless was Alfred, who deserted in 1954. When interrogated about her husband's desertion, Alfred's wife shared "that she was not surprised about this, because she also saw in her former husband an adventurer, a person who wants to experience something, but not like what we have here in the GDR."³⁴⁷ The "adventures" in question were more personal than political in nature, despite his dissatisfaction with the limitations of life in the GDR: according to his file, "he led a life of adventure and was constantly chasing new sensations and, secondly, his lifestyle made it difficult for him to fulfill his obligations to his child because he was very generous in his spending and drinking."³⁴⁸ Obviously, the distasteful characterization of Alfred's "life of adventure" cannot be taken as its word: the authorities would be incentivized to categorize his flight as frivolous without giving credence to his desire for a life outside the GDR. Still, beyond the haze of the hostile archive, his restlessness with the status quo is palpable.

While border guards' specific motivations for leaving the GDR are often obscure, the actions of deserters make one thing clear: a hefty contingent of the *Grenzpolizei* did not feel any sort of loyalty to their state, much less their organization. One particularly amusing example is *Gefreiter* Jürgen: in addition to holding conversations with colleagues about how "life was better in the West; everything that happened in the West was much better than in the GDR"³⁴⁹ and concealing his numerous family ties to West Germany and America – including an alleged cousin married to an "American spy" – Jürgen held "repeated conversations about West Germany, in which he openly talked about himself as a future member of the West German

³⁴⁷ DVH 27/134554. "dass sie darüber nicht erstaunt sei, denn auch sie sah in ihrem ehemaligen Manne den Abenteuerer, einen Mensch der etwas erleben will, aber nicht das wie es bei uns in der DDR ist."

³⁴⁸ DVH 27/134554. "ein Abenteuerleben führte und ständig neuen Sensationen nachjagte und zum anderen durch seinen Lebenswandel, er war sehr großzügig in Geldausgaben bei Trinkerei und konnte dadurch seine Verpflichtungen gegenüber seines Kindes nur schwer nachkommen."

³⁴⁹ DVH 27/134554. "man in Westen besser Leben könne, daß alles, daß im Westen geschehe viel besser sei als in der DDR"

border guard and spoke contemptuously about the *Deutsche Grenzpolizei*.³⁵⁰ In other words, Jürgen did not even bother to keep quiet about his intent to defect to enemy forces. Even officers of the *Grenzpolizei*, who were more likely to have a “high political consciousness” and less likely to desert than common soldiers, often decided to sacrifice their position in the *Grenzpolizei* when it came into conflict with their personal ambitions. The wife of an *Unteroffizier* who deserted in 1955 was quoted by her neighbor as saying: “If my husband was not in uniform, we would have gone [West] long ago.”³⁵¹

Border guards confessing their desire to desert to their comrades appears to be a fairly common occurrence. The report of border guard Ludwig, who deserted in 1957, reads: “According to individual comrades [...] Ludwig said yesterday evening that he wanted to steal a motorcycle so that he could drive to the border, leave it there and run away to West Germany.”³⁵² Often, border guards confided their intentions to desert to their comrades and tried to recruit them to come along, or asked if they had any relatives in the West. Reading in between the lines, the frequency of such open confessions of desertion intentions implies that prospective deserters were not an isolated minority in the *Grenzpolizei*; rather, they had considerable sympathy among their comrades. When asked why they didn’t report their comrade’s intentions to desert, the border guards who reported these confessions after-the-fact frequently responded that they “did not want to betray” their comrades.³⁵³ In this way, desertion files suggest that a sense of

³⁵⁰ DVH 27/134554. “... wiederholten Gespräche über Westdeutschland, in denen er sich am Vortrage seiner Desertion gegenüber des Soldat [redacted] richtig offen als zukünftiger Angehöriger des westlichen Grenzschutzes vorstellte und verächtlich über die Deutsche Grenzpolizei sprach.”

³⁵¹ DVH 27/128913. “Wenn mein Mann nicht die Uniform an hätte, wären wir schon längst nach drüben gegangen.”

³⁵² DVH 27/135183. “Nach Angaben einzelner Genossen des Stabes der [redacted], hat [redacted] in den gestrigen Abendstunden geäußert, er wolle sich ein Motorrad stehlen, damit er bis zur Grenze fahren könne, dort stehen lassen und nach Westdeutschland abhauen.”

³⁵³ Example: “FRAGE: Warum haben sie nicht gemeldet, das der Genosse [redacted] abhauen wollte? ANTWORT: Ich wollte den Genossen [redacted] nicht verraten.” cf: DVH 27/134554.

down-to-earth pragmatism – which, for some, entailed fleeing West for a better life – united the personnel of the *Grenzpolizei* to a greater extent than any shared political consciousness.

One 1959 report encapsulates the recurrent patterns of defiance, ambivalence, and stubborn prankishness that border guards displayed towards the politics and ideology of the GDR – and the state’s paranoid, draconian, and out-of-touch manner of dealing with them. A missive sent by the Stasi to the *Leiter der Politischen Verwaltung der DGP*, titled “Denigration of Battle Songs,” describes one group of border guards who chose to “repurpose” their political indoctrination by making a mockery of it.³⁵⁴ On October 19, 1959, border guards sang their own renditions of the well-known communist propaganda songs “*Die Internationale*,”³⁵⁵ “*Spaniens Himmel breitet seine Sterne*”³⁵⁶ and “*Brüder, zur Sonne, zur Freiheit*”³⁵⁷ with lyrics satirizing everyday life in the *Grenzpolizei*.³⁵⁸ In the latter case, for example, the well-known refrain (“Brothers, to the sun, to freedom, / Brothers up to the light! / Brightly from the dark past / the future shines forth.”³⁵⁹) was transformed into: “Border guards, drink away your wages! / Border guards, drink away your wages! / We’re stealing the potatoes from the farmers and the coal from the Reichsbahn.”

The comrades “very often sang the song in such a denigrating manner when drunk,” the Stasi reported, “and even the officers would not do anything about it.” When interrogated, the

³⁵⁴ DVH 27/135343. “Verunglimpfung von Kampfliedern in der Kompanie [redacted] der Grenzbrigade [redacted]”

³⁵⁵ DVH 27/135343. “Völker hört die Signale – auf zum letzten Gefecht – die Überlandzentrale versorgt die Welt mit Licht!”

³⁵⁶ DVH 27/135343. “Spanien Himmel breitet seine Sterne über unsere Holzbaracken aus – und der Spieß brüllt schon in der Ferne – jetzt ist es mit dem Ausgang aus!”

³⁵⁷ DVH 27/135343. “Grenzer versauft Eure Löhne – Grenzer versauft Euren Lohn, von den Bauern klauen wir die Kartoffeln und von der Reichsbahn die Kohlen.”

³⁵⁸ DVH 27/135343. “Es wurde bekannt, dass am 19.10.1959 gegen 19.30 Uhr auf der Fahrt von der Dienststelle zum Schießstand von Genossen des 1. Zuges der Kompanie [redacted] Kampflieder der Arbeiterklasse mit umgedichteten Text gesungen wurden.”

³⁵⁹ “Brüder, zur Sonne, zur Freiheit, / Brüder zum Licht empor! / Hell aus dem dunklen Vergangnen / leuchtet die Zukunft hervor.”

accused singers admitted they had learned the song from comrades during a training session.³⁶⁰ The three comrades caught singing were punished with three days of “strict arrest” (*strenger Arrest*), while the *Unterleutnant, Feldwebel* and *Gruppenführer Unteroffizier* who stood idly by while the parodies were being sung were punished by similar means.³⁶¹ Meanwhile, the report noted with an air of bewilderment, “The political-moral condition in the company can be described as satisfactory”; most people “perform their job flawlessly” and “there are no serious signs of unwillingness to serve.”³⁶²

Lurking between the lines of this assessment is an implicit question: what would induce such seemingly exemplary border guards to agitate against the state? The administrators who composed this report, focused on prosecuting outward displays of “inflammatory speech,” would hardly have been able to answer this question. The disconnect between the administration and its rank-and-file prevented them from comprehending the *Eigensinn* – variously disillusioned, mistrustful, playful, outspoken, or simply apathetic – that underlay the political attitude of the *Grenzpolizei*’s alienated personnel. And so, through the 1950s, the *Hauptverwaltung der Deutschen Grenzpolizei* continued to address displays of inadequate ideological conviction with the same method they had since 1948: issuing new and improved guidelines for political education. The SED’s ideology itself could not be at fault; *Politschulung* was sure to have the intended effect, if only its means of instruction could be perfected.

³⁶⁰ DVH 27/135343. “Auch haben die Genossen des Stammpersonals sehr oft im betrunkenen Zustand das Lied so verunglimpft gesungen und selbst die Offiziere hätten nichts dagegen unternommen.”

³⁶¹ DVH 27/135343. “Uln. [redacted] erhielt 2 Tage Hausarrest, Uffz. [redacted] 3 Tage Arrest und Fdw. [redacted] wird vor der Parteileitung zur Verantwortung gezogen.”

³⁶² DVH 27/135343. “Der polit-moralische Zustand in der Kompanie [redacted] kann als befriedigend bezeichnet werden”; “versieht seinen Dienst einwandfrei”; “Es gibt keine ernsthaften Anzeichen der Unlust zum Dienst”

Chapter 4: The Personal and the Political

“We must ensure that our comrades do not indulge in excessive consumption of alcohol. We must ensure that our comrades do not associate with dubious women. It is often the case that comrades lead an immoral life, get into debt, and no longer know what to do. They have no trust in the collective. The enemy will, of course, approach this and exploit it for his dirty interests. We must put an end to this at last.”

— “Arguments for the Fight Against Desertions in the East German Border Police” (*“Argumentation für den Kampf gegen Desertionen in der Deutschen Grenzpolizei,”*) *Hauptverwaltung Deutsche Grenzpolizei* (Central Administration of the East German Border Police), September 5 1952³⁶³

Any analysis of the desertion phenomenon would be misleading if it placed an undue focus on the political causes of desertion. The vast majority of desertion files describe individuals who deserted, at least in part, for personal reasons. Desertion reports that describe a personal catastrophe – separation from a spouse, a fight with one’s parents, a series of failed suicide attempts – outnumber those which contain a clearly articulated critique of the government. In its efforts to sketch the “causes” of desertion, the investigative authorities of the *Deutsche Grenzpolizei* gathered reams of material concerning border guards’ personal lives. Parents, siblings, comrades, girlfriends, and community members were interrogated, and the border guards’ personal correspondence was reproduced in typewritten form, in order to scrutinize and reconstruct the life circumstances that induced them to flee to the West.

Prior to the closure of the border in 1952, a plurality of desertions were attributed to *Grenzer* either reuniting with family members in the West or taking advantage of the *Grüne Grenze* – which many *Grenzer* were already in the habit of crossing on a regular basis – to seek

³⁶³ DVH 27/134532. “Deshalb müssen wir darauf achten, dass unsere Kameraden sich nicht dem übermäßigen Genuss des Alkohols hingeben. Darauf achten, dass sich unsere Genossen nicht mit zweifelhaften Frauen abgeben. Oft ist es so, die Genossen führen ein unmoralisches Leben, machen Schulden, wissen nicht mehr ein noch aus. Zum Kollektiv haben sie kein Vertrauen. Hier wird sich der Gegner natürlich heranmachen, wird sie für seine schmutzigen Interessen ausnutzen. Damit müssen wir endlich Schluss machen.”

better fortunes. A sample of “probable causes” of desertion in 1948 include the following: “bride in the West,” going to visit a “seriously ill aunt,” and “wife lives in Lübeck.”³⁶⁴ Even one *Oberwachtmeister*, described as “one of the best police officers in the *Kommando*,”³⁶⁵ reportedly deserted to the West because he was dissatisfied with the educational opportunities in the East, and “he believes he can offer his family a better life in the West.”³⁶⁶ It was not uncommon for border guards to meet a future spouse when traversing the *Grüne Grenze* (or, after 1952, by traveling to West Berlin) and then desert in order to be with them.³⁶⁷ (One border guard who deserted in December of 1948 was suspected of deserting in order to be with a woman who he met at a Christmas party in Lübeck, for example.)³⁶⁸ These desertions mirror the character of *Republikflucht* among the general population at this time: centering family relationships and economic opportunity rather than political dissidence. Allegiance to their nascent nation-state was evidently not these deserters’ first priority.

Desertion reports that make any mention of politics are exponentially outnumbered by those of border guards who deserted to escape turbulent circumstances in their personal lives: to escape broken marriages,³⁶⁹ to avoid the responsibility of raising children fathered out of wedlock,³⁷⁰ to escape mounting debts,³⁷¹ or to remove themselves from a dysfunctional family

³⁶⁴ DVH 27/134534. “Braut im Westen”; “schwerkranke Tante”; “Die Frau des [redacted] wohnte in Lübeck.”

³⁶⁵ DVH 27/134534. “Seinen Dienst versah er pflichtbewusst mit der erforderlichen Energie. In Kollegenkreisen war [redacted] angesehen und beliebt. Politisch hatte [redacted] ein feste demokratische Grundlage, er gab immer wieder ein klares politisches Wissen und Handeln zu erkennen.”

³⁶⁶ DVH 27/134534. “einer der besten Polizei-Angehöriger des Kdo. [redacted]”; “Er glaubt, seiner Familie im Westen ein besseres Dasein bieten zu können.”

³⁶⁷ DVH 27/135183.

³⁶⁸ DVH 27/134534.

³⁶⁹ DVH 27/134534. e.g. one *Obergefreiter*: “Lebte in Unfrieden mit der Ehefrau und ist vermutlich deshalb nach dem Westen gegangen.”

³⁷⁰ DVH 27/134539. e.g. “Die bisherigen Ermittlungen haben ergeben, dass vermutet werden kann, dass [redacted] vorsätzlich desertiert ist, um sich seinen Verpflichtungen seiner Familie gegenüber zu entziehen. Das kann vorläufig damit begründet werden, dass er am 22.5.51 heiraten musste, da seine Frau in anderen Umständen ist.”; e.g. one soldier who deserted in 1953: “vermutlich Rechtsachen wegen einem unehelichen Kind (lt. Vorgang).” DVH 27/135180.

³⁷¹ DVH 27/135183. e.g. a *Gefreiter* deserted in 1957 to avoid payment of a “Manko von 500 DM in seiner Kantine”

with whom they had a tumultuous relationship (“Probable cause: broken family relationships [zerüttete Familienverhältnisse],” as the record-keeping shorthand went). A border guard who deserted in 1948, for example, “had a love affair with a girl from [the West] while his alleged fiancée was about to give birth.”³⁷² Another border guard reportedly got engaged to two women in different towns at the same time, both of whom were pregnant – a situation which induced in him a “very severe mental depression,” driving him to desert out of a “fear of responsibility.”³⁷³ Some reports, fraught with tragic pathos, suggest an individual in the depths of despair for reasons that – though impenetrable – undoubtedly transcend the circumstances of Cold War politics or even border service: e.g. “He was a person who took very little part politically and socially. Furthermore, [he] had already attempted suicide several times, but his comrades always came to the rescue, and so he is still alive today.”³⁷⁴ In such cases, flight to the West functioned not as a change of political allegiance, but rather as a pressure valve for individuals in distress who viewed themselves as having nothing to lose.

The presumed causes of desertion as reported by officers and party officials – in all cases, but especially those relating to border guards’ personal lives – must be read critically. The *Stasi* and the *Grenzpolizei* would have been incentivized to lay the blame on exogenous circumstances that absolved the circumstances of life in the GDR, and therefore the SED and its politics, from any culpability. Furthermore, observations such as that of a border guard who deserted in 1957 (“A review of Martin’s locker gave the impression that although Martin is married, he is still in

³⁷² DVH 27/134534. “unterhielt mit einem aus [redacted] stammenden Mädchen ein Liebesverhältnis, während seine angebliche Verlobte der Niederkunft entgegensieht.”

³⁷³ DVH 27/134534. “[...] in Eisenach eine Braut in anderen Umständen hat und sich das zweite Mal in [redacted] verlobte und dieses Verlöbnis auch nicht, wie vermutet wird, ohne Folgen blieb, befand sich [redacted] in sehr starken seelischen Depressionen, die ihn dazu trieben, dem Verhältnis mit seiner Braut in Eisenach aus dem Wege zu gehen, indem er vermutlich Zone wechseln wollte.”

³⁷⁴ DVH 27/134544. “Er war ein Mensch, der sich politisch und gesellschaftlich sehr wenig beteiligte, desweiteren hat der Beschuldigte schon mehrmals Selbstmordversuche unternommen, die Kameraden sind aber immer zur rechten Zeit gekommen und somit ist er heute noch am Leben.”

contact with other girls”³⁷⁵) indicate a lack of acquaintance with the individual in question, and cursory explanations such as “presumed reason: because his wife had started an affair with another man”³⁷⁶ can hardly be extrapolated as the true, never mind the sole, “cause” of an individual’s desertion to the West.

Nevertheless, the narratives of those who deserted due to personal angst – however embellished – offer a window into the emotional world of the border guards and the ways that the administration attempted to make sense of them. The following narrative of a *Wachmeister* who deserted to the West in 1951 is instructive:

Dietrich committed *Republikflucht* while completely drunk, to which it must be said that Dietrich had a strong penchant for alcohol and could become dangerous to himself and his comrades when intoxicated. [...] Dietrich was objective and knowledgeable in his other work, and he knew himself how badly alcohol affected him. Although he always promised in discussions to put an end to this evil for good, he relapsed again and again. Dietrich had bad circumstances at home, as he had step-parents with whom he often had bad arguments on his vacation days, about which he told his comrades in the *Kommando*.

Because he did not have a pleasant home, he felt well integrated into the collective in the *Volkspolizei* at the *Grenzkommando*, where he did his duty and never expressed the thought of leaving the ranks of the *Volkspolizei* or going any other way. [...] Despite everything, Dietrich was easily influenced and also tended to live beyond his means. It can be assumed that external influences also instilled doubt and disbelief in Dietrich – doubt and disbelief, as a result of which he ultimately ran into the arms of the class enemy with a drunken head.”³⁷⁷

³⁷⁵ DVH 27/135183. “Eine Schrankdurchsicht im KPP ergab den Eindruck dass [redacted], obwohl er jung verheiratet ist, noch mit anderen Mädchen in Verbindung steht.”

³⁷⁶ DVH 27/134534. “Vermutlicher Grund: Weil seine Frau mit einem anderen Mann ein Verhältnis angeknüpft hat.”

³⁷⁷ DVH 27/134539. “begin [redacted] die Republikflucht im total betrunkenen Zustand, wozu zu sagen ist, daß [redacted] eine starke Neigung zum Alkohol hatte und im Rauschzustand sich selbst und seinen Kameraden gefährlich werden konnte.” “[redacted] war in seiner sonstigen Arbeit sachlich und gewissenhaft und wußte selbst, wie schlecht auf ihn der Alkohol einwirkt. Obwohl er bei Aussprachen stets versprochen hat, dieses Übel endgültig abzustellen, ist er jedoch immer wieder rückfällig geworden. [redacted] hatte zuhause schlechte Verhältnisse, indem er Stiefeltern hat, mit denen er in seinen Urlaubstagen öfters schaffe Auseinandersetzungen hatte, was er auch den Kameraden des Kommandos mitteilte. Weil er kein angenehmes Zuhause hatte, fühlte er sich in der Volkspolizei auf dem Grenzkommando wo er seinen Dienst verrichtete gut in das Kollektiv ein und brachte nie den Gedanken zum Ausdruck, aus den Reihen der Volkspolizei auszuschneiden oder irgendwelche anderen Wege zu gehen. [...] Trotz allem war [redacted] leicht zu beeinflussen und neigte auch dazu, über seine Verhältnisse zu leben. Es ist anzunehmen, daß durch äußerliche Einwirkung auch in B. Zweifel und Unglaube gesetzt wurde, wodurch er letzten Endes mit angetrunkenen Kopf dem Klassenfeind in die Arme lief.”

Dietrich's tale is an illuminating case of how private anxieties – in this case, alcoholism and a toxic home environment – might induce even a cooperative and well-integrated comrade to desert to the West. The potential escape hatch offered by the nearby *Grüne Grenze* must have been palpable for a border guard in distress. But from the warped perspective of the investigators, Dietrich's desperate escape represents a moral fall of sorts, as expressed by the evocative image of running drunkenly “into the arms of the class enemy,” portraying Dietrich's immoral lifestyle as a prelude to the corruption by the West.

Perhaps it was this blurring of the personal and the political that allowed the authorities to pin Dietrich's obviously personal desertion on the specter of an enemy infiltrator. According to the reports' conclusion, the first of many “causes” of the desertion was as follows:

We see the causes of the desertion in the following points:

1. In [the] border section, there is a lot of enemy work being done by members of the Western police, who are constantly trying to approach our comrades, as well as by Western workers who cross the Demarcation Line every day and often influence our comrades in a negative way.³⁷⁸

This disconnect between a personal turmoil-driven desertion and a supposed political “cause” is a recurrent one. Investigators found a way to tie discussions of politics into their appraisal of even the most clearly self-interested desertions. This makes for occasionally absurd reading. In 1954, for example, *Gefreiter* Ulrich deserted apparently for personal reasons: his girlfriend was pregnant, he feared paying alimony, and his mounting anxiety manifested in “exceeding vacation time, [getting in] fights and the like.”³⁷⁹ (As in many cases, it became the

³⁷⁸ DVH 27/134539. “Die Ursachen der Desertation [sic] sehen wir in folgenden Punkten: 1. In Grenzabschnitt [redacted] wird starke gegnerische Arbeit geleistet durch Angehörige der Westpolizei, die ständig versuchen, unsere Kameraden anzusprechen sowie durch die Westarbeiter, die täglich die D.-Linie passieren und nicht selten in negativer Art die Kameraden beeinflussen.”

³⁷⁹ DVH 27/135180. “Wegen dieser ganzen Zeit, bis auf die letzten 3 bis 4 Monate, mußte er oft bestraft werden wegen übermäßigen Alkoholgenuß; daraus entstand noch Urlaubsüberschreitung, Schlägerei und dergleichen. Im Jahr 1953 bestand bei Schmidt schon einmal Desertionsverdacht. Der Grund war die Schwangerschaft der [redacted] und die von ihm befürchtete Zahlung von Alimente.”

task of officers and functionaries to intervene in his personal life to ameliorate his erratic behavior: Two officers and a party secretary “held discussions” with Ulrich, which “led to [him] changing his attitude to comply with the alimony payment [...] and expressing the intention, also to [his girlfriend’s] mother, that he would soon become engaged to her in order to marry her later.”³⁸⁰)

Ulrich’s story is typical of a desertion in which (according to the received narrative) politics did not play a role. Yet the nature of desertion prevented any desertion from being ruled as entirely apolitical, and insufficient political indoctrination was always a convenient scapegoat to add to an interminable list of “causes.” A section of Ulrich’s desertion report regarding the “political and moral condition” of the *Kommando* makes the following observations:

During discussions with individual comrades, it was established that a large number of members of the *Kommando* had not saved any money, but had also not purchased any furniture or other valuables, despite having belonged to the *Grenzpolizei* for a long time. The comrades really squandered their money. This is also one of the reasons why the comrades were indifferent to the performance of their duties and indifferent to their political education.

Ulrich himself was one of them. This is particularly evident from his punishments, as he was often punished for drunkenness. The staff of the station is not sufficiently familiar with the political events of the day, and there are particular uncertainties about the Moscow Declaration and the strength of the world peace camp. The reasons for this are the formal implementation of political information and a lack of individual discussions by the department management.³⁸¹

³⁸⁰ DVH 27/135180. “Mit ihm geführte Aussprachen durch den Parteisekretär der Kdtr, Genossen Ultn. [redacted] und dem Stellv für politische Arbeit der GB, Genossen Major [redacted] führten dazu, daß [redacted] seine Haltung änderte der späteren Alimentenzahlung durch Pfändungsbeschluß nachzukommen und die Absiche äußerte, auch gegenüber der Mutter der Maul, daß er sich in Kürze mit ihr verloben wird, um sie später zu heiraten.”

³⁸¹ DVH 27/135180. “Politisch-moralischer Zustand der Dienststelle”; “Bei Aussprachen mit einzelnen Genossen wurde festgestellt, daß eine große Anzahl von Angehörigen des Kdos nicht gespart haben, sich aber auch keine Möbel oder sonstige Werte angeschafft haben, trotz längerer Zugehörigkeit zur Deutschen Grenzpolizei. Die Genossen haben das Geld regelrecht verplempert. Hierin ist ebenfalls eine der Ursachen zu suchen, die bei diesen Genossen zur Gleichgültigkeit gegenüber der Dienstdurchführung und zur Gleichgültigkeit gegenüber der politischen Erziehung führt. [redacted] selbst war einer derjenigen. Dies zeigt besonders seine Bestrafungen, wo es zum Ausdruck kommt, daß er wegen Trunkenheit sehr oft bestraft werden mußte. Der Personalbestand der Dienststelle ist nicht hinreichend mit den Politischen Tagesgeschehen vertraut und es bestehen besonders Unklarheiten über die Deklaration von Moskau und der Stärke des Weltfriedenslagers. Ursachen dafür sind die

In the investigator's imagination, the personal had become political: ruminations on the shortcomings of Ulrich and his *Kommando* segue seamlessly into anxieties about the comrades' understanding of the Moscow Declaration and the "the strength of the world peace camp," reflecting the automatic politicization of desertion that characterized the state's view of the phenomenon.

One aspect of border guards' personal drama that was especially politicized was the intersection between desertion and a wide range of behaviors perceived as "immoral" – alcoholism, theft, promiscuity, violence, et cetera. This association began to take on a cause-and-effect relationship in the state's official narrative, whereby indulging in too much vice put border guards at risk of being enticed to the morally bankrupt West. "Very often, immorality, drinking, dealing with questionable women, etc. are the causes of desertion," a 1955 desertion report declared. "A whole series of deserted soldiers have moral weaknesses, and when they see no other way out, they flee to the West."³⁸²

One unavoidable element of this moral panic is an almost hysterical preoccupation with the specter of "dubious women" (*zweifelhafte Frauen*), cast as one of many "negative elements" keen to lead border guards astray.³⁸³ The profile of one soldier who deserted in 1955 encapsulates the perfect storm of anxious moralizing about alcohol, promiscuity and dubious women which, when combined, could lure an impressionable comrade toward the West: "Hans, an easy man who lived beyond his means and was prone to alcohol and dubious women, had a child with a

formale Durchführung der Politinformationen und mangelnde individuelle Aussprachen durch die Dienststellenleitung."

³⁸² DVH 27/128913. "Sehr oft sind Unmoral, Sauferei, Umgang mit fragwürdigen Frauen u.a. Erscheinungen die Ursachen zur Desertion. [...] Eine ganze Reihe desertierter Soldaten haben dieselben moralischen Schwächen und sind dann, wenn sie keinen anderen Ausweg mehr sehen, nach dem Westen flüchtig geworden."

³⁸³ DVH 27/155680. "Auf der gleichen Linie liegt die Beeinflussung unserer Grenzpolizisten durch negativ eingestellte Elemente, besonders durch zweifelhafte Frauen in unserer Republik."

girl near Oschatz. At the workplace, he had relations with a prostitute, who forced him to have sex and persuaded him to go to the West with her.”³⁸⁴ The vice of having a “weakness for women” was frequently portrayed as a cause of desertion in itself: “Lots of dealings with women” was listed by the Stasi as the seventh most prevalent “cause” of desertion in 1955.³⁸⁵

Sometimes, the phantasmagoric association between dubious women, immoral behavior, and the decadent West – combined with the authorities’ evident desire for a scapegoat – manifested in strange fixations and digressions within desertion reports. One 1955 Stasi report, in the middle of blaming officers being “poor role models” for the desertion phenomenon, went on a tangent about “the bourgeoisification of the families of some of our officers.” The scandalized Stasi relayed the following scene from one *Grenzbereitschaft*: “The wife of the *Oberleutnant* is drinking with petty bourgeois at a restaurant.³⁸⁶ Afterwards, they come to [his] apartment, and the wife, dressed only in a robe, is dancing on the table. The bourgeois kneel in front of the table and watch. Although the *Oberleutnant* was not there, she claims to have done the same thing in the presence of her husband.”³⁸⁷ The implications of this were grave, concluded the Stasi: “Officers who want to educate people in our service are not even able to educate their own family members, whose misdeeds become known and thus lower the authority of the

³⁸⁴ DVH 27/128913. “Am 18.1.1955 desertierte der Soldat [redacted]. [redacted], ein leichter Mensch, der über seine Verhältnisse lebte, zu Alkohol und zweifelhaften Frauen neigte, hatte bei Oschatz ein Mädchen mit einem Kind. Am Dienort verkehrte er mit einer Prostituierten, die ihm zum Verkehrt nötigte und ihn überredete mit ihr nach dem Westen zu gehen.”

³⁸⁵ DVH 27/155680. “Viel Umgang mit Frauen”

³⁸⁶ The abbreviation given here is HO, which stands for *Handelsorganisation*, a national retail business owned by the GDR. HO-G is used as an abbreviation for *Handelsorganisation-Gaststätte*; using context clues, I am translating this word here as *Gaststätte*. cf: Maurer, *Halt - Staatsgrenze!*, 463.

³⁸⁷ DVH 27/155680. “Damit im engen Zusammenhang steht die Verbürgerlichung der Familien eines Teils unserer Offiziere. Offiziere, die in unseren Dienststellen Menschen erziehen wollen, sind nicht einmal in der Lage, ihre eigenen Familienangehörigen zu erziehen, deren Untaten bekannt werden und so die Autorität der Offiziere herabsetzen.” “Die Frau des Ob. Ltn. [redacted] zecht mit Kleinbürgern in der HO. Anschließend kommt man in die Wohnung des S. und die Frau tanzt nur mit einem Morgenrock bekleidet auf dem Tisch. Die Spießer knien vor dem Tisch und schauen zu. Obwohl [redacted] nicht dabei war, gibt sie an, dasselbe auch im Beisein ihres Mannes getan zu haben.”

officers.” The causal relationship between such salacious events and desertion to the West is not explained. (The predominance of these sensational parables are more reflective of the Stasi and the *Grenzpolizei*’s male-dominated apparatus than an empirical reality. The Stasi, in particular, has been noted for embodying a “conservative, patriarchal and discriminatory structure,” and was in the habit of rendering women associated with the opposition as “licentious deviants.”³⁸⁸)

While the prevalence of dubious women luring men across the border may have been overstated, the association between desertion and “excessive alcohol consumption,” was by no means a product of the SED’s moralizing imagination. Alcohol abuse was endemic among the *Grenzpolizei*, particularly because their leisure time was limited and they were often stationed in rural areas where there were few opportunities for entertainment besides the *Gaststätte* (tavern). An incalculable number of desertions took place under the influence of alcohol, and many were preceded by a visit to a *Gaststätte*.³⁸⁹ Many deserters had even been punished before for consuming alcohol on the job.³⁹⁰ An extremely typical desertion report reads as follows: “Presumably, since Harald had been drinking all night, he was not in possession of his mental powers and deserted under the influence of alcohol.”³⁹¹ Desertion reports display a pointed fixation on the alcohol abuse and consumption of border guards, reflecting the GDR government’s tendency to moralize alcoholism and frame it as a criminal behavior.³⁹²

³⁸⁸ Cooper, Belinda, “Patriarchy Within a Patriarchy: Women and the Stasi,” *German Politics & Society* 16, no. 2 (47) (1998): 1–31. 4, 7.

³⁸⁹ Example: “In den Nachmittagsstunden begab er sich in die Gaststätte in Gehrendorf bis 1600 Uhr wo er größere Mengen Alkohol zu sich nahm.” This *Gefreiter* was reportedly too drunk to participate in the FDJ meeting that evening and deserted the following morning. cf: DVH 27/135183.

³⁹⁰ e.g. “Seine Dienstdurchführung war mangelhaft. Am 25.11.54 wurde [redacted] wegen Genuß von Alkohol während des Dienstes mit 8 Tagen Ausgangssperre bestraft.” cf: DVH 27/134554.

³⁹¹ DVH 27/134561. “Vermutlich war [redacted], da er die ganze Nacht getrunken hatte, nicht im Besitz seiner geistigen Kräfte und ist unter Alkohol desertiert.”

³⁹² Fulbrook, *The People’s State*, 118.

As with other disciplinary infractions, the *Grenzpolizei* found itself ill-equipped to deal with alcohol abuse. Some desertion reports call for a “campaign against the misuse of alcohol,” whereas others insist that border guards are only driven to go out drinking out of boredom, and that the solution is to “organize leisure time so that we can guide and educate our young people in their free time.”³⁹³ Mitigating alcohol consumption often became the responsibility of the officers, who either punished their subordinates for drinking or – in the case of one *Kommandoleiter* in 1954 – staged personal interventions to encourage their underlings to change their ways: “I spoke to him about it, and showed him that a person who consumes more alcohol than he can handle can never perform his duties properly. He then promised to do better. After that, he no longer drank beer or schnapps, but instead made do with lemonade.”³⁹⁴ In any case, the notion that perhaps border service or life in the GDR itself drove people towards alcohol abuse – and, in turn, to desert – did not enter into the *Grenzpolizei*’s consideration.³⁹⁵ (This echoed the SED’s attitude towards alcoholism in GDR society at large: “it was impossible to concede that rising rates of alcoholism could in any way be related to social conditions in the GDR.”³⁹⁶)

³⁹³ DVH 27/134539. “Die Schlussfolgerung der Kommandanturleitung, eine Kampagne gegen Missbrauch des Alkoholgenusses einzuleiten, kann nicht als die Massnahme angesprochen werden, die aus einer realen Einschätzung Situation abzuleiten ist. Es werden nur die VP.-Angehörigen der Dienststellen die Gasthäuser regelmäßig aufsuchen, die in ihrer Zeit im Kommando selbst keine Befriedigung durch kollektive gesellschaftliche Arbeit finden. Aus diesem Grunde muss die Schlussfolgerung abgeleitet werden, dass es notwendig ist, in den Dienststellen [...] die Freizeit zu organisieren, um unsere jungen Menschen auch in Freizeit lenken und erziehen zu können.”

³⁹⁴ DVH 27/134544. “Ich sprach mit ihm darüber und zeigte ihm auf, dass ein Mensch, der mehr Alkohol zu sich nimmt als er verträgt, niemals seinen Dienst richtig durchführen kann. Daraufhin versprach mit selbiger, sich zu bessern. In der Folgezeit trank er auch nicht mehr Bier oder Schnaps, sondern begnügte sich mit Limonade.”

³⁹⁵ A similar example, from 1959: “[redacted] gab sich gern dem übermässigen Genuß von Alkohol hin und war mit seinem Geld sehr leichtsinnig. Durchaussprachen seitens der Kompanieleitung konnte erreicht werden, daß er seinen übermässigen Alkoholgenuss etwas einstellte und einen Aufbausparvertrag von monatlich 120.00 DM abschloss.” cf: DVH 27/135343.

³⁹⁶ Fulbrook, *The People’s State*, 118.

The expectation of officer intervention appears not only to have applied to alcohol consumption and disciplinary infractions, but also to dramas of a highly personal nature. In lieu of better strategies to stop border guards from fleeing West for personal reasons, the *Hauptverwaltung der Grenzpolizei* administration often acted as if personal problems were the job of the *Kommando* leaders to solve. One border guard who deserted in 1955 was accused of leading an “immoral lifestyle” involving “dealings with many women,” including one woman, Birgit, who admitted in an interrogation that she had considered deserting to the West with him. His file concludes with a lambastment of the *Kommando* leadership for failing to prevent his philandering:

The desertion was facilitated by the negligence of the command leadership. Although it was known that Fritz was married, the command tolerated Fritz’s relationship with Birgit. Birgit is pregnant by Fritz. As the team leader, Fritz was under no control whatsoever by the *Kommando* leadership in his capacity.³⁹⁷

Similarly, administrators appear to have bent over backwards to remediate conditions for the aforementioned Ulrich, noted for his propensity for squandering money and starting fights:

A discussion held with him at the beginning of 1954 by the then Deputy General, Comrade Major Fischer, revealed that Ulrich was an active sportsman (wrestler), but had no opportunity to train due to his service in the *Kommando* and the lack of support from officials. It was agreed with the sports association of a large company in Plauen, which had a wrestling team, that Ulrich could take part in training and matches. The company made it possible for Ulrich to take part in training and competitions twice a week.³⁹⁸

The expectation that officers micromanage the lives of their subordinates reflects both that the understaffed *Grenzpolizei* could not afford to fire its problematic personnel – and that the upper echelons of the *Grenzpolizei* needed someone to blame for the otherwise elusive,

³⁹⁷ DVH 27/13456. “Die Desertion wurde begünstigt durch die nachlässige Arbeitsweise der Kdo-Leitung. Obwohl bekannt war, daß [redacted] verheiratet ist, duldet der Kdo-Leiter das Verhältnis des [redacted] mit der [redacted]. Wie die [redacted] angibt, ist sie von [redacted] schwanger. [redacted] als Gespannführer stand durch die Kdo.-Leitung in seiner Eigenschaft unter keinerlei Kontrolle.”

³⁹⁸ DVH 27/135180.

amorphous problem of desertions driven by personal drama. For example, the soldier Horst, who deserted in 1954, was described as having an exceptionally turbulent personal life: he came from “one of the poorest families” in his town, and was trapped in an unhappy marriage – he had been pressured to marry his girlfriend at age 18 after getting her pregnant – and was unable to financially support his young family.³⁹⁹ As a result, he suffered from a “very tense married life.”

Yet even Horst’s desertion was judged to be at least partially the fault of inadequate leadership. The “causes of desertion” are judged to be as follows: “The collective in the *Kommando* was not strong enough to make comrade Horst a valuable member of society.” The failure of the *Kommando* did not only consist of failing to mold Horst into a more respectable young man – it was also deemed, as in so many cases, a failure of political indoctrination. “The FDJ organization and his superiors were probably concerned with him, but they were not convinced of the strength of the peace camp. The political and moral condition of the department is insufficient; the party comrades do not have a leading role in the department, and did not do a good job with the comrades to educate them to become conscious patriots.”⁴⁰⁰

The state’s frenetic attempts to make sense of the deserters’ interpersonal angst reflect the tension between the multiple connotations of desertion. For border guards, desertion was a decision to escape from one life into another; for the government, an act of treason. In constructing political meaning behind the personal circumstances underlying each desertion, the state stripped border guards of their agency. In the official narrative, border guards were not capable of thinking for themselves; desertion was not a decision, but instead the result of a moral

³⁹⁹ DVH 27/134554.

⁴⁰⁰ DVH 27/134554. “Das Kollektiv im Kdo. war nicht stark genug um den Gen. [redacted] zu einen wertvollen Glied in der Gesellschaft zumachen. Man hat sich wohl von Seiten der FDJ Organisation und auch der Vorgesetzten mit ihm beschäftigt ihm aber nicht von der Stärke des Friedenslagers überzeugt. [...] Der Polit-moralische Zustand der Dienststelle ist ungenügend die Parteigenossen haben in der Dienststelle nicht die führende Rolle und leisteten mit den Gen. keine gute Arbeit um sie zu bewussten Patrioten zu erziehen.”

fall, a failure of someone else's leadership, or the inevitable outcome of an incorrigible character. Paradoxically, meanwhile, the states' obsessive analysis of the intimate details of deserters' personal lives obscured any discontents with the GDR that could have contributed to their woes. Deserters were the victims of circumstance, according to the party line – never the victims of the state.

Chapter 5: The Enemy

“The *Deutsche Grenzpolizei* protects and defends the borders of this first German state of peace ever more successfully. It prevents enemy agents from entering the territory of the GDR, and is receiving ever greater active support from our population.”⁴⁰¹

Paranoia and hostility towards the enemy (*der Gegner*) on the other side of the border characterized East German border service since the official closing of the border in 1952.⁴⁰²

During the turbulent 1950s, paranoia was not necessarily unfounded – an attack from the West was never out of the question, and the nascent *Grenzpolizei* was in the process of being transformed into a military force that would be capable of serving as the first line of defense, should an attack occur. A 1959 “*Kampfblatt*” (“fight-leaflet”) presumably intended for circulation among the border guards or to be posted at the station, illustrates the fever pitch of constant vigilance regarding a potential enemy attack which characterized work in the *Grenzpolizei*:

Comrades!

Our task in the present period is to secure and defend the ordered section of the border under all conditions! Be aware of the seriousness of the decisive situation! It has been proven that the enemy is preparing an attack on our Republic and is currently planning provocations!

Comrades!

We call on all soldiers, non-commissioned officers and officers of our unit, especially the party and FDJ members, to use all their strength and abilities to thwart the enemy's war plans. A prerequisite for the timely recognition of all actions of the enemy is a thorough observation of every movement of the enemy as well as every change in the terrain and their immediate reporting!

Comrade soldiers!

You have a great responsibility! [...]

We are convinced, comrades, that you are aware of your great responsibility in the current situation and will act as loyal sons of our socialist homeland!

⁴⁰¹ Oberstleutnant Greiner-Mai, quoted in “Wachsam, klug und umsichtig handeln. Die Grenzordnung – ein wichtiges Element der Grenzsicherung.” *Der Grenzpolizist: Wochenzeitung der Deutschen Grenzpolizei* (Berlin), February 5, 1959. 1. “Deutsche Grenzpolizei schützt und verteidigt immer erfolgreicher die Grenzen dieses ersten deutschen Friedensstaates. Sie verhindert das Eindringen von feindlichen Agenten in das Gebiet der DDR, wobei sie in immer stärkerem Maße die aktive Unterstützung unserer Bevölkerung findet.”

⁴⁰² Baechler, “The Making of a Border,” 203.

Our struggle is just!⁴⁰³

Vigilance against the Western enemy went beyond practical military readiness, taking on a larger-than-life dimension and bearing immense social and cultural weight. Fostering active hatred against the imperialist enemy in its rank-and-file was an explicit goal of the *Grenzpolizei* and a central concept in political training. Unsurprisingly, therefore, a lack of virulence toward the enemy across the border was a common flashpoint in discussions of the ideological shortcomings of the *Grenzpolizei*. Within desertion reports, lists of measures to prevent future desertions (“*Einzuleitende Maßnahmen*”) often include some variation of the following: “Education of comrades to revolutionary vigilance and hatred against the Western imperialists and the Adenauer clique.”⁴⁰⁴ The “tabooisation” of the enemy West was coupled with a steady increase in bans on interacting with the West throughout the 1950s: by 1955, border police were forbidden from visiting West Berlin, corresponding with anyone in the West, or even keeping in touch with anyone who had close contacts in the West.⁴⁰⁵

Yet for all the *Grenzpolizei*'s exhortations about hatred of the West as one of its core values, it appears that this sentiment was not universally shared among its personnel. Judging

⁴⁰³ DVH 27/135343. “Genossen! Unsere Aufgabe in der gegenwärtigen Periode besteht darin, den befohlenen Grenzabschnitt unter jeder Bedingung zu sichern und zu verteidigen! Seid Euch dem Ernst der entscheidenden Situation bewußt! Es ist erwiesen, dass der Gegner einen Überfall auf unsere Republik vorbereitet und gegenwärtig Provokationen beabsichtigt! Genossen! Wir rufen alle Soldaten, Unteroffiziere und Offiziere unserer Einheit, insbesondere die Partei- und FDJ-Mitglieder auf, ihre ganzen Kräfte und Fähigkeiten einzusetzen, um die Kriegspläne des Gegners zu vereiteln. Voraussetzung für das rechtzeitige Erkennen aller Handlungen des Gegners ist eine gründliche Beobachtung jeder Bewegung des Gegners sowie jeder Veränderung im Gelände und deren sofortige Meldung! Genossen Soldaten! Ihr tragt eine große Verantwortung! Von Eurer Beobachtung und Bewegung im Gelände hängt es ab, ob wir alle Versuche des Gegners bereits schon im Keim stecken und eine Aggression mit den notwendigen Gegenschlag verhindern können oder nicht! Deshalb Genossen, seid äußerst wachsam und beachtet die Tarnung aller Eurer Bewegungen in Gelände! Duldet keine Nachlässigkeit und Sorglosigkeit bei der Sicherung Eures Abschnittes! Laßt keine Dienstvergehen zu, denn Dienstvergehen und Nachlässigkeiten stärken den Gegner! Wir sind überzeugt Genossen dass Sie sich Ihrer großen Verantwortung in der gegenwärtigen Situation bewußt sind und als treue Söhne unserer sozialistischen Heimat handeln werdet! Unser Kampf ist gerecht! Dem Gegner werden wir nicht gestatten, seine Atom-Bomben und Raketen über unserer sozialistische Heimat zu entladen! Schon ein Versuch, schon der Anfang, wird für ihn das Ende sein! Die Leitung der Abteilung spricht allen Soldaten, Uffz. und Offizieren für ihre bisherigen guten Leistungen Dank und Anerkennung aus und erwartet, dass Sie auch im weiteren Kampf das in Sie gesetzte Vertrauen rechtfertigt!”

⁴⁰⁴ DVH 27/134561.

⁴⁰⁵ Stief, *Desertionen in Geteilten Berlin*, 25.

from desertion reports, members of the border police were so fragile in their convictions that they were at constant risk of being corrupted by the enemy, and subsequently lured to the West, through a variety of channels. “*Beeinflussung des Gegners*” (“enemy influence”), often provided with scant additional context, is one of the most frequently listed “causes” of desertions. This influence was quantifiable: “the intensified work of the enemy” (and, of course, “the inadequate attention paid to enemy work by some of the political organs, party and FDJ organizations”) was declared by the *Grenzpolizei* headquarters as the “cause” of 56 desertions in the first quarter of 1955.⁴⁰⁶ When a detachment or an individual was judged to be in lackluster “political-moral condition,” the amorphous “enemy” and their undefined “work” often took the blame. Regarding the dire state of ideological conviction in the *Grenzpolizei*, the *Sekretariat des Kommandeurs* concluded, “The reason for this is that the enemy propaganda is not even stopped at the workplace.”⁴⁰⁷

Who, exactly, was this “enemy,” and how did their propaganda manifest? A holistic overview of desertion files reveals a panoply of channels through which “agent activity” (*Agententätigkeit*) supposedly took place. To begin, let us examine concrete examples of people labeled as “agents.” *Grenzpolizei* files contain no shortage of anecdotes about Western “agents” being exposed, indicating that it was not impossible for a West German spy to infiltrate border territory. To give a representative example: in 1955 one *Postenführer* was praised for identifying a “suspicious” character in the border zone on account of his “poor command of the German language [...] and the fact that some of his shoes and trouser legs were still wet.” This man later

⁴⁰⁶ DVH 27/128913. “Die verstärkte Arbeit des Gegners und die ungenügende Beachtung der Feindarbeit durch einen Teil der Polit-Organen, Partei- und FDJ-Organisationen sind auch die Ursachen für die 56 Desertionen im I Quartal.”

⁴⁰⁷ DVH 27/128913. “Bei fast allen Desertionen ist festgestellt worden, dass die Desertieren nicht überzeugt waren von der Stärke des Weltfriedenslagers, von der Unbesiegbarkeit unserer Sache. Das hat seine Ursache darin, dass man der gegnerischen Propaganda nicht einmal auf der Dienststelle Einhalt gebietet.”

admitted in an interrogation that “he was working on behalf of a West Berlin agent center.”⁴⁰⁸

Despite the fanfare about “enemies and saboteurs,” however, most of the individuals arrested at the border fit the profile of unexceptional economic criminals rather than agents of international espionage. One character, presented as a representative example of the “henchman and criminals” lurking in the border zone – a smuggler trying to sneak 25 kilograms of coffee beans over the border to “sell them at high prices” – hardly seems like the type of character to exert a potent negative ideological influence.⁴⁰⁹

At other times, files paint far more lurid pictures of *Agententätigkeit*, such as the following anecdote from 1955:

The work of agents in our ranks is clearly demonstrated by the example of agent Schmidt[.] Schmidt, a bourgeois, work-shy element, was given the task of infiltrating the border police in West Berlin and setting up a group hostile to the GDR. He became a border policeman and began to work. He approached comrades with negative views and tried to influence them skillfully. There were some fans of wild dance music at the *Kommando*. Schmidt skillfully exploited this, and built up a group that was to desert to West Berlin in plain clothes. The premature desertion of 2 members of the border police exposed this agent.⁴¹⁰

Obviously, such anecdotes cannot be taken at face value. Schmidt’s story, comprising one out-of-context paragraph in a longer report on the “causes” of desertions, raises more questions than it answers. What agency “gave Schmidt the task” of “infiltrating” the *Kommando*, and what

⁴⁰⁸ DVH 27/128913. “Aufgrund des schlechten Beherrschens der deutschen Sprache, der Eintragungen im DPA, (Wohnort Berlin) sowie der zum Teil noch nassen Schuhe und Hosenbeine, kam dem Postenführer diese Person verdächtig vor. [...] Bei der Vernehmung gab diese Person zu, daß sei im Auftrage einer westberliner Agentenzentrale arbeitete.”

⁴⁰⁹ DVH 27/128913. “[...] Untersuchung eines Waggons, der mit einer Plane bedeckt war, feststellen, daß 25.-kg Bohnenkaffee versteckt waren. Bei den sofort eingeleiteten Ermittlungen wurde der Zugführer als Täter entlarvt. Er hatte die Absicht, diesen Bohnenkaffee zu hohen Preisen zu verkaufen.”

⁴¹⁰ DVH 27/128913. “Die Arbeit von Agenten in unseren Reihen zeigt sich deutlich am Beispiel des Agenten [redacted] in der GB [redacted], Kdo. [redacted]. [redacted], ein bürgerliches, arbeitsscheues Element, erhielt in Westberlin den Auftrag in die Grenzpolizei einzudringen und eine, der DDR feindlich eingestellte Gruppe aufzubauen. Er wurde Grenzpolizist und begann zu arbeiten. Er macht sich an negativ diskutierende Genossen heran und versuchte diese geschickt zu beeinflussen. Auf dem Kdo waren einige Anhänger von wüster Tanzmusik. Das nützte [redacted] geschickt aus und baute eine Gruppe auf, die geschlossen in Zivil nach Westberlin desertieren sollte. Durch die vorzeitige Desertion von 2 Grenzpolizei-Angehörigen wurde dieser Agent entlarvt.”

was his end goal? Identifying the true identities and goals of alleged “agents,” and to what extent the aforementioned “work-shy element” was engaged in actual Cold War espionage, lies outside the scope of this thesis.

However, desertion files reveal at least one archetype that formed part of the corpus of supposed “enemy infiltrators”: namely, individuals from the East who had been to the West before, who then joined the *Grenzpolizei* and talked freely and openly about their experiences. These individuals land in desertion files because they allegedly tried to convince their comrades to flee West, or fled back to the West themselves. One representative of this archetype was Bernd, an unusually peripatetic soldier who deserted in 1954. According to his file, he had previously worked at the East German uranium mining company Wismut, but disliked working there, and crossed the border to West Germany, where he hopped from job to job before (allegedly) spending an entire year there unemployed.⁴¹¹ The officers investigating his desertion were quick to blame his desertion on corruption resulting from his brief taste of the West: “The loose way of life in West Germany, which he was familiar with, was the means of education (*Erziehungsmittel*) towards his desertion. [...] The influence of Western ideologies, and the unrestrained life that he had already led in the West, were probably the factors that led him to desert.”⁴¹²

Bernd “often talked about the good conditions in West Germany,” but he does not seem to be a unilateral champion of the West, just a self-interested narrator of his personal experiences: he reportedly expressed “that he was no longer interested in the West, that he had

⁴¹¹ DVH 27/134554.

⁴¹² DVH 27/134554. “Die lockere Lebenswandel in Westdeutschland welcher ihm bekannt war, war das Erziehungsmittel seiner Desertion. [...] Angehaucht von den westlichen Ideologien und das schon einmal von ihm geführte zügellose Leben im Westen, sind wohl die Momente, die ihn zur Desertion verleitet haben.”

gotten to know the West.”⁴¹³ In the end, the officers could not attribute his desertion solely to his Western sojourn; he was also simply an uncooperative employee (“undisciplined and unclean”) who frequently expressed that he was “fed up” with his job.⁴¹⁴

Other border guards who had a taste of the West were all too happy to “glorify” West Germany to their comrades. Like many East Germans, border guards frequently visited the West through West Berlin to buy Western goods, which was interpreted by the SED as “glorification.”⁴¹⁵ This interpretation is evident in the case of the soldier Paul, who deserted in 1954: “Paul carries out corrosive activity (*zersetzende Tätigkeit*) on the *Kommando* by glorifying the conditions in West Germany; he shows pictures of himself from his vacation to the comrades of the *Kommando* in which he is photographed wearing a T-shirt etc. and, above all, negatively influencing young comrades.”⁴¹⁶ Paul’s “corrosive activity” took a form that more strongly resembles bragging about a vacation than propagandizing for an enemy. Nevertheless, he was duly punished for this offense with ten days of arrest.

The fact that individuals like Paul and Bernd were recruited to the *Grenzpolizei* despite their questionable history is yet another testament to the organization’s pattern of superficial background checks. Indeed, hiring border guards with experience in the West who proceeded to exert a “subversive” (*zersetzend*) influence on their comrades by speaking positively about their experiences seems to have been a frequent occurrence. A 1955 Stasi report about the recent increase in desertions throughout the *Volkspolizei* lays part of the blame on the

⁴¹³ DVH 27/134554. “oft von den guten Zustände in Westdeutschland gesprochen habe.” “dass er kein Interesse mehr am Westen hätte, und er den Westen kennengelernt hatte und er auch nur 3 Jahre bei der Grenzpolizei verbleiben wolle.”

⁴¹⁴ DVH 27/134554. “undiszipliniert und unsauber”; “er habe die Schnauze voll”

⁴¹⁵ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 235

⁴¹⁶ DVH 27/134554. “eine zersetzende Tätigkeit auf dem Kdo ausübt, indem er die Zustände in Westdeutschland verherrlicht, Aufnahmen von sich selbst aus seinem Urlaub, worauf er mit Niggihemd usw. fotografiert ist und diese Bilder den Genossen des Kdos zeigt und vor allen Dingen junge Genossen negativ beeinflusst.”

Grenzbereitschaften where “poor checks are carried out at the registration offices, and elements such as formerly *republikflüchtig* youths who came back from the West were conscripted into the *Volkspolizei* and had bad discussions as soon as they joined it, drove decomposition among their comrades, and deserted at the first best opportunity.”⁴¹⁷ As an example of these “bad discussions,” the report mentions two recent hires in Berlin who “spread propaganda for the European Army because they had better uniforms than the *Volkspolizei*.”⁴¹⁸

Often, the “enemy influence” at play was the soft power of Western media and culture. Western cultural products were often portrayed in desertion files as both morally objectionable and possessing an almost preternatural ability to corrupt the hearts and minds of *Grenzpolizisten*. Reading Western literature (“*Westliteratur*”), for example, was suspicious, especially in conjunction with other *Westverbindungen*: a soldier who deserted in 1953 was said to be “connected to West Berlin through a girl he often went there with. He also read Western literature at home.”⁴¹⁹ As hinted by the story of an agent seducing border guards to the West by means of “wild dance music,” Western music was especially scorned as a symbol of capitalist *Unkultur*,⁴²⁰ as in the scandalized report of one *Kommando*: “There is a so-called jazz club in the *Kommando*, made up of [four comrades]. These comrades listened to RIAS and Nordwestdeutscher Rundfunk, jazz music in particular, and danced to this music in the club

⁴¹⁷ DVH 27/155680. “die Registrierstellen sehr schlecht überprüft wird, und Elemente angeworben werden, wie ehemalige republikflucht Jugendliche, die aus dem Westen zurückkamen, zur VP verpflichtet wurden und gleich beim Eintritt in diese schlechte Diskussionen führten, Zersetzung unter den Kameraden trieben und bei der ersten besten Gelegenheit desertieren.”

⁴¹⁸ DVH 27/155680. “machten Propaganda für die Europaarmee, weil es dort bessere Uniformen gibt als bei der Volkspolizei.”

⁴¹⁹ DVH 27/135180. “Verbindung nach Westberlin durch ein Mädchen, mit welchem er öfters dort war. Weiterhin las er zu Hause Westliteratur.”

⁴²⁰ DVH 27/135183. Another example: “Die Untersuchungen ergaben, daß es sich bei [redacted]. um einen Menschen handelt der mehr Aufmerksamkeit dem Westen als der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik schenkte. Dies zeigte besonders die Aufnahme von Schlager aus Westdeutschland auf seinem Tonbandgerät und Aufzeichnungen sowie Empfehlungen Westdeutscher Sender die in Heften gefunden wurden.”

room with the most impossible physical contortions.”⁴²¹ These descriptions reflected the SED’s long-harbored prejudice towards Western music, literature, and fashion, which were derided as markers of capitalist decadence and associated with youthful criminality.⁴²²

In a similar vein, the administration often attributed desertions to “agents” sneaking Western cultural products into the ranks, thereby corrupting *Grenzpolizei* personnel. A 1952 administrative order, “Measures to Prevent Desertions in the *Volkspolizei* Grenzbereitschaften,” expressed alarm at the fact “that enemy elements and agents continue to succeed in bringing trashy literature (*Schundliteratur*) into our offices[.]”⁴²³ This reflected another perennial anxiety of the SED in the era of the open border with West Berlin: namely, of West Berlin as a “bridgehead of ‘cultural decadence’” whose cultural products could interrupt the SED’s transformation of its citizens into “socialist personalities.”⁴²⁴

Neither “agents” nor *Westverbindungen* were necessary for border police to obtain access to Western media, however: as hinted by the comrades of the Jazz-Club who listened to their genre of choice on RIAS and Nordwestdeutscher Rundfunk, border guards – like the rest of the East German population – frequently tuned into Western radio stations, where they received news and listened to music that formed the basis of the youth “cultural sphere.”⁴²⁵ Listening to Western radio stations was nominally disallowed in the *Grenzpolizei*, and arrests and criminal

⁴²¹ DVH 27/134554. “Im Kdo besteht ein sogenannter Jazz-Club, der sich aus den Genossen [redacted], [redacted], [redacted] und [redacted] zusammengesetzt. Von diesen Genossen wird unter anderem Rias sowie der Nordwestdeutsche Rundfunk gehört, insbesondere Jazzmusik und noch dieser Musik im Clubraum mit den unmöglichsten Körperverrenkungen getanzt.”

⁴²² Ross, Corey, “East Germans and the Berlin Wall: Popular Opinion and Social Change before and after the Border Closure of August 1961,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 1 (2004): 25–43. 31 - 32.

⁴²³ DO 1/56116. “Maßnahmen zur Verhinderung von Desertionen in den VP-Grenzbereitschaften,” “dass es feindlichen Elementen und Agenten immer nach gelingt, Schundliteratur in unsere Dienststellen hineinzubringen und Serzetsungsarbeit in den Reihen der Grenzpolizei zu leisten.”

⁴²⁴ Corey, “East Germans and the Berlin Wall.”

⁴²⁵ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 237 - 238.

proceedings were occasionally carried out for the offense throughout the 1950s.⁴²⁶ However, the frequency with which Western radio stations (*Westsender*) make an appearance in desertion files indicates that this ban was far from consistently enforced. A 1955 Stasi report of one *Kommando* remarked disapprovingly that “in the *Kommando* they play skat and listen to Western radio stations. The political training is only carried out superficially, and there are backlogs.”⁴²⁷

When the ban *was* enforced, border guards intentionally went elsewhere to listen to *Westsender*, whether to the houses of locals or to restaurants, as with a group of comrades (one of whom deserted that night) who went out drinking at a restaurant in 1954: “Although I had been told several times that, as members of the German border police, it was strictly forbidden for us to listen to Western stations, we did it anyway.” (When Adenauer’s speech began playing on the radio, the mayor of the small border town, who had entered the restaurant for a beer, threatened the comrades “that if it wasn’t switched off immediately, he would kill the box, and reproached us for tolerating such things.”)⁴²⁸ The preponderance of the *Westsender*-listening among the *Grenzpolizei* is further evidenced by the frequency with which “RIAS-influence” (“*Riasbeeinflussung*”) is named as a culprit of desertion. Radio was a palpable manifestation of the states’ limited ability to construct the enemy: “hatred against the Western imperialists” would have been difficult to stoke when border guards spent their free time tuning into their broadcasts.

⁴²⁶ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 236.

⁴²⁷ DVH 27/155680. “Im Kdo wird Skat gespielt und Westsender gehört. Die Polit-Schulung wird nur oberflächlich durchgeführt und es gibt Rückstände.”

⁴²⁸ DVH 27/134554. “[redacted] und [redacted] stellten Westsender ein und zuerst war Musik und anschließend die Übertragung Adenauers. Trotzdem ich mehrmals belehrt worden bin, dass er für uns als Angehöriger der Deutschen Grenzpolizei strengsten untersagt ist Westsender zu hören machten wir es trotzdem. Wir waren schon einige Zeit drin, da kam der Bürgermeister von der Ortschaft Albingshausen und trank ein Glas Bier. [redacted] stellte daraufhin wieder Musik ein nach einer Weile wieder die Übertragung Adenauers. Der Bürgermeister äußerte sich wenn dies nicht gleich abgeschaltet würde erschlüge er den Kasten und machte uns den Vorwurf, dass wir solche Sachen dulden.”

One particularly alarming specter for the Stasi – mirroring the general anxiety surrounding “dubious women” – was the prospect of enemy women who would lure heretofore loyal *Grenzpolizei* to the West with their feminine wiles. Insofar as this fear had a basis in reality, many *Grenzpolizei* did, in fact, desert to be with a girlfriend in the West. Moreover, women were no exception when it came to violating the ban on contact with West German civilians. The social life of a soldier who deserted in 1955, as described by the Stasi, was not exceptional: “He socialized with a number of comrades from the *Kommando* at the cook’s house, where they constantly listened to Western radio stations and were thus influenced. He and other comrades were also in contact with girls from West Germany who had come to visit the restricted area, including a girl who worked for a French officer.”⁴²⁹

Although rooted in these truths, however, the Stasi and the *Grenzpolizei* administration developed a “fear fantasy” about young women luring impressionable men across the border that doubtlessly did not correspond to reality.⁴³⁰ One anecdote relayed by the Stasi about two *Gefreiten* who patrolled the 10-meter *Kontrollstreifen* illustrates the administrations’ worst nightmare:

When it was recognized by the enemy [that the *Gefreiten* were not being supervised], he sent two girls over. They started talking to our border police officers and joking around with them, which led to sexual intercourse. Taking advantage of this, they put the border police under pressure and made them desert.”⁴³¹

⁴²⁹ DVH 27/155680.

⁴³⁰ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 241. “Even civilians posed dangers, especially if they lived on the wrong side of the barbed wire. In the minds of the state security and border police, young women were particularly dangerous agents. They developed a story about ‘young girls’ who were sent to lead vulnerable young men off the right path, which haunts the reports as a fear fantasy in many variations.”

⁴³¹ DVH 27/155680. “Beide hatten 6 Wochen als Gespannsführer und Begleitposten am 10 m Streifen gearbeitet ohne jemals kontrolliert zu werden. Als das vom Gegner erkannt wurde, setzte er 2 Mädels an. Sie begannen sich mit unseren Grenzpolizisten zu unterhalten, mit ihnen Scherze zu treiben, was bis zum Geschlechtsverkehr führte. Diese Faktoren ausnutzen setzen sie die Grenzpolizisten unter Druck und brachten sie zur Desertion.”

Anecdotes such as these are more reflective of the Stasi – an organization which itself was in the practice of “[using] many women as sexual bait, as agents and prostitutes” – than reality.⁴³² In any case, the conservative social mores harbored by the functionaries of the Stasi and the *Grenzpolizei* caused them to paint Western women – especially those on the margins – with a broad brush, perceiving them not as individuals with agency but as villains endowed with the powers of seduction.

The most visible enemy in the immediate vicinity of the border guards was, of course, members of the West German border regime. The *Grenzpolizei* administration harbored significant anxiety about the prospect of the “negative influence” they could exert on East German border guards. Accordingly, members of the *Grenzpolizei* were forbidden from interacting with West German border guards, customs officers and civilians from 1952 onwards.⁴³³ Even a friendly greeting to a West German official was viewed as a betrayal, and innocuous conversations with West German officials could be met with prison sentences.⁴³⁴ From a strategic perspective, this ban on contact was logical: members of the Western border regime were, technically speaking, enemy forces.

Yet this ban, like so many others, was not consistently heeded. Desertion reports from throughout the 1950s express anxiety about the frequency of interactions between *Grenzpolizei* and Westerners – particularly Western customs officers (*Zöllner*) – and their supposed negative influence. In 1955, the Stasi declared “the influence on our border policemen exerted by [Western] customs officers or elements sent by [Western] customs officers” to be a prominent

⁴³² Cooper, Belinda, “Patriarchy Within a Patriarchy,” 4 - 5.

⁴³³ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 240.

⁴³⁴ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 239 - 240.

cause of desertion in the *Grenzpolizei*.⁴³⁵ This appears to have been such a consistent problem that the administration initiated logistical changes in the day-to-day-operations of the *Grenzpolizei* to limit interactions between *Zöllner* and members of the *Grenzpolizei* as much as possible. A 1955 list of “Measures taken by the *Grenzpolizei* Headquarters in the Fight Against Desertions” includes moving the locations of the *Posten* “from the immediate vicinity of the control strip to prevent direct enemy influence on *Grenzpolizei* members by Western customs officers and persons recruited by the enemy secret service.”⁴³⁶ The fact that such measures were repeatedly re-initiated, even though contact had been officially forbidden for years, indicates that unauthorized interaction with Western border agents was common practice.

What did interaction between Eastern and Western border agents look like – and was it ever really subversive enough to convince an impressionable comrade to desert? As one might expect, first-hand accounts of riveting, politically charged exchanges between Eastern and Western border guards or other Westerners are virtually absent from *Grenzpolizei* desertion files. (That does not mean that they did not occur – only that to admit as much to the authorities would be a nonsensical move for an East German citizen.) When probed about their interactions with individuals on the other side of the border, border guards usually protest that their conversations were anodyne. One *Gefreiter* being interrogated about the desertion of his coworker said that “I myself have never spoken to customs officers before, but I have to admit that I have often had

⁴³⁵ DVH 27/155680. “Die Beeinflussung unserer Grenzpolizisten durch Zöllner bzw. von den Zöllner geschickte Elemente zutage.” The posts in the border service always consisted of at least two people, one “Postenführer” (leader) and one “Posten” (subordinate). cf: Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 212.

⁴³⁶ DVH 27/128913. “Maßnahmen der Hauptverwaltung Deutsche Grenzpolizei im Kampf gegen Desertionen”; “aus der unmittelbaren Nahe des Kontrollstreifens [...] um die unmittelbare gegnerische Beeinflussung der GP-Angehörigen durch westliche Zöllner und vom gegnerischen Geheimdienst angeworbener Personen zu verhindern[.]”

conversations with civilians. However, they only talked about the time of day and the weather.”⁴³⁷

Desertion files speak far more often of the trading of coveted *Westzigaretten* and other goods than contentious political ideas. Many border guards had a transactional relationship with Western border agents similar to that of a *Gefreiter* who deserted in 1955: “when the customs officers came by, he would get cigarettes.”⁴³⁸ These relationships could be fraternal as well as transactional. One Major said of his *Gefreiter* and his comrades in 1954: “Albert was interrogated by me and after initially stubbornly denying it, he told me that they had spoken to the customs officers about chocolate, cigarettes and drinking beer together in the Western zone.”⁴³⁹ Similarly, in September of 1955, “[six] members of the *Grenzpolizei* attended a carousal in a West German restaurant after crossing the 10-meter checkpoint. They drank and chatted with the customs officers and civilians in the restaurant.”⁴⁴⁰ Ultimately, the *Grenzpolizei* administration had difficulties instilling hatred of the enemy on the other side of the border because, in practice, “West German officials often proved to be friendly and generous when it came to cigarettes, literature, and beer.”⁴⁴¹

When Western border guards do appear to have enticed members of the *Grenzpolizei* over the border by proselytizing about the “golden West,” it was usually with promises of economic

⁴³⁷ DVH 27/134561. “Ich selbst hatte bisher noch niemals mit Zöllner gesprochen, muß allerdings zugeben, daß ich mich schon öfters mit Zivilpersonen unterhalten habe. Dabei wurde jedoch nur über die Tageszeit und das Wetter gesprochen.”

⁴³⁸ DVH 27/134561. “daß er sich jetzt, wenn Zöllner kommen würden, Zigaretten holen würde.”

⁴³⁹ DVH 27/134554. “[redacted] wurde von mir verhört und nach anfänglichem hartnäckigem Leugnen erzählte er, dass man mit den Zöllnern gesprochen hatte, wobei man sich über Schokolade, Zigaretten und über gemeinsames Biertrinken in der Westzone unterhielt.”

⁴⁴⁰ DVH 27/155680. [redacted] nahm mit anderen 5 Grenzpolizei-Angehörigen am 4.9.1955 nach Überschreitung des 10-Meter-Kontrollstreifens in einer westdeutschen Gaststätte an einer Zecherei teil. In dieser Gaststätte wurde mit anwesenden Zöllnern und Zivilpersonen gezecht und Unterhaltungen geführt. Im Laufe des Abends betrat der ehem. Grenzpolizei-Angehörige [redacted] die Gaststätte und teilte den anwesenden Grenzpolizisten mit, daß die unerlaubte Entfernung bemerkt worden wäre.

⁴⁴¹ Sälter, *Grenzpolizisten*, 270.

opportunity. In 1954, a deserter reported – according to his comrade – that western customs officers encouraged him to desert by claiming that there was work to be found in the agricultural sector.⁴⁴² Western border agents are frequently described as having convinced a border guard to desert by telling them how well another deserter was faring in the West. In 1955, three western customs officers shouted across the border in an attempt to “lure over” (*hinüberlocken*) two soldiers from the *Grenzpolizeibereitschaft* Schönberg by telling them that one of their comrades who had deserted to the West had since found a good job in Hamburg.⁴⁴³ Similarly, in 1955, a soldier from the *Grenzbereitschaft* Blankenfelde spoke to Western border police about “how a [former] member of the *Volkspolizei* was doing in West Berlin.”⁴⁴⁴

On rare occasions, East-West border guard interactions which go beyond attempts to “lure” *Grenzpolizisten* to the West or swapping cigarettes make their way into desertion files. Mostly, these take the form of “provocations,” such as in the *Grenzpolizeibereitschaft* Eisenach in 1955, when “American occupiers and border guards pointed their heavy weapons mounted on armored patrol vehicles and buckets at our border police, and shouted to them that they could be shot down at any time, because the *Grenzpolizei*’s weapons were too bad.”⁴⁴⁵ But some interactions, far from hostile, have a poignant quality. A desertion file from the *Grenzbereitschaft* Dermbach in May 1955 reports: “During the work on the 10-meter patrol strip, the deserters and

⁴⁴² DVH 27/134554. “[redacted] wollte bereits am 19.2.1954 den Gefr. [redacted] veranlassen, mit in die Westzone zu gehen. Die Zöllner und auch der Desertierte [redacted] erklärten, dass es drüben im Westen auch für Gefr. [redacted] Arbeit in der Landwirtschaft gäbe.”

⁴⁴³ DVH 27/128913. “Aber auch die Arbeit des westlichen Grenzschutzes ist aktiver geworden. So versuchten u.a. Im Bereich der Grenzpolizeibereitschaft Schönberg drei Offiziere des westlichen Zolls, zwei Genossen Soldaten, die sich auf Posten befanden, hinüberzulocken. Sie riefen dabei den Grenzpolizisten zu, daß ein von der Grenzpolizeibereitschaft desertierte Soldat in Hamburg gute Arbeit hat.”

⁴⁴⁴ DVH 27/135180. “Vor mehreren Tagen hat [redacted], mit dem Soldaten [redacted] zusammen mit Westpolizisten gesprochen, wie es einem VP-Ang. In Westberlin ergeht.”

⁴⁴⁵ DVH 27/128913. “Eine andere Methode ist, die u.a. In der Grenzpolizeibereitschaft Eisenach vorkam, daß amerikanische Okkupanten und Grenzschutz ihre schweren Waffen, die auf Panzerspähwagen und Kübel montiert sind, auf unsere Grenzpolizisten richteten und ihnen zuriefen, man könne sie jederzeit niederknallen, da die Waffen der Grenzpolizei zu schlecht seien.”

other members of the *Grenzpolizei* constantly talked to the shepherd boys on the other side of the 10-meter patrol strip. They asked questions such as ‘Where is the customs house?’ or ‘What would it be like if we took a walk to West Germany?’ or ‘What’s the 10-meter strip or wire fence for if we are talking about the unity of Germany?’⁴⁴⁶ For these comrades, any obligation they may have felt towards the 10-meter strip and wide fence was dissolved in the face of the amicable “enemy” on the other side, and they opted for the “walk to West Germany,” with all the danger that entailed.

“What is the situation of working people in the West?” asked the 1952 “Arguments for the Fight Against Desertions in the East German Border Police:

Oppression, exploitation, torment by the domestic and foreign bloodsuckers. Hardship and misery, that is the way of life for working people in the West, caused by the criminal policies of the Western powers. Unemployment, mercenary armies, battlefields and mass graves – this is the path that young people in West Germany are expected to take. This path also awaits every border policeman who deserts.⁴⁴⁷

But this illusion stood no chance when border guards themselves could gaze across the horizon and – or share a beer with the agents of the bloodsuckers themselves – and see for themselves that it was not the case.

⁴⁴⁶ DVH 27/155680. “Die Desertionen sowie weitere GP-Angehörige hatten sich während den Arbeiten am 10 m Kontrollstreifen laufend mit Hirtenjungen jenseits des 10 m Kontrollstreifens unterhalten. Hierbei wurden Fragen gestellt ‘Wo steht das Zöllnerhaus,’ oder ‘wie wäre es denn, wenn wir mal einen Spaziergang nach Westdeutschland machen,’ oder ‘was soll der 10 m Streifen bzw. Drahtzaun, wenn wir von der Einheit Deutschlands sprechen’ usw.”

⁴⁴⁷ DVH 27/134532. “Wir brauchen uns nur richtig in der Welt umzusehn. Wie ist die Lage der werktätigen Menschen im Westen? Unterdrückung, Ausbeutung, Peinigung durch die in- und aus-ländischen Blutsauger. Not und Elend, das ist der Weg des Lebens der werktätigen Menschen im Westen, hervorgerufen durch die verbrecherische Politik der Westmächte. Was hat dort die Jugend? Sie ist arbeitslos, wird verdummt und ihr Elend wird ausgenutzt, um sie in die Söldnerarmee zu pressen. Dort müssen sie für die schmutzigen Interessen der deutschen und amerikanischen Imperialisten ihr Leben auf fremden Schlachtfeldern lassen. [...] Arbeitslosigkeit, Söldnerarmee, Schlachtfeld und Massengrab, das ist der Weg, den die Jugend in Westdeutschland gehen soll. Dieser Weg erwartet auch jeden Grenzpolizisten der desertiert.”

Conclusion

Gentlemen, we have arrived safely.
 We are doing very well and are glad to have done you a favor. We have taken advantage of what you have taught us (crossing the border.)
 We wish you all the best for the future.
 Cigarettes are excellent.

— Postcard sent to a *Grenzpolizei* station by two border guards who had just fled to the West, 1959⁴⁴⁸

Through decades of administrative reshuffling, the fall of the GDR and the reunification of Germany, the *Grenzpolizei* files have migrated from archive to archive, undergoing intermittent waves of elimination. In the process, the files have lost their original sequence and been rendered incomplete.⁴⁴⁹ Numerous as they are (69 bound volumes with “desertion” in the title currently reside in the German Federal Military Archive) their pages, mostly unnumbered, are arranged in an hauntingly disconnected manner. Deserters make their appearance – sometimes for a single page, sometimes as the protagonist of an interminable saga, replete with ruthless interrogations and intimate details – then promptly disappear, their whereabouts impossible to trace. Did they stay in the West and start new lives? What did they do when the Berlin Wall was constructed in 1961, barring entry to the GDR once and for all? By switching Germanies, did they successfully outrun their personal torments? These unanswerable questions turn the deserters of the *Grenzpolizei* into ghosts of the archive.

⁴⁴⁸ DVH 27/135343. “Abschrift der Ansichtskarte der Fahnenflüchtigen [redacted] und [redacted] an Dienststelle der Deutschen Grenzpolizei / Meine Herren, wir sind gut angekommen. Uns geht es ausgezeichnet und wir sind froh, Ihnen damit einen Gefallen getan zu haben. Wir haben es ausgenutzt, was Sie uns gelernt haben (Grenzübertritt.) Wir wünschen Ihnen weiterhin alles Gute. Zigaretten sind ausgezeichnet.”

⁴⁴⁹ Bundesarchiv. “2.1.1.2.6 Deutsche Grenzpolizei.” ARGUS.

Yet beyond the distortions and illusions of the archive – beyond the prejudices and paranoia of an anxious dictatorship – an *Alltagsgeschichte* of the *Grenzpolizei* deserters is visible. When read with a critical eye, the hopes, dreams, and discontents of the subjects – rather than the state – shift into focus. Re-assembling the *Grenzpolizei* files into a new constellation allows the historian to uncouple the state from its alienated subject and examine both of their stories independently. In doing so, the ghosts of the archive are reanimated, and a new story emerges: desertion as an ironic microcosm of the GDR.

The members of the *Grenzpolizei* who deserted to the West formed an infinitesimal fraction of the 2.8 million *Republikflüchtige* whose departure eventually led to the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961.⁴⁵⁰ Yet their stories are instructive: as historian Rüdiger Wenzke argues, desertions “reflected the shortcomings and tensions of the political development of the SED state.”⁴⁵¹ The reasons *Grenzpolizisten* chose to flee to the West were as numerous as the deserters themselves – but it is this very plurality that underscores the limits of SED’s quest for total control. Even while acting as the manpower of the dictatorship, the *Grenzpolizisten* remained stubborn and difficult individuals, resisting subsumption into the collective, declining to be transformed into “socialist personalities.”

The pragmatic, disinterested, and ideologically unreliable *Grenzpolizisten* who fled to the West are reflective of the nature of the GDR as a “participatory dictatorship” – one that operated not from a base of popular support, but instead was predicated on the population’s “open compliance with the ‘public transcript’ of the powerful, alongside strategies of avoidance[.]”⁴⁵²

The erstwhile comrades of the *Grenzpolizei* complied with the public transcript, at least for a

⁴⁵⁰ Members of the armed organs of the GDR made up less than one percent of *Republikflucht* from 1952 to 1961. cf. Stief, *Desertionen in Geteilten Berlin*, 16.

⁴⁵¹ Wenzke, “Die Fahnenflucht in den Streitkräften der DDR,” 253. “mehr oder weniger stark die Mängel und Spannungen der politischen Entwicklung des SED-Staates widerspiegelten.”

⁴⁵² Palmowski, Jan, *Inventing a Socialist Nation: Heimat and the Politics of Everyday Life in the GDR, 1945-1990*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 12.

time: by voluntarily enlisting in the *Grenzpolizei*, they became cogs in the machine of the dictatorship, facilitating the operational maintenance of the SED's claim to power. Then, when the *Grenzpolizei* no longer suited their purposes, they traversed the demarcation line from one Germany into another.

Most deserters, it appears, did not conceive of themselves as Cold War actors. Their modus operandi was *Eigensinn*, in its most literal translation of "own-sense": neither conformity nor open rebellion, but an obstinate, impervious, self-willed pragmatism. Nevertheless, by disrupting the mechanism which was supposed to secure the boundaries of the GDR, every desertion became political, whether the border guards intended it or not. The microhistory of each individual desertion constituted a humiliation for the SED. By rejecting the state's attempts to transform them into ideal *Grenzpolizisten* and prioritizing their own desires over the lofty aims of the state, deserters exposed the SED's attempt to bend society to its will as a fantasy. Ironically, in the very act of escaping the dictatorship, deserters illustrated its limits.

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