An Uncontainable Ally: Sight, Smell, Sound, and the Soviet Military in East Germany, 1957-1994

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the Soviet military presence in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) from 1957 to 1990 and in the "New Federal States" from 1990 to 1994 from the perspective of sensory encounters in everyday life. While historiography has often portrayed the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany (GSFG) and East German civilians as living in almost total isolation from each other, I argue that the Soviet military was an uncontainable ally. The Soviet military presence was not merely an abstract extension of Soviet geopolitical power but a pervasive sensory reality that shaped East German life through sight, smell, and sound. Using a phenomenological approach and *Alltagsgeschichte* (history of everyday life), my study draws on a diverse source base, including citizen petitions, municipal archives, and oral histories. Each chapter analyzes a specific sensory intrusion that defied physical boundaries. Visual encounters with Soviet conscripts fostered communal sympathy and subverted official propaganda. Olfactory landscapes dominated by the scent of Soviet gasoline and perfumes created distinct "smellscapes" that transcended military base walls. Relentless sonic disturbances from aircraft and military training areas fueled environmentalist movements in the late GDR, where citizens used state-sanctioned complaint channels to protest the physical and psychological toll of sustained military activity. Ultimately, I demonstrate that the sensory intrusion of the Soviet military eroded the GDR state's legitimacy through its inability to shield its citizens from negative sensory effects. By the time of the Soviet withdrawal from a reunited Germany in 1994, these decades of sensory contact had forged a complex emotional legacy. My work builds on the Sensory Turn in Cold War studies by offering a new framework for understanding civil-military relations and the lived experience of state socialism and its afterlives.

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Introduction

At any given time from the late 1940s to 1989, there were between 300,000 to 650,000 Soviet military personnel and civilians living and working in the territory of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Scholars estimate that, cumulatively, between eight to ten million Soviet citizens had lived within the borders of the GDR during this almost fifty-year period.[1] This number becomes even more staggering when one realizes that the GDR had a population of around sixteen million in 1990. [2] Throughout the GDR's existence, Soviet citizens were by far the largest foreign population in the country.[3]

Throughout the Cold War, the GDR was host to the largest, best armed, equipped, and trained contingent of Soviet forces stationed outside of the USSR.[4] Spread out across six armies and twenty-five divisions, over 2.5 percent of the entire land area of the GDR was de facto Soviet territory, including over one thousand military installations in the form of troop garrisons, airbases, motor pools, bunkers, radar and communication stations, missile sites, fuel and supply depots, and vast military training grounds (Figure 1).[5] Most facilities were seized and repurposed from the Wehrmacht after World War Two, replacing Nazi military infrastructure with Soviet.

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[1] Evgenii Volkov, "German Democratic Republic of the 1970s-1980s through the Eyes of Soviet Officers (Oral Stories)," *Folklore* 70, no. 70 (2017), 52.
[2] Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk and Stefan Wolle, *Roter Stern über Deutschland: sowjetische Truppen in der DDR* (Dresden: Landeszentrale für politische Bildung in Sachsen, 2001), 97.
[3] Christian th. Müller, " „O' Sowjetmensch!" Beziehungen von Sowjetischen Streitkräften Und DDR-Gesellschaft Zwischen Ritual Und Alltag," in *Ankunft – Alltag – Ausreise. Migration Und Interkulturelle Begegnung in Der DDR Gesellschaft* (Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung Potsdam, 2005), 17; Volkov, "German Democratic Republic of the 1970s-1980s through the Eyes of Soviet Officers," 52.
[4] Horst Lohmann and Siegfried Stoof, *Die Gruppe der Sowjetischen Streitkräfte in Deutschland: 1945 - 1994 ; ein historischer Abriss* (E Meißler, 2010), 41.
[5] "Militärische Altlasten | Startseite | LfU," accessed September 26, 2021, https://lfu.brandenburg.de/lfu/de/aufgaben/boden/altlasten/spezielle-altlastenthemen/militaerische-altlasten/#.

The sheer massiveness and density of the military presence on the relatively small GDR meant that the Soviet military had a profound influence on daily life.

Nowhere in East Germany were the effects of the Soviet military presence more profound than in the hundreds of communities located adjacent to Soviet bases and militarized landscapes.[6] In these areas, sensory and environmental effects combined with interpersonal encounters created a distinctive transnational lifeworld.[7] This dissertation argues that the Soviet military presence shaped everyday life in the GDR not only through ideology or political influence, but through its constant sensory and social presence within local communities. Beginning in the late 1940s, the rapid expansion of Soviet military infrastructure expropriated land and transformed surrounding settlements, reshaping them through the sights, sounds, and smells generated by a massive foreign military apparatus. Over time, repeated encounters (both direct and indirect) with Soviet soldiers, vehicles, and military infrastructure embedded their presence within the rhythms of daily life. These experiences gradually normalized the Soviet military within local communities, producing a form of layered familiarity that transformed the Soviets from an abstract other to familiar neighbors. Even as Socialist Unity Party (SED) mass organizations promoted official narratives of German-Soviet friendship through ceremonies and commemorative events, it was these everyday encounters within a shared lifeworld that most

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[6] "Bases" as defined by a fixed set of military structures for use during both peace and wartime, see David Sorenson, *Shutting down the Cold War: The Politics of Military Base Closure* (St. Martin's Press, 1998), 10; "Militarized Landscapes"—large swathes of land altered by constant military activity such as military training areas and shooting and bombing ranges, see Edwin Martini, *Proving Grounds: Militarized Landscapes, Weapons Testing, and the Environmental Impact of U.S. Bases* (University of Washington Press, 2015), 3-15.

[7] "Lifeworld" as a phenomenological concept drawn from Edmund Husserl in *Crisis of the European Sciences*, "the entire world given to us in immediate experience replete with cultural richness, manifold practical meanings and sensuous fullness," Russel Matheson, *Husserl: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Bloomsbury, 2006), 194. See also Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* (Northwestern University Press, 1984).

profoundly structured how East Germans perceived the Soviet military presence. These patterns of familiarity in many cases persisted even into the period of Soviet withdrawal in the early 1990s.

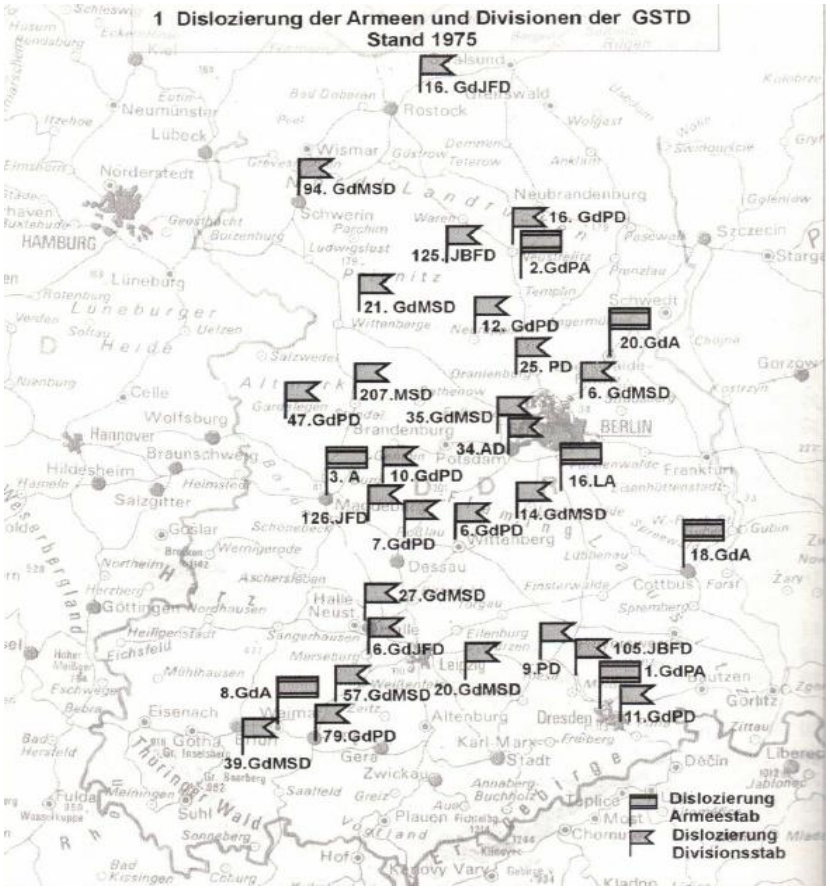

Figure 1: Deployment of armies and divisions of the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany (GSFG) in 1975 within the GDR, Hans-Albert Hoffmann and Siegfried Stoof, Sowjetische Truppen in Deutschland und ihr Hauptquartier in Wünsdorf 1945-1994: Geschichte, Fakten, Hintergründe (Köster, 2017), 290.

Historiography

Political-economic fault lines persist between the former East and West Germany, and there has been a growing public discourse on differences of opinion concerning Russia between

the two regions of today's Federal Republic since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Given these circumstances, the everyday Cold War relationship between East Germans and Soviet troops remains surprisingly understudied. [8]

The bulk of literature on the Soviet forces in Germany consists largely of narrower military studies of tactics, operational warfare, strategy, unit compositions, equipment, and Cold War geopolitics.[9] This shifted in the early 1990s with the opening of formerly inaccessible Russian archives, enabling Norman Naimark to write *The Russians in Germany*.[10] This

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[8] Deutsche Welle, "What's behind Eastern Germans' Empathy for Russia? | DW | 27.05.2022," DW.COM, accessed September 19, 2022, https://www.dw.com/en/whats-behind-eastern-germans-empathy-for-russia/a-61954976; Jochen Bittner, "Opinion | Eastern Germans' Soft Spot for Russia," *The New York Times*, December 30, 2014, sec. Opinion, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/31/opinion/bittner-eastern-germans-soft-spot-for-russia.html; Katja Hoyer, "East Germans Still Find It Hard to See Russia as the Enemy | The Spectator," accessed September 19, 2022, https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/east-germans-still-find-it-hard-to-see-russia-as-the-enemy. deutschlandfunk.de, "Umstrittenes Verständnis - Ostdeutschland, Russland und der Angriff auf die Ukraine," Deutschlandfunk, accessed September 19, 2022, https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/einstellung-ostdeutsche-russland-putin-100.html. Christopher F. Schuetze, "Why Germany Is Still Divided When It Comes to Russia," World, *The New York Times*, November 7, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/07/world/europe/germany-russia-divide.html.

[9] Examples include: Charles Adams, *Review of the Soviet Ground Forces* (Defense Intelligence Agency, 1977); Gavin Garthoff, *The Soviet Image of Future War* (Public Affairs Press, 1959); Tom Gervasi, *Soviet Military Power: The Pentagon's Propaganda Document, Annotated and Corrected* (Vintage Books, 1988); Andrei Antonovich Grechko, *The Armed Forces of the Soviet State: A Soviet View* (All-Union Copyright Agency in the USSR, 1975); Edward Luttwak et al., *The Grand Strategy of the Soviet Union* (St. Martin's Press, 1983); Stepan Anastasovich Mikoyan, *Stepan Anastasovich Mikoyan: An Autobiography* (Airlife Pub, 1999); Novosti Press, *Soviet Almanac* (Progress Publishers, 1974); Robin Alison Remington, *The Warsaw Pact: Case Studies in Communist Conflict Resolution* (The MIT Press, 1971); Gordon Rottman, *Warsaw Pact Ground Forces* (Osprey Publishing, 1987); Alex Peter Schmid and Ellen Berends, *Soviet Military Interventions since 1945: With a Summary in Russian* (Transaction Books, 1985); Richard Felix Staar, *Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe*, (Hoover Institution Press, 1988); Friedrich Wiener and William Lewis, *The Warsaw Pact Armies: Organization, Concept of War, Weapons and Equipment* (Carl Ueberreuter Publishers, 1977); Steve Zaloga, *Inside the Soviet Army Today* (Osprey, 1987); *Informat͡sionnyĭ sbornik Shtaba ob"edinennykh vooruzhennykh sil* (East View Publications, 1970); *Soviet Propaganda Campaign against NATO* (U.S. Arms control and Disarmament Agency, 1983); *NATO and the Warsaw Pact: Force Comparisons* (NATO Information Service, 1984); *Soviet Military Power* (Department of Defense, 1987). VI Feskov, *Vooruzhennye Sily SSSR Posle Vtoroi Mirovoi Voyni: Ot Krasnoy Armii k Sovetskoi* (Scientific and Technical Literature Publishing, 2013); Lutz Freundt and Stefan Büttner, eds., *Rote Plätze: Russische Militärflugplätze, Deutschland 1945-1994: Fliegerhorste--Aerodrome--Militärbrachen* (AeroLit-Verl, 2007); David Glantz, *The History of Soviet Airborne Forces* (F. Cass, 1994). William E. Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (Yale University Press, 1998). JP Nettl, *The Eastern Zone and Soviet Policy in Germany* (Oxford University Press, 1951); Volker Liebscher, *<RELAIS> Die MfS-Spezialfunkdienste in Zusammenarbeit Mit NVA Und Sowjetarmee* (Aero Lit Verlag, 2008).

[10] Norman M. Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945 – 1949* (Belknap Press, 1997).

foundational work deals with the immediate postwar period and was the first major study to treat the Soviet occupation in Germany from a cultural-political perspective, arguing that the Soviet Military Administration played a key role in the foundation of the GDR state and in the creation of its institutions. Yet Naimark reinforced the trend (especially in Anglo-American historiography) to relegate the Soviet military's role in GDR history to the early postwar years (1945-1953). There are two main reasons for this. First, after the foundation of the GDR in 1949 and the 1953 uprisings, the Soviet military ceased to directly intervene in the GDR's domestic affairs.[11] Second, there is a prevailing perception among both historians and the general public that there was little-to-no contact between the Soviet military and East German communities, especially in comparison to the contact between US, British, and French military personnel in West Germany. Because of this, studies have framed the Soviet military foremost as a political tool of the USSR in Germany and an extension of Soviet geopolitical power and less as an entity that exerted its own influence on GDR society. This is reflected in major comprehensive works on the GDR that largely relegate the Soviet military after 1953 to an abstracted background actor who regains pertinence only at subsequent decisive moments in GDR history that directly involved the military (e.g. the Checkpoint Charlie standoff in 1961).[12] In my dissertation, I demonstrate that Soviet military *did* continue to play a major role after 1953 beyond sporadic Cold War confrontations. For example, I demonstrate how the Soviet military can be integrated

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[11] Hope Harrison has argued that the GDR's role as a "Super Ally" gave it outsized autonomy in comparison to other Eastern Bloc states, Hope Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall: Soviet-East German Relations, 1953 - 1961*, (Princeton University Press, 2005).

[12] Examples include: Katja Hoyer, *Beyond the Wall: A History of East Germany* (Basic Books, 2023); Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (Yale University Press, 2008); *The Divided Nation: A History of Germany, 1918-1990* (Oxford University Press, 1992).Mike Dennis, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic, 1945 - 1990* (Longman, 2000).

into wider established frameworks of understanding the function of GDR institutions—such as how they complicate Mary Fulbrook's participatory dictatorship thesis and the GDR's culture of complaint (explored in Chapter 3).

This dissertation complements the larger body of literature on Cold War occupation history and civil-military relations in Germany history. There exist already a considerable body of literature and new work is currently being done on everyday interactions between civilians and American and NATO troops in West Germany.[13] These works have made great strides in situating civilian-military encounters in a within a wide range of contexts: from exploring gender and sexual power dynamics between male troops and female civilians to broader cultural-political influence.[14] Maria Höhn has also emphasized American troops' roles as cultural importers central to the introduction of Americanization and consumerism in postwar West Germany.[15] The imbalance of a comparable volume of literature on the GDR side on the same subject area is due to the fact that the dynamics of interpersonal encounters in the East operated

[13] For Civil-Military relations, see Ute Frevert, *A Nation in Barracks: Conscription, Military Service and Civil Society in Modern Germany* (Berg, 2004); David Avrom Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Modern Warfare as We Know It* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008). For pre-twentieth century treatments of foreign occupation in Germany history, see Michael Rowe, *From Reich to State: The Rhineland in the Revolutionary Age, 1780-1830* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[14] Examples include: Adam R. Seipp, *Strangers in the Wild Place: Refugees, Americans, and a German Town, 1945-1952* (Indiana University Press, 2013), Erica J. Lansberg, *Encounters in the Rubble: American Interactions with German Children and Youth in Postwar Germany* (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2025); Thomas W. Maulucci and Detlef Junker, *GIs in Germany: The Social, Economic, Cultural, and Political History of the American Military Presence* (Cambridge University Press, 2015); Heide Fehrenbach, *Race after Hitler: Black Occupation Children in Postwar Germany and America* (Princeton University Press, 2007); Atina Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany* (Princeton University Press, 2009); Maria Höhn, *GIs and Fräuleins: The German-American Encounter in 1950s West Germany* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Leonie Bausch of Nottingham University is also working on a dissertation, *Sex Under Occupation. Intimacy, Entertainment, and Conflict in the French Zone of Occupation in Germany 1945-1955*.

[15] Maria Höhn, *GIs and Fräuleins*.

under fundamentally different conditions.[16] In West Germany, no-fraternization policies were dropped early on during the occupation and, from then on, NATO troops could more or less freely mingle with the civilian population. Eventually, US bases such as at Kaiserslautern and Spangdahlem came to dominate adjacent West German communities economically and provided (and continue to provide) considerable sources of contact.

In the Soviet Occupation Zone, partially in response to widespread sexual violence and disorder in the immediate postwar period, the Soviet Military Administration ceased quartering troops with locals in 1947, confining them from that point on to barracks with few exceptions.[17] Soviet officers were often housed off-base, and their quarters generally located in fenced-off *Russenviertel* where contact with the East German population was limited. While interpersonal contact still occurred and was surprisingly widespread in its own ways (as this dissertation will show), it occurred largely at a clandestine level through underground black-market economies, crime, and brief (unsanctioned) encounters. While sustained (even romantic) relationships could and did form, these occurred much more sporadically and do not have a strong presence in the archival record.[18] This absence of an archival record is further complicated by the fact that the

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[16] The closest example of a similar treatment of the postwar period examining both the Western and Soviet side is, Silke Satjukow, "„Besatzungskinder": Nachkommen Deutscher Frauen und Alliierter Soldaten seit 1945," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 37, no. 4 (2011): 559–91.

[17] Hans-Albert Hoffmann and Siegfried Stoof, *Sowjetische Truppen in Deutschland und ihr Hauptquartier in Wünsdorf 1945-1994: Geschichte, Fakten, Hintergründe* (Köster, 2017), 33.

[18] The memoire of Karl-Heinz Schmalfuß describes the rarity of romantic relationships and the efforts that Soviet commanders took to prevent marriages between Soviet officers and East Germans. In one case, an officer was transferred to Afghanistan to prevent his marriage to an East German woman, Karl-Heinz Schmalfuß, *Meine Wege nach Moskau: Erinnerungen und Reflexionen eines DDR-Generals* (Helios, 2011), 111. In my own archival research, I only found one Stasi file that specifically mentioned consensual romantic encounters. In 1980, a woman was suspected of foreign espionage because of her alleged sexual relationships with Soviet officers, Einschätzung der politisch-operativen Situation, der feindlichen Angriffe und der Durchsetzung von Sicherheit und Ordnung in den LVO-Vorhaben beteiligten Betrieben, January 7, 1980, folder 26798, MfS HA XVIII, Stasi-Unterlagen-Archiv, Berlin.

files of the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany and its successor, the Western Group of Forces, are locked away at the Central Archives of the Russian Ministry of Defense (*TsAMO RF*) in Podolsk near Moscow. Even before the war in Ukraine, these were inaccessible to most scholars, in contrast to those of Western militaries.

Russian-language historiography about the Soviet military in Germany from the perspective of lived experience is small, but several monograph-length works, which use contemporary memoirs of high-ranking officials as their evidentiary base, have been released since the 1990s.[19] More recent work has been undertaken by cultural historians like Evgenii Volkov and Anna Tikhomirova. Their work relies on oral histories, through which the authors elucidate the thoughts and emotions of Soviet officers and their children while living in Germany in the 1970s and 1980s.[20] These reveal that while Soviet troops admired the GDR's significantly higher quality of life and better availability of consumer goods, their attitudes of East German civilians ranged from quiet admiration to general indifference, indicating that a widespread hatred towards (East) Germans did not last far beyond the postwar years. These works largely deal with Soviets' impressions of Germans as an abstract image and less through lived experiences with them.

Since the early 2000s, a comparatively small yet growing body of (chiefly German-language) literature has analyzed the German-Soviet coexistence through the lens of social

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[19] Jurij Vasil′evič Basistov, *Pod Znakom Krasnoj Zvezdy Gruppa Sovetskich Vojsk v Germanii 1945-1995* (SIBIVESEP, 2005).

[20] Anna Tikhomirova, "ot shraybikusa do indetsev i kovboytsev: GDR v zhizennom mire sovetskovo rebonka 1980-x godov—zhurnalny zal," accessed September 28, 2021, https://magazines.gorky.media/nz/2008/2/ot-shrajbikusa-do-indejczev-i-kovbojczev-gdr-v-zhiznennom-mire-sovetskogo-rebenka-1980-h-godov.html. Volkov, "German Democratic Republic of the 1970s-1980s through the Eyes of Soviet Officers." See also, Sergei Vershinin, *Obraz GDR v Sovetskom Massovom Soznanii: K Postanovke Problemy.*, vol. 4 (UrORAN, 2003), 336-353.

history and *Alltagsgeschichte*—history of everyday life. Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk and Stefan Wolle's 2001 *Roter Stern über Deutschland* was the first attempt to comprehensively examine the Soviet military's occupation of East Germany and its legacy from 1945 to 1994.[21] As a handbook-style survey meant for a general audience, it does not offer a deep analysis of the underlying meanings of the Soviet presence in Germany. It provided a relatively clean narrative structure of the major contours of the topic mainly from the realm of high politics, but with some attention given to daily life for both East Germans and Soviet troops on their bases, setting up a groundwork for more in-depth studies.

By far the most foundational and substantive work and first true *Alltagsgeschichte* on the German-Soviet coexistence, is Silke Satjukow's monograph *Besatzer,* published in 2008.[22] Her core thesis is that the decades-long Soviet-German experience was characterized by a "neighborly coexistence" (*Nebeneinander*) rather than a true "togetherness" (*Miteinander*).[23] In other words, she argues that the Soviets were largely "invisible" to East Germans. To illustrate this, she highlights the image of the walls of Soviet bases— "green fences"—describing that the Soviets were so successful at insulating themselves from the surrounding population that the literal and figurative "walls" of Soviet bases created a "foreign body" (*Fremdkörper*) within the GDR. In evoking this rather tumorous image, she underlines the spatial and social segregation between the Soviets and East Germans and works to undermine the myth of German-Soviet

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[21] For earlier (shorter) treatments of the subject, see Karl Wilhelm Fricke, "Okkupanten Oder Waffenbrüder? Die Gruppe Der Sowjetischen Streitkräfte in Deutschland," *Deutschland-Archiv* 15, no. 3 (March 1982): 269–76.
[22] Silke Satjukow, *Besatzer "Die Russen" in Deutschland 1945-1994* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH, 2008). More recent works have also engaged in transnational perspectives while still focusing on interpersonal encounters, see Piotr Wołoszyn, "Nebeneinander, Miteinander, Gegeneinander? Das Stationierte Sowjetische Militär Und Die Zivilbevölkerung in Der DDR Und in Polen" (Dissertation, Europa-Universität Viadrina, 2015), Deutsche Nationalbibliothek.
[23] Satjukow, *Besatzer,* 30.

friendship (i.e. The SED's supposed failure to cultivate ideological friendships). Due to fear of ideological contamination by the "better off" East Germans, the Soviet leadership led a parallel society within the GDR, a state within a state, she argues. Satjukow also emphasizes the economic strain Soviet occupation costs on the GDR, claiming that it nearly bankrupted the country by the 1980s. Ultimately, she argues, when the Soviets finally left Germany in 1994, they left as strangers and a burden was lifted from former East Germans both literally and figuratively.

On the one hand, Satjukow provides an excellent social history that illustrates the key paradox of the Soviet military presence— the (relative) alienation between Soviet troops and East Germans in daily life as a contradiction to the official SED narratives of German-Soviet friendship. On the other hand, in focusing exclusively on social distance and interpersonal interaction, her analysis is constrained by the "green fences" of Soviet garrisons. By framing the Soviet presence as a "foreign body," she reinforces a visual-centric understanding of the artificial boundaries between the Soviets and East Germans that completely overlooks how porous those boundaries actually were. My dissertation contests this spatial decoupling, arguing instead that the Soviet military presence was fundamentally *uncontainable*. In centering on a phenomenological approach—highlighting sensory experiences such as the intrusive noise of armored columns, aircraft, and the sweet smell of Soviet gasoline— I argue that, on the contrary, the Soviet military was neither a distant nor invisible neighbor. Rather, through the combined constant visual-sound-and-smellscapes, the Soviets engendered a layered familiarity that permeated East German life and constituted a core pillar of the lifeworld of many German communities. Further, instead of alienation, I demonstrate that there were clear and durable

patterns of sympathy and familiarity among East Germans towards the Soviets that far transcended the socialist regime, which developed even without direct interactions with individuals.

My methodology complements Satjukow's through a more phenomenologically-based history of everyday life (*Alltagsgeschichte*) that incorporates more recent methodology in sensory histories.[24] Beyond histories of everyday life, my dissertation intersects with broader sensory and environmental histories, as well as histories of emotions. My sensory angle specifically builds on the recent sensory turn in Cold War studies that have increasingly sought to examine the Cold War beyond high-politics and interpersonal contact and more unseen and, at times, unconscious sensory angles through the lens of "sensory warfare."[25] In particular I borrow Bodo Mrozek's use of Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) as a means of illustrating how smell transcended artificial boundaries and could even have political implications as he has described in the case of the Inner-German border.[26]

Sound, particularly in the form of noise pollution emanating from aircraft, armored vehicles, and artillery fire is a key frame of analysis in Chapters 3 and 4. Beyond integrating elements of sonic histories, I also engage and build upon recent environmental histories of the GDR.[27] I argue that the notion that East Germans' desire for "peace and quiet" in the latter half

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[24] By *Alltagsgeschichte*, I am specifically drawing from Alf Luedkte, *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).
[25] See Bodo Mrozek, ed., *Sensory Warfare in the Global Cold War: Partition, Propaganda, Covert Operations* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2024). Sensory historiography is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.
[26] Bodo Mrozek, "The Smell of the Berlin Wall: Olfactory Border Management at the Inner-European Frontier," in *Sensory Warfare in the Global Cold War* (Penn State University Press, 2024), 147-160.
[27] In particular I draw upon Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*, Technologies of Lived Abstraction (MIT Press, 2010); Jeremy E. Taylor and Russell P. Skelchy, eds., *Sonic Histories of Occupation: Experiencing Sound and Empire in a Global Context* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022). Sonic history is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

of the GDR correlated to the rapid rise of *Eingaben* against Soviet-generated noise pollution in the 1980s.[28] Intrusive sensory pollutants like excessive noise eroded confidence among GDR citizenry towards the state. In this I build upon recent works in environmental history such as by Julia Ault and Scott Moranda by situating these noise complaints in the broader context of the 1980s GDR environmental movement through arguing that Soviet-generated noise pollution could be just as damaging for GDR institutions as that from lignite mining or heavy industry as discussed in those works.[29] Additionally, my discussions of environmental rejuvenation projects aided by Soviet troops in the early 1990s further heightens the role of the Soviet military not only as active polluters themselves, but also being integrated in environmental restoration during the withdrawal, albeit with limited practical effect.

Unlike many works on the Soviet- German coexistence (or on the GDR for that matter), my narrative does not end with the collapse of the socialist regime in the GDR in 1989/1990 but rather continues into the 1990s, covering the Soviet withdrawal. By doing this I am building on recent works that have focused more attention on the Soviet military withdrawal across Central/Eastern Europe in early 1990s that contemporarily had been completely overshadowed by revolutions and the collapse of socialist regimes.[30] In my particular case, I am not only applying Jennifer Allen's thesis arguing against a perceived over-fetishization of 1989 as a definitive historical rupture, but using the withdrawal itself as a frame of analysis to identify

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[28] Paul Betts, *Within Walls: Private Life in the German Democratic Republic* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 159.
[29] Julia E. Ault, *Saving Nature under Socialism: Transnational Environmentalism in East Germany, 1968-1990* (Cambridge University Press, 2021); Scott Moranda, *The People's Own Landscape: Nature, Tourism, and Dictatorship in East Germany*, Social History, Popular Culture, and Politics in Germany (The University of Michigan Press, 2014); See also Thomas Fleischman, *Communist Pigs: An Animal History of East Germany's Rise and Fall* (University of Washington Press, 2020).
[30] See Jörg Morré and Christoph Meißner, *The Withdrawal of Soviet Troops from East Central Europe: National Perspectives in Comparison* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021).

continuities of the German- Soviet coexistence that outlasted the socialist regime.[31] In particular, I trace continuities of communal sympathy towards common Soviet troops that began during the GDR but transcend into the 1990s as well as the gradual end of the sensory world with the Soviet departure. In tracing elements of sympathy and familiarity, I am engaging with as well with histories of emotion. Ute Frevert has written extensively on the power of states to mold citizens' emotions—one of the main goals of the Society of German Friendship was to instill positive *feelings* toward the Soviet Union, even if its heavy-handed efforts were not that successful.[32] In this I demonstrate how sensory experiences engendered in GDR citizens' feelings of layered familiarity towards the Soviets driven by sensory experiences, overriding organized efforts by state-run German- Soviet friendship projects. Histories of emotion also consider major political turning points and transitions as times of rapidly heightened and changing emotions, such as 1989/1990 in Germany.[33] In my final chapter, I analyze the unexpected popularity of open house days on Soviet bases as they were closing in 1991-1992, arguing that they represented a kind of emotional bereavement at the loss of the sensory world for East German communities, even if not all of those sensory experiences were positive.

At the same time, the emotional attachment to these bases in the face of a growing nostalgia, post-1989, suggests that these places were becoming sites of memory, at times

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[31] Jennifer Allen, "Against the 1989-1990 Ending Myth," *Central European History* 52 (2019): 125–47.
[32] Ute Frevert, *Writing the History of Emotions: Concepts and Practices, Economies and Politics* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 319-320.
[33] See also Ute Frevert, *The Power of Emotions: A History of Germany from 1900 to the Present* (Cambridge University Press, 2023); Ute Frevert, *Emotions in History: Lost and Found*, The Natalie Zemon Davis Annual Lecture Series at Central European University, Budapest 4 (Central European Univ. Press, 2011); Rob Boddice, "The History of Emotions: Past, Present, Future," *Revista de Estudios Sociales*, no. 62 (October 2017): 10–15.

contested.[34] While the main focus of this dissertation concerns Soviet bases as "living" sites, my final chapter's discussion of open houses also engages with and offers a foundation for further studies that examine former Soviet military areas in other countries such as Poland and Slovakia as emerging sites of memory.[35]

Method/Sources

My dissertation's narrative begins in 1957, which corresponds to the signing of the *Stationierungsabkommen*, the status of forces agreement between the GDR and the Soviet Union, which marked the symbolic transition of the Soviets evolving from an occupying force to a partner army within the GDR. Beyond this political agreement, Soviet military infrastructure became sufficiently entrenched and stabilized in the GDR by this time to have become an ideal starting point to analyze both the interplay between sensory experience and state efforts to manage the official "German-Soviet friendship," which is the focus of the first chapter. From a historiographical perspective, my dissertation picks up where many works on the GDR drop the Soviet military as a main "character" after the 1953 uprisings and subsequent destalinization. Beginning the narrative in 1957 as opposed to more traditional starting points of 1945 or 1949 is a deliberate move to integrate the Soviet military's role as a major influence on East German

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[34] See Pierre Nora, ed., *Conflicts and Divisions* (Columbia University Press, 1996). I suggest that the bases as fixed features over time became analogous to an extent to city walls as discussed by Kristin Poling, *Germany's Urban Frontiers : Nature and History on the Edge of the Nineteenth-Century City* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020).
[35] Christoph Lorke, "Contested Spaces, Contested Memories: Images of Post-Soviet Military Bases in Reunified Germany," *Český Lid* 106, no. 4 (2019): 439–61; Dagnosław Demski, "Values, Substantiality, and Passage of Time: Representations and Reinterpretations of Military Heritage," *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* 70 (December 2017): 171–92. Slovak historian Barnabas Vajda has examined the Komarno fortress in the context of public memory and the erasure of its Soviet past by the locality in favor of emphasizing its Austro-Hungarian one, Barnabas Vajda, "The Soviet Army Stationing and its Legacy in Czechoslovakia and at Fortress Komarno," in *The Withdrawal of Soviet Troops from East Central Europe* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021), 213-228. See also Aleida Assmann, *Shadows of Trauma: Memory and the Politics of Postwar Identity* (Fordham University Press, 2016).

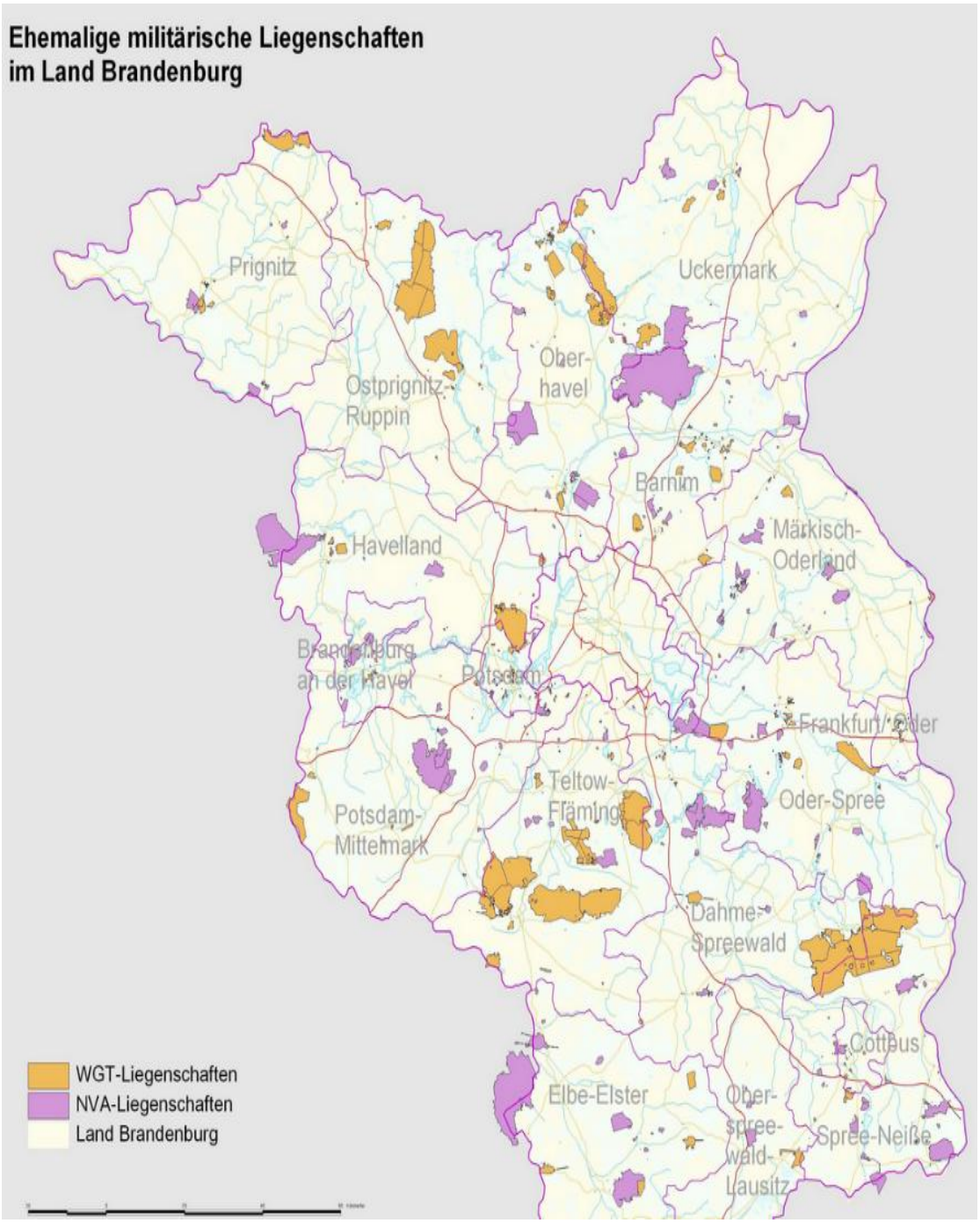

Figure 2: Former military sites in Brandenburg. Soviet sites are orange, NVA sites are purple, “Militärische Altlasten | Startseite | LfU,” September 26, 2021, https://lfu.brandenburg.de/lfu/de/aufgaben/boden/altlasten/spezielle-altlastenthemen/militaerische-altlasten/#.

daily life past the point where they were no longer as directly involved politically. The narrative also transcends the *Wende* and carries on until August 31, 1994, when the last Soviet troops departed Germany, solidifying 1990-1994, as a period of liminality where many aspects of Soviet-influenced daily life continued and survived the collapse of socialism.

Geographically, my dissertation primarily focuses on the area of the modern federal state (*Bundesland*) of Brandenburg. Located in eastern Germany and bordering Poland, it surrounds (but does not include) the city-state of Berlin (Figure 2). With its territory including much of the historical core of the Kingdom of Prussia, Brandenburg is mostly rural with a landscape dominated by forests, lakes, and farmland. In GDR terms (1952-1990), Brandenburg roughly corresponds to the districts (*Bezirke*) of Potsdam, Frankfurt (Oder), and Cottbus. Although Soviet troops were dispersed throughout the GDR, there were both thematic and practical reasons for focusing on this region. It had the highest concentration of Soviet forces in the GDR both in terms of troop numbers and the number of military sites, containing roughly half of all Soviet forces in Germany within its territory.[36] This means that while the phenomena this dissertation explores were not necessarily exclusive to Brandenburg, they occurred with much greater frequency and concentration there, which made the region an ideal focus of study for this project. Within Brandenburg, my dissertation examines the community areas of Wittstock, Eberswalde, Strausberg, and Bernau with the greatest frequency (Figure 3). These communities were located in relative adjacency to the widest range of Soviet military sites: airbases, training areas, garrisons, armored vehicle depots, among others.

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[36] Hans-Albert Hoffmann and Siegfried Stoof, *Sowjetische Truppen in Deutschland und ihr Hauptquartier in Wünsdorf 1945-1994: Geschichte, Fakten, Hintergründe* (Köster, 2017), 180.

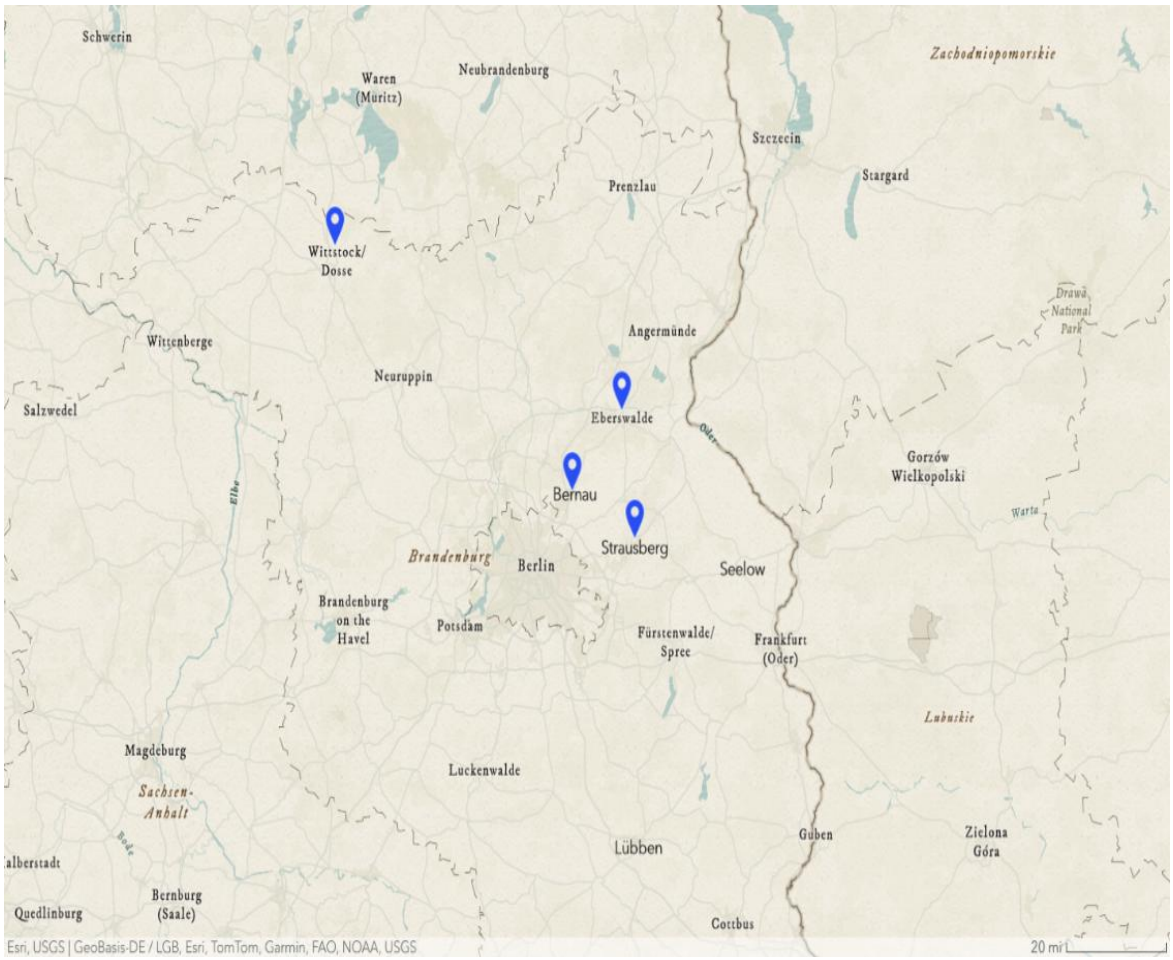

Figure 3: Locations of the principal community areas examined in the dissertation, marked in blue, Author/ArcGIS.

Residents in these areas experienced the full breadth of Soviet military activity and sensory output, making these places ideal areas of focus within Brandenburg.

While multilayered in its approach, this dissertation is at its core, a phenomenological study that attempts to reconstruct aspects of GDR inhabitants' lifeworld, who lived in spaces influenced by Soviet military personnel and activity. In interrogating a wide and complementary source-base, I reconstruct how people in the GDR perceived, experienced, interpreted the Soviet

military presence in everyday life, principally through sensory experiences. Instead of focusing on direct interaction between Soviet troops and East German civilians, my dissertation analyzes the broader sensory environments generated by the presence of the Soviet military in East Germany.

In order to achieve this, I draw on a diverse range of sources that capture both official responses and lived experience. Prominent among these are *Eingaben*—citizen petitions directed at local authorities—which provide valuable insight into how East Germans articulated grievances in response to Soviet military activity, especially noise pollution. These complaints reveal how sensory disruptions became politicized and how GDR citizens negotiated their relationship with the state.

A considerable portion of my archival source base consists of local municipal (*Kreis*) files which include correspondence between local officials and Soviet commanders. These materials help illuminate how East (and former East) German officials mediated conflicts between residents and Soviet units, how they negotiated practical arrangements with Soviet garrison commanders (especially during the withdrawal), and attempted to manage the environmental and political consequences of surrounding Soviet military installations.

While they feature less prominently in the dissertation, Stasi files nevertheless offer crucial insight into how the police state tracked and monitored Soviet sensory intrusions into GDR daily life, such as monitoring the black-market economy that distributed Soviet gasoline to East Germans. In addition, upper-level correspondence between SED leadership and the Stasi reveals increasing state concerns regarding Soviet noise pollution in the 1980s.

Especially in the chapters covering the Soviet withdrawal in an era free of press censorship, local and regional newspapers in the early 1990s frequently reported on Soviet-related incidents, environmental problems and public events such as open house days on Soviet bases. Contemporary photographs, both official and private further help reconstruct visual landscapes and how they appeared and, in the case of staged images, reveal the intentionality behind how officials wanted the Soviets to be presented and how those were perceived by local people both during and post-socialism.

While the Soviet perspective is limited in part due to the inaccessibility of many primary sources and the German focus of this dissertation, this gap is supplemented by published memoirs and testimonies by Soviet veterans. I also draw upon Soviet veterans' posts on social media veterans' groups, forums, and blogs for insights on their lived experience and how it compares with contemporary East German perceptions.[37] In some specific cases, I draw upon my own communication with Soviet veterans I located on social media.

To complement government-derived archival sources, my dissertation incorporates retrospective accounts from contemporary witnesses, including oral history interviews, memoirs,

[37] I consulted the following veterans' groups on Facebook:
"GSVG/ZGV: Mesta Nashei Iunosti i Molodosti, Togda i Seichas," accessed March 15, 2026, https://www.facebook.com/groups/GSVG.ZGV.mesta.nashei.ynosti.i.molodosti/; "Veterany GSVG–ZGV–IuGV–SGV–TsGV. Estoniiaa. Latvia. Litva," accessed March 15, 2026, https://www.facebook.com/groups/2090268427776842/; "Poisk Sosluzhivtsev Po Sluzhbe v GSVG," accessed March 15, 2026, https://www.facebook.com/groups/4803822516357070/; "GSVG," accessed March 15, 2026, https://www.facebook.com/groups/569761237573880/; "Zabroshennye Garnizony GSVG," accessed March 15, 2026, https://www.facebook.com/groups/917453362570571/; "GSVG Ili Kak Molody My Byli," accessed March 15, 2026, https://www.facebook.com/groups/1385922261527681/; "Kto sluzhil v DDR 1945–1994 g. P/P-47490. 64-MSP. GSOVG. GSVG. ZGV.," accessed March 15, 2026,https://www.facebook.com/groups/756678459270792/; "Polevaia Pochta," accessed March 15, 2026, https://www.facebook.com/groups/1100241123922844/; "GSVG Sluzhba v Germanii," accessed March 15, 2026, https://www.facebook.com/groups/470735064341037/.

memory projects, and internet forum posts on both hobby and GDR nostalgia websites.[38] These sources often contain detailed recollections of sensory experiences such as the sounds of aircraft and vehicles or the smell of fuel and perfume.

Chapter Overview

Chapter 1 examines how the East German state sought to cultivate Soviet-German friendship through carefully constructing how the Soviets were seen through public rituals, parades, and scripted meet and greets. Drawing on *Kreis* documents, press photos, and oral histories, it argues that locals' organic experiences of seeing Soviet military personnel contradicted official state optics. Despite this contradiction, perceptions of seeing Soviet soldiers as *Arme Schweine* (poor guys) contributed to feelings of sympathy and ultimately contributed to establishing the Soviets as a normalized part of everyday lived experience, even if people did not perceive them as the pinnacle of socialist civilization as the state intended.

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[38] Oral history participants included former local government officials, a former NVA officer, as well as locals from the areas of Eberswalde and Wittstock. From November 2023 to July 2024, I conducted thirteen semi-structured in-person interviews as well as communicated electronically via email and social media with four individuals. Participants were located organically based on mutual contacts, their appearance in the archival record, and in some cases, through groups on social media. Participants who were civilian locals were asked general questions about their life living adjacent to the Soviets and their perceptions. Political figures and former military personnel were asked more specific questions about their career and corroborative queries based on the archival record. Following general ethical protocol, all interviewees gave informed oral consent to be interviewed and to be recorded and that their testimony would be used as a source in my project. I assigned pseudonyms (and in some cases, mononyms) to participants who were not public figures to protect their privacy. I let the interviewees tell their own story and generally only asked follow-up questions from what I felt were either interesting or warranted clarification. My methodology for interpreting those interviews largely draws upon Linda Shope's ideas which understands oral history as a controlled dialogue in which the interviewer knows when to ask the interviewer to clarify details, make connections between recollections, and if necessary, challenge contradictions. Based on further experience with Shoah Foundation interviews, I found it crucial to not only remain an objective listener but also to have sufficient background knowledge of the interviewee's historical context to guide the interview and to assess the relevancy of questions. See Gabriela Hernandez et al., "Oral Histories as Critical Qualitative Inquiry in Community Health Assessment," *Health Education & Behavior* 44, no. 5 (2017): 705–15; Linda Shopes, "Making Sense of Oral History," *History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web*, February 2002, http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/. Noah Shenker, "Through the Lens of the Shoah: The Holocaust as a Paradigm for Documenting Genocide," *History and Memory* 28, no. 1 (2016): 141–75.

Chapter 2 explores how smell mediated the everyday experience in East Germany from the 1960s to the late 1970s. To do this, it explores three key olfactory encounters: the 1965 Bernau trichlorethylene (TCE) water contamination disaster, Soviet perfume, and *Russensprit* (Soviet military gasoline). Using *Kreis* documents, Stasi reports, memoirs, contemporary internet forums, and oral histories, the chapter argues that the intrusion of Soviet smells into the fabric of everyday life exposed the fragile artificial boundaries between distinct Soviet military and East German spaces and the limits of the GDR state's ability to control them. The example of the 1965 TCE event in Bernau reveals the limits of state control over Soviet environmental sensory impacts, while the more everyday odors of perfume and gasoline (powered by an extensive black-market economy) became absorbed into local lifeways, completely outside of the state's purview.

Chapter 3 examines how the problem of negative Soviet "self-noise"[39] from military activity turned the Soviets into a major source of frustration and complaint. It argues that while citizens utilized official state channels to complain about negative noise from the Soviets, the utter inability of the state to deal with it harmed the state's legitimacy and complicates the idea of participatory dictatorship as a key way that the GDR was able to maintain power and be functional. Drawing principally from *Eingaben* and Stasi reports, it analyzes how the noise from armored vehicles, aircraft, and artillery around places like Wittstock and Cottbus saturated daily life to the point that it was highly disruptive for ordinary East Germans, becoming a major source of citizen complaints (*Eingaben*) in the 1980s. While the state took the problem seriously

[39] Terminology from Kevin Sliwoski, "Loud Town, Quiet Base Olongapo City, Subic Bay and the US Navy, 1950-70," in *Sonic Histories of Occupation: Experiencing Sound and Empire in a Global Context* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

and tried to manage the problem through measurement and polite mediation with the Soviets, they could not compel the Soviets to change policy to affect change to the population's satisfaction.

Chapter 4 is the first of two chapters covering the Soviet withdrawal of Germany, challenging the notion of 1989 as a clear endpoint and presents the withdrawal as a gradual transformation in terms of a shared sensory landscape. It examines the case of Wittstock and its surrounding communities during the Soviet withdrawal, analyzing how sound and the changing visual landscape amid the breakdown of the Soviet presence was both a rupture with the past but also a continuity. The chapter argues that the withdrawal exhibited continuities of old complaints from the GDR period, but persisting in the context of a newly united Germany with the power dynamics shifted against Soviets who no longer could operate with impunity. This unique and liminal period fostered surprising new forms of cooperation and solidarity, especially in the wake of birth of the *Freie Heide* citizens' initiative which sought to prevent the planned Bundeswehr takeover of the Wittstock training ground and its continued military use.

Chapter 5 revisits the themes introduced in chapter 1 to examine how previous habits of normalization and garnered sympathy towards the Soviets shaped local responses to the withdrawal, further demonstrating the withdrawal as a time of continuity with the past, rather than a clear break. It demonstrates that local governments continued practices established in the GDR such as rituals and public ceremonies, but also the effects of years of perceiving (seeing) the Soviets as *Arme Schweine* contributed to community sympathy and further solidarity with the Soviets as shown through Christmas and New Year's donation drives amid worsening conditions on Soviet (now Russian/CIS) bases. This also included donation campaigns to fund medical

treatment for children of Soviet officers. The opening of Soviet airbases and garrisons to the public as Open House Days (*Tag der offenen Tür*) generated intense local interest and participation as well as symbolic acts of a final collapse of old artificial barriers. It demonstrates that the end of the occupation signaled a sense of underlying sensory bereavement on the part of locals who ventured onto closing bases in a fleeting moment before their final closure.

Chapter One: Visuals of Normalization: Soviet-German Friendship Through Propaganda, Meetups, and labor, 1957-1970s

For the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the GDR, schoolchildren in Strausberg drew mock posters to honor the occasion. The drawings contained motifs of the GDR: high-rise apartment buildings, images of scientists, rockets, factory workers, and young pioneers. One drawing by a ten-year-old boy was particularly striking. The image seemed to be depicting downtown Strausberg; a central street with a playground with children playing and collecting bottles for recycling and the Berlin TV Tower visible in the distance under a smiling sun. Tucked away on the left-hand side is a Soviet soldier; standing at attention, holding a Kalashnikov in front of guardhouse under a Soviet flag. Behind him the student drew the rear of a GAZ truck driving into the distance along with a fragment of a fence or concrete wall. He even managed to accurately replicate the olive drab *Russengrün* hue on the truck. The student was probably depicting the entrance to the main Soviet garrison complex in Strausberg.[40] While the image of the soldier was certainly meant to allude to a generalized Soviet-German-Friendship, the decision to include *that* specific soldier, *that* vehicle, *that* guardhouse is deliberate. The child may have frequently passed by that same guardhouse walking about town with his family or to school, been fascinated by military hardware or the mystery that lay beyond the walls of the garrison. One can speculate, but this decision by the student to include the Soviet military as an integral part of an idyllic depiction of life in Strausberg is telling. As was true for many of those who grew up in the GDR around the Soviet military, the Soviet Union was not an abstract

[40] Mappe von Schriftstücken über Arbeitseinsätzen der Nationalen Front Strausberg im Wohnbezirk I, 1979, folder 1026, E, Stadtarchiv Strausberg.

concept or a faraway place, but a real, familiar thing in daily life that was simultaneously mediated through purpose-driven state efforts and organic experiences in everyday life.

The Soviet military becoming ingrained in the daily lives of so many local Germans in communities over the first decades of the Cold War was inevitable. Even with official no-contact policies in place, the soldiers, officers, vehicles, aircraft were simply too dense and too numerous for the Soviets to retain an abstract image of superior socialist civilization. As a result, the SED officials' efforts at producing positive ideological images of the Soviets directly competed with those East Germans encountered through everyday experience.

While it certainly was in the SED's[41] best interest to cultivate positive feelings towards the Soviets among the population, this was doubly true of local administrators and party officials at the community and municipal (*Kreis*) level. To Soviet garrison commanders, these were the first point of contact and face for the communities they represented; to villagers and townspeople; they were the bridge between the Soviet and East German worlds. Local governments during this period largely had two tasks concerning the Soviet military. First, they had to facilitate German-Soviet friendship and instill positive feelings among their communities towards the Soviets. Second, and as will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter, they had to mollify the population where myriad negative impacts of the Soviet military was concerned, and at times this required directly obfuscating and downplaying those impacts. It was their challenge to ensure that the Soviet role in the daily lives of their constituents was a positive one.

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[41] *Sozialistische Einheitspartei*—Socialist Unity Party.

This chapter argues that local municipal administrations played a key role in normalizing the Soviet military in East German communities from the late 1950s through the late 1970s. They did so through facilitating forms of visibility and interactions that helped make Soviet soldiers a familiar part of local life. Local SED and DSF[42] functionaries organized friendship events, youth exchanges, and other staged encounters with involving Soviet military personnel to advance the GDR's German-Soviet friendship project. These sanctioned interactions existed alongside—and were often overshadowed—by more mundane forms of contact. By the 1970s, local governments were also subcontracting Soviet troops for manual labor on municipal projects, bringing them into public spaces where civilians could observe and come into contact with them. These practices, along with the everyday visibility of the Soviet military on local landscapes helped render Soviet troops a familiar and integrated presence within East German communities, even if locals' impressions of the Soviets did not correspond to what the state had initially intended.

Method/Historiography

Scholarly discussion of Cold War friendship projects in Soviet satellite states has largely centered on their supposed failure. Mary Fulbrook has argued that membership in the Society for German- Soviet Friendship "… appears to have barely impinged on the lives of many members, who might have done little more than go to an occasional film viewing."[43] Jan C Behrends and Christian Müller both contend that these friendship projects, such as in East Germany, Poland,

[42] Society for German-Soviet Friendship (DSF).
[43] Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (Yale University Press, 2008), 109.

and elsewhere did little to genuinely cultivate "friendship" among citizens towards the Soviet Union.[44] They argue this in discussions of the efforts of the Society for German-Soviet Friendship: while initially built with genuinely good intentions, the friendship project eventually devolved into monotonous rituals that, despite mandatory participation, meant little to East Germans. These friendship projects largely stemmed from the utopian aspects of Marxism and what Zygmunt Bauman has described as the "gardening state"—states that operate under the supposition that loyal citizens can be cultivated and ordered as if in a garden.[45] Particularly during Sovietization, and Bolshevization of the Soviet Occupation Zone and the early GDR, the SED under Ulbricht and other "little Stalins" of Central Eastern Europe emulated Stalinist models of nation-building.[46] In discussions of sanctioned events and rituals, as this chapter too will show, at least by margins of purely political success, it was in fact limited.

Yet rather than assessing these friendship projects as failures from the standpoint of further examples of communist states irrationally applying Marxist philosophy as a "solution to everything," more recent works ventured further into exploring unintended consequences and

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[44] Jan C. Behrends, *Die Erfundene Freundschaft: Propaganda Für Die Sowjetunion in Polen Und in Der DDR* (Böhlau, 2006) - "Sowjetische 'Freunde' Und Fremde 'Russen': Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft Zwischen Ideologie Und Alltag (1949-1990)," in *Fremde Und Fremd-Sein in Der DDR. Zu Historischen Ursachen Der Fremdfeindlichkeit in Ostdeutschland* (Metropol, 2003.). "O' Sowjetmensch!" Beziehungen von Sowjetischen Streitkräften Und DDR-Gesellschaft Zwischen Ritual Und Alltag," in *Ankunft – Alltag – Ausreise. Migration Und Interkulturelle Begegnung in Der DDR Gesellschaft*, with Christian Th. Müller (Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung Potsdam, 2005), 17-134.

[45] Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Polity, 2007), 20. On utopian Marxism and comparisons to its function as a "solution to everything" and as surrogate religion, see Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (University. of California Press, 1995), 8. Leszek Kołakowski and Paul Stephen Falla, *Main Currents of Marxism: The Founders, the Golden Age, the Breakdown* (W. W. Norton, 2008), 1208.

[46] Norman Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945 - 1949* (Belknap Press, 1997), 467. Eric D. Weitz, *Creating German Communism, 1890-1990: From Popular Protests to Socialist State* (Princeton University Press, 1997). "Little Stalins" as used in, Norman Naimark, "The Sovietization of East Central Europe," in *The Cambridge History of Communism*, vol. 2 (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 70.

specificities of national contexts.[47] In arguing against previous scholarship that the Soviet friendship project in Czechoslovakia was a failure (for similar reasons to the East German context), Rachel Applebaum contends that, on the contrary, the friendship project succeeded, in part, *through* its political failure.[48] While it may have failed in the realm of high politics, the project succeeded in the realm of everyday life and organic experiences by Czechs and Soviets on the ground. Certain efforts by state authorities in the name of Soviet-Czech friendship delivered unintended consequences that delivered results that state authorities did not necessarily want, but nevertheless improved relations between individuals on the ground. In this chapter, I make a similar argument in the case of municipalities employing Soviet troops on town projects. While local residents did not come away with an image of a superior socialist brother army, they nevertheless developed sympathy and familiarity that persisted for decades even after 1989.

Lutz Niethammer's interviews in the late 1980s of older West and East Germans point to obvious differences in attitudes towards the Soviets. West German interviewees, who had little to no personal experience with Soviet citizens outside of World War Two memories, were largely shaped through lingering Nazi stereotypes and Cold War propaganda. In other words, Soviets largely existed an abstract people. [49] East Germans, on the other hand, who had regular contact with the Soviets from afar on the other hand could instead draw upon personal experiences of friendliness with Soviet troops while also downplaying Soviet brutality after the war.[50]

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[47] Rachel Applebaum, *Empire of Friends: Soviet Power and Socialist Internationalism in Cold War Czechoslovakia* (Cornell University Press, 2019). Molly Pucci, *Security Empire: The Secret Police in Communist Eastern Europe*, Yale-Hoover Series on Authoritarian Regimes (Yale University Press, 2020).
[48] Applebaum, *Empire of Friends,* 14.
[49] Lutz Niethammer, "Juden und Russen im Gedächtnis der Deutschen," in *Der Historische Ort Des Nationalsozialismus Annäherungen* (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1990), 127.
[50] Ibid, 128.

Niethammer of course suggests here an important nuance: the GDR environment restricted what East Germans would or could say negatively about the Soviets. That for many the Soviet were reduced for the vast majority to a visual-sensual realm of perception from afar such as knowing where Soviets were quartered by seeing newspapers in windows instead of curtains or the prevalence of "stinky" Soviet perfume was suggestive of veiled feelings of civilizational superiority towards the Soviets (see Chapter 2).[51] As will be discussed later in this chapter, recollections by former East Germans of German- Soviet friendship events are marked with stereotypes, perpetuating Russian and Slavic tropes. Niethammer in essence captures what subsequent German scholars have, quite unsatisfactorily, called (or implied) that the German-Soviet relationship was simply "ambivalent."[52] What is certainly *not* ambivalent is that the German- Soviet world in the context of these communities in the GDR was shaped by a very real visual-sensory realm that exerted itself both through high politics and through organic experience. Instead of ambivalence, I would call the German- Soviet relationship a layered familiarity. In the end, what matters is not the supposed political failure of German-Soviet-Friendship propaganda, but that organic personal experience proved in the end a much more powerful force, as this chapter shows.

This chapter makes use principally of four primary source bases: municipal (*Kreis*) documents, propaganda print media (including newspapers), and oral histories[53] along with one personal memoir. An examination of documents at the *Kreis* level, such as administrative

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[51] Ibid. See also Chapter 2 on the topic of smell and perfume.
[52] Müller frames the Soviet presence in a "gray reality", "O Sowjetmensch,." Implied in, Silke Satjukow, *Besatzer "Die Russen" in Deutschland 1945-1994* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH, 2008).
[53] For my methodology on oral history interviews, see the methodology/sources section in the Introduction.

reports, meeting minutes, planning documents, and internal directives reveals how local functionaries interpreted and implemented state directives and then adapted to those directives at the local level, reacted to problems, and how they communicated with local Soviet garrison commanders. Propagandistic materials such as brochures as well as newspapers reveal in certain main ways Soviet-German friendship was presented. One can see how local the *Kreis* localized friendship narratives to emphasize Soviet cultural exchange, sacrifice, and cooperation, particularly the propagandization of Soviet labor details within towns. Oral histories, which I conducted (from November, 2023 to July, 2024) in semi-structured interviews with over a dozen current and former residents of Eberswalde, Bernau, Jüterbog, Wittstock, Strausberg, and other areas who grew up in the 1950s to the 1970s supplement written sources in providing recollections of friendship events and everyday life growing up next to the Soviet military. Apart from former politicians and other public figures, real names of interviewees have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect the privacy of those individuals. In addition, the memoir of Hannelore Rose, who grew up in Altes Lager near Jüterbog, provides detailed insight of living in one of the most militarized locales in the GDR. I also conducted an informal survey in a GSFG veteran group on social media regarding food quality on Soviet bases to which I received responses from ten individuals who were stationed throughout the GDR.

Soviet-German Friendship

The concept of German-Soviet Friendship stems from the occupation period. It evolved from an initial veneration of the Soviet Union with a heavy focus on Stalin to a more generalized celebration of Soviet culture but also a (at least rhetorically) celebration of the GDR and the

USSR's alliance as coequal brothers-in-arms—*Waffenbrüder.*[54] Both the SED and the Soviet Union knew that to shape East Germany into a faithful ally, the historical animosity between them from before the Second World War had to be dealt with. This was the time of the "Gardening State."[55] This was the age of planners and visionaries who viewed society as a "virgin piece of land to be cultivated and professionally managed….Ultimately, the new ideal society, should be an orderly, beautiful garden in which traditional values, opposing ideologies, and uncomfortable memories no longer had a place." [56] Professionally managing the GDR garden, for state leaders, involved instilling in the East German population the idea of German-Soviet friendship through propaganda, ritual, and education as well as celebrating key moments of German- Soviet cooperation.[57] At the very center of the process stood a presentation of German history told from the perspective of class struggle, and an East Germany striving to emulate Soviet brothers and the first socialist society in human history.[58] To accomplish this, the state sought to cultivate German-Soviet friendship from the top-down through propaganda, ritualized state holidays, Russian-language education, and through mass organizations,

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[54] For the occupation period and predecessor organization of the society for German Friendship—the Society for the Study of the Culture of the Soviet Union, see Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 408-411.
[55] Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Polity, 2007), 20.
[56] Behrends, *Die Erfundene Freundschaft,* 9.
[57] A key example of early propagandized German-Soviet cooperation is Soviet help during the 1947 Oderbruch flood. Widely circulated press emphasized the role that Soviet troops played in rescuing trapped civilians and livestock in the flooded area. Sigrid Strenge and Marga van Tankeren, *Letschiner Chronik*, vol. 1 (Letschin: Heimatverein Letschin e.V, 2001), 34. Volkspolizisten im Kampf Gegen das Hochwasser, 1979, BIB03 OF 1, Kreisarchiv Märkisch-Oderland, Seelow.
[58] Christian Müller argues that Soviet-German-Friendship evolved through distinct phases: 1945-1948: invention of friendship, 1949-1967: acceptance of the Soviets as role models, 1968-1985: ritualization and formalization of friendship propaganda. "„O' Sowjetmensch!" Beziehungen von Sowjetischen Streitkräften Und DDR-Gesellschaft Zwischen Ritual Und Alltag," in *Ankunft – Alltag – Ausreise. Migration Und Interkulturelle Begegnung in Der DDR Gesellschaft*, Band 29 (Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung, 2005), 35.

particularly the *Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft* (DSF) but also the *Gesellschaft für Sport und Technik* (GST), the *Jungpioniere,* and *Freie Deutsche Jugend* (FDJ).[59]

By the late 1950s, multiple factors came into place in East Germany for the Soviet friendship project that allowed local municipalities to increasingly engage with local Soviet garrisons for the purposes of cultivating friendship propaganda. East Germany began to resemble less an occupied territory and more a sovereign ally to the USSR. In 1954, the Soviets halted reparations payments and forgave the GDR's debt of 2.5 billion USD[60] and reduced annual occupation costs.[61] That same year, the "Group of Soviet Occupation Forces in Germany" (GSOFG) was renamed to the "Group of Soviet Forces in Germany" (GSFG), a name that it would retain until 1989. In 1955, the Warsaw Pact was founded with East Germany joining at the same time.[62] In 1956, the paramilitary *Kasenierte Volkspolizei* was reformed into a proper East German military—the National Peoples Army (NVA).[63]

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[59] The DSF was renamed from the Society for the Study of the Culture of the Soviet Union in 1949. Richard Mand et al., *Handbuch Gesellschaftlicher Organisationen in Der DDR* (Berlin: Staatsverlag der DDR, 1985), 73.
[60] Approximately thirty billion in 2026.
[61] This move was also to help stabilize the GDR after the 1953 uprising. Hans-Albert Hoffmann and Siegfried Stoof, *Sowjetische Truppen in Deutschland und ihr Hauptquartier in Wünsdorf 1945-1994: Geschichte, Fakten, Hintergründe* (Köster, 2017), 57.
[62] Frank Umbach has argued that there was initially little strategic need for an Eastern Bloc military alliance by the mid-1950s due to the USSR's military dominance of Central Eastern Europe and overwhelming conventional superiority over NATO. But, under Khruschev, the Soviet Union's version of a "divine right" to dominate East Central Europe as it seemed under Stalin, no longer existed; the USSR needed to legitimize its power and control over Central/Eastern Europe through other means. Contrary to popular opinion, at least in the beginning, the Waraw Pact's formation in 1955 occurred more out of a political desire of the Soviets and Khruschev to legitimate their hold over Europe as a leading member of a multi-national alliance. Frank Umbach, *Das Rote Bündnis : Entwicklung Und Zerfall Des Warschauer Paktes 1955 Bis 1991* (Links Verlag, 2005), 119. However, by the 1960s, the Warsaw Pact (along with COMECON) began to function more as a multilateral alliance with regular joint exercises, as this chapter later explores. See also Mark Kramer, "The Changing Pattern of Soviet-East European Relations 1953-1968," in *The Cambridge History of Communism*, vol. 2 (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 155. Ruediger Wenzke, ""Sozialistische Waffenbrueder? Über die Beziehungen der Nationalen Volksarmee der DDR zu anderen Warschauer Pakt-Armeen," in *Der Warschauer Pakt: Von Der Gründung Bis Zum Zusammenbruch: 1955 Bis 1991* (Links Verlag, 2009), 85-110.
[63] The NVA was an all-volunteer military until 1962 when conscription was introduced. It was composed of six combat divisions (two panzer and four motor-rifle). It had a fluctuating total strength of around 175,000 men,

In March, 1957, the SED and the Soviet Union signed the *Stationierungsabkommen*, the stationing agreement, which superseded an initial agreement in 1955. In all GDR documentation henceforth, The Soviets were no longer designated occupation forces, but "temporarily stationed Soviet forces in Germany."[64] Its most important provision (Article One) was that the Soviet military would not interfere with East German politics and domestic policy.[65] Among other things, crimes committed by Soviet military or civilian personnel on GDR territory had to go through the East German legal system. Base expansions and construction projects had to be made in agreement with GDR authorities and the USSR promised to compensate for damages done to GDR property, primarily in unofficial duties. While deeply flawed, the treaty established a firm base for a stabilized Soviet troop presence in Germany as they related to nearby communities.

By 1957, Soviet bases were already establishing themselves as permanent fixtures as part of the numerous communities' visual-sensory realm. Certain communities had dedicated spaces within them to house Soviet officers and their families while training areas, garrisons, airfields, and other places, putting Soviet troops in plain sight for these communities.[66] To local officials,

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considerably dwarfed by the GSFG. In event of war with NATO, the NVA would fall under Soviet command, assisting the offensive into West Germany. See Wolfgang Wünsche and Hans Werner Deim, eds., *Rührt Euch! Zur Geschichte Der Nationalen Volksarmee Der DDR* (Edition Ost, 1998).See also, Thomas M. Forster, *The East German Army: The Second Power in the Warsaw Pact* (Allen & Unwin, 1980); Klaus Froh, *Chronik Der NVA, Der Grenztruppen Und Der Zivilverteidigung Der DDR 1956-1990*, (Köster, 2010); Bruno Thoss, ed., *Volksarmee Schaffen--Ohne Geschrei! Studien Zu Den Anfängen Einer Verdeckten Aufrüstung in Der SBZ/DDR 1947-1952* (Oldenbourg, 1994).

[64] Die Zeitweilige Stationierte Sowjetische Streitkräfte in Deutschland.

[65] "Abkommen Zwischen Der Regierung Der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik Und Der Regierung Der Union Der Sozialistischen Sowjetrepubliken Über Fragen, Die Mit Der Zeitweiligen Stationierung Sowjetischer Streitkräfte Auf Der Territorium Der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik Zusammenhängen," March 12, 1957, http://www.verfassungen.de/ddr/streitkraefteabkommen57.html

[66] Soviet military installations are often heavily featured in local town chronicles, books, and local history (*Ortsgeschichte*) periodicals, pointing to a recurring pattern of perceived significance to local history and as sites of memory. Examples include, Antje Zeiger, *Flugplatz Wittstock* (Hendrick Bäßler Verlag, 2024); Dieter Rein, "Die

including DSF functionaries, engaging with local garrisons under the banner of German-Soviet friendship made sense. Karl-Heinz Schmalfuß, the former Acting Minister of the Interior (MdI) of the GDR, wrote in his 2011 memoir, "I would like to emphasize that, generally, the state doctrine of German-Soviet Friendship succeeded…to one part of GDR citizens, friendship was dear to their hearts, the majority of citizens respected it, and only a small portion [outright] rejected it."[67]

While it is unsurprising that a committed apparatchik of the GDR would say that a state policy was successful, he is not completely incorrect in his assertion. Most GDR citizens did indeed seem to *accept* the idea of German-Soviet Friendship, but what precisely this acceptance meant fell under a nebulously wide spectrum. For East Germans living in towns dominated by the Soviet military, convincing them to accept the Soviets was even more important.

Month of German-Soviet Friendship: Bernau 1964

The 1964 "Month of German-Soviet Friendship" in Bernau demonstrates how local governments translated state directives on Soviet-German Friendship at the community level.

Rote Armee in Strausberg- Eine Offene Frage?," in *Beiträge Zur Strausberger Garnisonsgeschichte* (Akanthus, 2001); Eberhard Wühle, "Die Sowjetischen Besatzungstruppen in Eberswalde Und Deren Versorgung Durch Die Handelsorganisation Spezialhandel Und Den VEB Spezialbau," in *Eberswalder Jahrbuch 2006-2007* (Verein für Heimatkunde zu Eberswalde e.V., 2006); Eberhard Wühle and Martin ed.s Hoeck, "Vom Ratskeller Eberswalde in Den Sowjetischen Gulag," in *2023 Eberswalder Jahrbuch* (Verein für Heimatkunde der Stadt Eberswalde e.V, 2023); Gerd-Ulrich Herrmann, *Munition Für Den Krieg "Märkisches Walzwerk GmbH" Strausberg* (Helios, 2023; Kristina Hübener, *Eberswalde zwischen Den Weltkriegen* (n.d.); Helmut Knop et al., *Fremde Heimat Eberswalde? Zuwanderungen in Vergangenheit Und Gegenwart: Begleitheft Zur Sonderausstellung Im Rahmen Des Kulturlandes Brandenburg 2003 EUROPA* (PUBLIC. Agentur für Kommunikation, 2003); Holger Kliche, *Ardelts Ingenieurkunst Für Frieden Und Krieg* (Geschichtswissenschaftliches Institut Eberswalde, 2021); Holger Kliche, *Akten Und Zeugenaussagen Zur Widerstandsgruppe Im Raum Eberswalde* (Geschichtswissenschaftliches Institut Eberswalde, 2023); Brigitta Heine and Birgit Klitzke, *Eberswalde: Eine Stadtgeschichte* (BeBra Wissenschaft Verlag, 2024); Wolfgang Dost, *Wittstock und seine 18 Ortsteile: Deutschlands drittgrößte Stadt* (Geiger-Verlag, 2011).

[67] Karl-Heinz Schmalfuß, *Meine Wege nach Moskau: Erinnerungen und Reflexionen eines DDR-Generals* (Aachen: Helios, 2011), 6.

During this period, the SED intensified its efforts to portray the USSR as Germany's role model for achieving communism. In places like Bernau, municipal authorities and the local DSF and other mass organization chapters had the monumental task of translating abstract ideological goals into tangible events and activities that could instill friendship ideals among the local population while at the same time involving local Soviet troops to achieve those goals.

Christian Müller regards the period from 1949 to 1967 as the zenith of Soviet friendship propaganda in the GDR— when the SED, after some reluctance in the early postwar years, began to prop up the USSR as a supreme role model for socialist civilization.[68] In 1952, at the plenary session on the third anniversary of the founding of the GDR, Wilhelm Pieck issued a plea for friendship with the USSR, "Friendship with the Soviet Union, with the Soviet people, is a prerequisite for the rebirth and existence of the German nation."[69] After the near-collapse of the SED following the 1953 uprisings, instilling the notion of "friendship" values among East Germans vis-à-vis the Soviets became a top matter for the party. Gone were the days of appealing to the person of Stalin, instead Soviet civilization itself was praised. During this period, entire weeks and months dedicated to Soviet friendship, which revolved around The Day of National Liberation (*Tag der Befreiung*) on May 8 (at least, until 1967[70]), and the Day of the October Revolution. The latter was not an official state holiday but rather celebrated in tandem with the Soviets in gestures of solidarity.

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[68] Müller, „O Sowjetmensch!", 38. According to Müller, this was followed by a period of ritualization and formalization of friendship propaganda, in which friendship events were scaled back and efforts to cultivate personal friendships with Soviet people went down.
[69] *SSSR-GDR--30 Let Otnosheniĭ, 1949-1979 : Dokumenty i Materialy* (1981).
[70] *Tag der Befreiung* ceased to be an official holiday in 1967 with the introduction of the five-day workweek.

These celebrations included demonstrations and heavy involvement and coordination with mass organizations in carefully coordinated and curated ceremonies, Soviet cultural programs such as film screenings, musical performances, and solemn laying of wreaths at Soviet memorials and cemeteries. The municipal *Kreis* government of Bernau in 1964 circulated a series of internal memos and planning documents which provide a comprehensive overview of the immense planning and wide breadth to implement SED directives on facilitating German-Soviet friendship from April to early May, culminating in the "Week of German-Soviet Friendship." These documents ultimately reveal how the *Kreis* adapted SED directives to suit local communities while at the same time counting on significant participation from local Soviet garrisons to remake soldiers into *Freunde*.

Kreis Bernau was one of 189 *Landkreise* (rural municipalities) in the GDR governed through a municipal council (*Rat des Kreises*) made up of members responsible for different sectors of local government (which oftentimes contained their own respective subcommittees). The chairman (*Vorsitzender des Rates*) in turn headed the municipal council. For simplicity's sake, I will refer to both the municipal council including the chairman as the "*Kreis.*" In line with democratic centralism in the GDR, municipal councils were not examples of autonomous local government, but rather local-level executive bodies meant to enact policy handed down by the SED. Depending on the policy in question, implementing it usually required cooperation with relevant GDR mass organizations and other party organs under the National Front. Based on these planning documents, the *Kreis* was largely responsible for the technical implementation of the German-Soviet Friendship while the local party boards of the DSF and National Front planned their content and ideological goals, or *politische-ideologische Arbeit*.

The local DSF and local party officials, in organizing the April-May 1964 Soviet-German friendship festivities in, were implementing SED directives originating from the 1959 Fifth Plenary Session of the Central Committee. The SED mandated the week to serve an overall objective of encouraging disarmament and détente through closer cooperation with the Soviet Union, whom they considered to be at the forefront of the struggle for international peace. To local organizers, the numerous ceremonies, cultural, and political events were meant to recognize the Soviet Union's preeminence as the leader of the socialist bloc, to demonstrate that the GDR fully backed the USSR on all geopolitical issues and underscored the GDR's own efforts in toward securing détente and peace and in "fight[ing] nuclear proliferation and the revanchist designs of West German imperialism."[71]

Kreis Bernau and the DSF set about adapting and localizing SED-mandated Soviet friendship to suit the local community. As stated in the planning documents, "the working people of our district are increasingly realizing that fraternal cooperation with the socialist states, especially with the Soviet Union, is a crucial prerequisite for the successful solution of the tasks of the Fifth Plenary [session of the SED]."[72] Unsurprisingly, it was nowhere indicated whether the *Kreis* actually consulted with the community concerning workers' viewpoints on the value of working with the Soviets. As such, the DSF planning committee particularly emphasized excursions, meetups, and knowledge exchanges and seminars between local German workers and technical specialists and officers and specialists from the local Soviet garrisons. For example, the woodworking VEB in Klosterfelde had an exchange on learning the Mitrofanov

[71] Maßnahmeplan zur Durchführung der Woche der Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft 1964, March 31 1964, folder 18112, EI RdKB, Kreisarchiv Barnim, Eberswalde.
[72] Ibid.

method, a Soviet-invented cost-reducing method of producing similarly-designed parts on the same machines.[73] Meanwhile, the LPG Schönerlinde engaged in a seminar to incorporate Soviet methods in hydroponics. In a way, the *Kreis* could take advantage of its proximity to the Soviet military both to fulfill directives concerning Soviet friendship while in the process gaining what they considered valuable technical improvements in local industry from the Soviets.

Besides a desire to directly inject Soviet know-how into local industry, *Kreis* and DSF sought to not only impose friendship values among locals towards the USSR but also to Soviet troops. In addition, they established a quota aiming to gain one hundred new members of the DSF during the friendship week. They aimed to accomplish this through several coordinated efforts. First, they commissioned the local Kreis newspaper *Neuer Tag,* to compose an article commemorating the meaning of the Eighth of May on the nineteenth anniversary of the end of World War Two. Second, the DSF commissioned that newspaper's editor to publicize photos and articles lauding Soviet troops in their help in the 1963 harvest and other assistance efforts. The newspaper also sought out reports specifically from VEBs, collective farms, schools, and other institutions named after Soviet figures (cosmonauts, scientists, artists etc.) regarding labor successes. The press also had to report on the positive outcomes of pen pal exchanges between Soviet and East German youth. Third, the DSF would host film screenings of two documentaries on the life of Nikita Khruschev. And finally, the DSF organized cultural events and friendship meetups with Soviet military personnel. in all towns and larger villages.[74]

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[73] Wayne Geerling and Gary Magee, "Learning from the Soviet Union Means Learning to Win: Group Technology and the Mitrofanov Method," in *Socialism with a Human Face* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).
[74] Maßnahmeplan zur Durchführung der Woche der Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft 1964, March 31 1964, folder 18112, EI RdKB. Kreisarchiv Barnim, Eberswalde.

Besides these larger events, the DSF also sponsored book clubs, readings, and book raffles for people in residential areas. The books extolling the virtue of Soviet civilization included: *The Russian Miracle*, *Battle on the Way* and the war novels *Fate of a Man*, *The Living and the Dead*, and *The Banner of Krivoi Rog*.[75] *The Banner of Krivoi Rog* by Otto Gotsche, a writer and politician, was inspired by the true story of a German communist miner (Otto Brosowski) who protected a Soviet banner from both the Nazis and Americans during World War II, an ideal tale of German-Soviet friendship. All these novels would be adapted into films in the Soviet Union and East Germany in the mid-1960s, giving the option to the DSF to screen the film versions at Soviet cultural events.

In sum, the *Kreis,* in cooperation with the local chapter of the DSF planned twenty-three events in April and May 1964, many of which were concentrated within the culminating "Friendship Week." Despite lofty official goals of "securing peace" and "ensuring security" in Europe, the associated events were rather light-hearted. These included meetings celebrating Soviet culture, dance and music ensembles, sporting events, knowledge-exchange excursions between local firms and Soviet military personnel. There were at least four planned youth-oriented events, which included dances and meetups with Soviet Komsomol members, who would have been young Soviet soldiers who were also members of the youth organization. A link between the East German FDJ and Soviet Komsomol constituted a conduit through which meetups between German youth and Soviet soldiers could occur.

Two events specifically honored Nikita Khruschev, including one celebrating his birthday and career during World War Two and another highlighting his recent state visit to the

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[75] Ibid.

GDR (Brezhnev would replace him only months later). While highlighting the Soviet state leader in some of the events may have seemed out of place in the post-Stalinist world, the celebration of Khruschev's person played a relatively small role. Soviet civilization took center stage: for that reason the organizers either planned to invite Soviet troops to be directly involved in nearly half the events.

The participant list for the main ceremony for the 1964 Day of Liberation offers a glimpse of the wide breadth of mass, political, military, and service organizations involved. The proceedings were organized by the National Front, which took place at the *Gaststätte* Elysium in Bernau. [76] The participant list is essentially a snapshot of the local administrative bureaucracy and party landscape of the time: city and *Kreis* councilmembers and workers, mass organization representatives from the National Front and DSF. Also in attendance were representatives from VEB firms, teachers and school administrators, along with twenty school children. [77]

Aside from these teachers and pupils, only an additional thirty of the over 500 participants of official proceedings of the eighth of May celebrations were ordinary GDR citizens (albeit with "special invitation") and the same number of Soviet military personnel, who were most likely senior officers, from the local garrison, if they showed up at all. [78] More telling is that mass organizations and the party were the conduits for ritualized top-down enforcement of German-Soviet-Friendship. During the official event, the Soviet anthem was played *before* the

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[76] The alliance of political parties and mass organizations in GDR, defacto coordination via the SED
[77] Zum 8. Mai haben Einladungen erhalten. April 21 1964, folder 18112, EI RdKB, Kreisarchiv Barnim, Eberswalde.
[78] Partially due to secrecy and/or a lack of information from the Soviets; municipal documentation only rarely gives out the actual names of Soviet personnel involved in official meetings, and generally only for high-ranking officers such as garrison commanders. It was also never guarantee that the Soviet garrison would allow soldiers and officers to attend such events. Official parlance generally rendered the Soviets a group, as either *Genossen* (Comrades) or, more commonly, *Freunde* (Friends)

East German one. High honors for German Soviet friendship were given out. The celebrations proceeded then to the Soviet War Memorial and Cemetery in Bernau, directly adjacent to the *Altstadt* in the center of town. Preceded by short speeches given by a Soviet officer and East German party official, wreathes were laid down at the memorial. Later, highly regulated events were held at the Soviet Officers' Club along with sporting events with Soviet military personnel at the local stadium.

Müller's assessment of this period in the GDR as a "Soviets as role model" stage is reflected in the 1964 DSF plans in Bernau. The DSF meticulously planned an ideological underpinning to the events that cast a broad net of involving Soviet high culture as well as efforts to implement Soviet methods and technology into local labor practices. They also clearly sought to take advantage of nearby garrisons—planning to invite or directly involving Soviet personnel in nearly half of twenty-three planned events, signaling clear efforts to cultivate personal friendships and contacts between Soviets and East Germans. Despite the clear importance given to involving Soviet troops, there was no clearly articulated mechanism for contacting garrison commanders nor was there a detailed process of facilitating meetups. The documents state that the *Kreis* chairman was responsible for inviting Soviet VIPs to the May 8 ceremony and that the DSF working with *Deutscher Turn-und-Sportbund* (DTSB) would facilitate the sanctioned meetups between East Germans and Soviet troops "in coordination with Soviet commanders." This suggests that, besides the chairman of the *Kreis*, few people were given leave to liaise directly with the Soviets. Further, the only Soviet individual named in any of the planning documents was Khruschev himself. Instead, planners set a quota for how many Soviet personnel they would like to be present at each event, e.g., "1 Soviet officer," "20 Soviet friends," "40

Soviet comrades." This means two things. First, for the purposes of planning political-ideological work, the planners here held the most value in the numerical presence of Soviet troops at the event and not necessarily *who* they were as individuals. Second, planners also would not have known which people and how many Soviet garrison commanders would agree to send to the friendship events, if they received a response at all. There would have been no direct phone lines, so all communication would have been sent via letters which then had to be translated between Russian and German.[79] Soviet officers were not allowed to even share their real last names with Germans.[80] Even from these planning documents, the opaqueness and lack of transparency between the local government and Soviet garrisons is nevertheless clear. There was a clear disparity between what the local party wanted from Soviet troops and what the Soviet commanders were willing to give, if anything. And, as personal testimonies attest, *Freundschaftstreffen* were often much more chaotic than planners would have wanted, and left participants with perceptions of the Soviets that the SED might have found undesirable.

DSF Freundschaftstreffen

Central to mass organization events were friendship meetings (*Freundschaftstreffen*). Since at least the 1950s, GDR citizens who had positive attitudes towards the Soviet Union indicated a desire to develop personal friendships with Soviet military personnel and other citizens in the GDR. They perceived an overemphasis of the DSF on "Soviet-German-Friendship

[79] The reliance on translations across the archival record throughout the GDR period (with a handful of exceptions) suggests that many local GDR officials were not proficient enough in Russian to handle communication with the Soviets without the use of interpreters and translators. Joint meetings between local officials and garrison commanders were almost always conducted via interpreters.

[80] Evgenii Volkov, "German Democratic Republic of the 1970s-1980s through the Eyes of Soviet Officers (Oral Stories)," *Folklore* 70, no. 70 (2017), 61.

Months" and weeks as the only times during the year that they felt the DSF's work as GDR citizens paid their monthly membership fees.[81] DSF members were also oversaturated with meetings and formal activities during major friendship campaigns so there was a desire to get to know the Soviets in more informal contexts. A key pattern of friendship meetings inviting Soviet military personnel reveals that they were also geared towards the German youth, thus the youth organizations DTSB and FDJ were also involved in their coordination. Still, the facilitation of these friendship meetings carried their own challenges: East German participation and, more problematic, Soviet reluctance to participate.

While there are no known records of participation statistics or postmortem assessments by the *Kreis* or DSF of the 1964 German-Soviet Friendship events and meetings, officials did closely monitor participation at events sought to achieve DSF membership quotas.[82] The state in the 1960s was disappointed in relatively low participation at friendship meetings between Germans and Soviet military personnel. A 1969 survey conducted by the Leipzig Institute for Youth Research shows that sixty-three percent of the GDR population stated they never attended a friendship meeting with Soviet military personnel, while thirty-five percent attended at least once, though the survey does not account for variances of participation according to urban/rural localities or by other demographics. [83] While today one will hear anecdotally from former East Germans that participation at any (especially voluntary) event in the GDR was low because of attached pressure from the state, this viewpoint does not capture the nuances of these friendship meetings. If we take again *Kreis* Bernau's 1964 friendship event lineup, the DSF scheduled

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[81] Müller, „*O Sowjetmensch!,"* 41.
[82] Such as the quota of 100 members after the Bernau 1964 German-Soviet Friendship week
[83] Müller, „*O Sowjetmensch!,"* 132.

many events on weeknights at relatively late in the evening (8:00pm). This was also three years before the GDR would institute a five-day work week, meaning there was less time to attend nonwork events.

Regardless, an additional factor complicated friendship meetings that neither the DSF nor the *Kreis* could influence—whether the Soviets would participate. Garrison commanders were under no pressure from their superiors to cooperate with the DSF or participate in friendship events. Soviet participation in propaganda events was always the prerogative of individual garrison commanders, usually at the rank of colonel (*polkovnik*). An additional complicating factor that friendship events involving Soviets interacting with Germans presented a paradox to the GSFG command, who strived for a complete separation between distinct Soviet and German worlds. This means that while events involving the Soviets in the early 1960s were at their high point in the GDR, actual Soviet participation would have been uneven. Lieutenant-Colonel (*podpolkovnik*) Aleksander Ivanovich Kholod, a fighter pilot stationed in Finow near Eberswalde, recalled, "I met only rarely with Germans, at official friendship meetings with representatives from the army [where we all sat together at a dinner table]. [But] with the Germans who lived in the town of Finow, we did still have contact despite everything. They would go into the *Magazin* and shopped there."[84]

As other scholars have already pointed out, the DSF and the SED eventually realized that there was no real way to quantify the extent to which friendship meetings involving Soviet troops were cultivating "friendship" in the first place, which was a reason why massive German-

[84] A.F Agarev et al., *Na Rybezhe. Sydba Cheloveka v Kontektste Holodnoj Vojny* (Ryazan: GUP RO, 2013), 103.

Soviet friendship events were scaled back after the 1960s. But raw participation numbers were not the only factor at play here.

The DSF clearly had its mind on numbers, participation, and membership quotas for friendship events, but extant documentation usually concerns planning and logistical matters revolving around friendship events. These do not elucidate anything about the actual experiences of those who attended them, be they Soviet or German. However, the personal testimonies of participants offer insights. One testimony of a former GDR resident taken in the early 1990s attests to a perceived superficial nature of friendship events with Soviet Komsomol youth:

> Our school was located next to a Russian barracks… But the first actual contacts only occurred at secondary school. Friendship meetings were organized there. The procedure was ritualized. The Russian teacher showed slides, and there were tea and cookies. Above all, those who were talented at languages were required to attend. People sat in a kind of quota-based circle—one Komsomol member, one FDJ member—and exchanged friendship gifts. The conversations did not go very deep; the interest was too superficial and the language skills too limited. Letter correspondence that began there usually fizzled out very quickly…[85]

In contrast, two accounts from "linguistically talented" students give a more positive and varied recollection. In an interview conducted in February 2024, two women, Heike and Katja (both about 60 at the time), recounted their experiences attending friendship meetings as teenagers while growing up in and around Eberswalde in the 1960s and 1970s. Katja worked for

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[85] Frank Gaudlitz and Thomas Michael Kumlehn, eds., *Die Russen gehen: der Abzug einer Armee* (BasisDruck Verlag, 1993), 49.

about a year at the Eberswalde Haus der DSF in the late 1970s, and in the 1980s, Heike worked for VEB Spezialhandel in Eberswalde, which supplied consumer goods to Soviet garrisons. Both women generally retain positive impressions of Soviet military personnel and also recount experiences that both confirm the mass organizations' attempts at constructed orderliness. Yet they also report a bit of chaos and improvisation.

Heike recounted a friendship meeting to accompany the larger anniversary of the October Revolution, which she gladly attended nearly every year. Her recollection highlights the mechanics of how local GDR officials staged these events. The mayor invited her, and other conventionally attractive (or "*knackige"* as Heike put it) young women who could speak Russian to attend. The mayor clearly wished to showcase an idealized image of the local East German youth to impress "*Die Freunde,"* as well as the DSF and his party superiors. After the cultural program, which was usually a musical or dance showcase from the Soviet Union, there was a reception with food from the Soviet Union, of which she specifically remembered the dried fish and other meats which were not typical fare in the GDR, demonstrating the DSF's efforts to construct a hospitable cultural exchange. She also accompanied the mayor's group on a limited tour of one of the Soviet garrison facilities in Eberswalde, where she recalled seeing the barracks facilities where (she would have been told) the common soldiers lived. The experience caused her to stereotype the Soviets, albeit positively. The cleanliness and orderliness of the facilities gave her the impression that "the Russians" were a "clean" people. Heike's account offers an additional insight: while Soviet bases were generally closed off, her account gives an example of an occasion where the garrison commander, in a gesture towards working with community

allowed Heike's group on base to view the barracks facilities, which presented the lowest operations security risk.

Katja, from Britz, a village near Eberswalde, recalled a smaller friendship meeting organized by the FDJ. At such events, the organizers would usually set up a designated table for Soviet personnel, though when and if they would arrive was unpredictable. On one occasion, a group of soldiers (though probably officers) arrived at the dance whereupon the coordinator quickly seated them at the guest table. The FDJ coordinator then pressured Katja and some other shy and hesitant teenagers to go sit with the soldiers. Katja recalled having a conversation with one of the soldiers in Russian about music, and found out they both enjoyed the same western music, "I was really fascinated, I thought they only knew patriotic songs about the revolution, but the one I talked to knew about the Beatles and the [Rolling] Stones too." [86] Later she would encounter the same soldier again whereupon he gifted her a Beatles record.

In describing their experiences at *Freundschaftstreffen*, both women admitted that these fleeting experiences were their only experiences directly interacting and conversing with local Soviet military personnel. Yet, these experiences, while fleeting, gave both of them positive impressions of their Soviet neighbors overall. At the same time, the women also highlighted the contrived nature of the friendship meetings and the unpredictability and inconsistency of Soviet participation. Katja did not specify whether the second encounter with the soldier occurred at a friendship event or elsewhere, regardless, it seems unlikely that one would encounter the same Soviet soldiers regularly at friendship events. While these organized meetings probably did little

in cultivating real friendships, they did, for at least some, give positive experiences of the Soviets to East Germans (though based on stereotyping), overall this spelled mixed success for local *Kreise* and the DSF. And, as indicated by the first testimony, it entirely depended on having good Russian proficiency in the first place.

The DSF and other mass organizations also collaborated with schools to bring youths and younger students into contact with the Soviet military. A teacher-compiled book chronicling the Rudi Arnstadt school in Bestensee (south of Berlin) recorded several friendship events and excursions for the students over a twenty-year period from 1960 to the 1980s. As with other brigade books, it would have been more than an amusing scrap book but rather proof for supervisors of the teachers' political-ideological work. The teachers who belonged to the "Russian Circle" (who were also DSF members) organized excursions, Russian-language and culture festivals, and were also responsible for encouraging students to join the DSF. As early as 1960, the teachers were bringing students to cultural events, photographing the students standing around a Soviet military band performing for them. [87]

We know that in the 1970s, the DSF and the teachers had connections to the Soviet garrison in Königs Wusterhausen and at the Soviet military hospital in the nearby town of Zeesen. Through these connections, teachers organized repeated excursions—bringing students to the military hospital to interact with Komsomol members who could have either been soldiers or civilian children of Soviet officers. There was also some level of reciprocity—in one year there were four excursions by the students to the hospital in Zeesen while there were three visits by Soviet children from the garrison school in Königs Wusterhausen. Through these visits the

[87] Chronik der Schule Bestensee, October 1960, folder 24, A-4 Bestensee, Kreisarchiv Dahme-Spreewald, Luckau.

teachers recorded "a firm friendship developed" between the students and the Soviet youth.[88] There were also reciprocal meetups between teachers and Soviet women who worked at the hospital, with Soviet civilian workers attending Russian-language and cultural events held at the school.[89] In contrast to arranging events purely with soldiers, repeat encounters with civilians who lived on Soviet bases were more feasible, as Soviet garrison schools for children were analogous to those in the Soviet Union, but located on German soil, thus the DSF and schools could arrange such reciprocal agreements. As with the Bernau DSF in 1964 for the larger friendship events, the teachers, most assuredly bound to quantitative goals, do not provide details of the actual encounters but merely record the number of times they happened as those were the metrics that would have mattered.

On the annual DSF election in the school, the leader of the Russian circle complained about the low attendance of member teachers at the election, "Even though ALL colleagues are members of the DSF, many were inexcusably absent. This is incomprehensible as this event was announced far enough in advance."[90] The leader then wrote about how the group discussed the lower number of students joining the DSF. This glaring negativity in an otherwise glowing account of successful friendship cultivation with the Soviets suggests that it may have resulted from a longer pattern of unexcused absences in the Russian Circle.[91] What is clear is that membership numbers and ensuring that meetups took place were the main barometers of success.

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[88] Chronik der Schule Bestensee, 1974, folder 24, A-4 Bestensee, Kreisarchiv Dahme-Spreewald, Luckau.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Chronik der Schule Bestensee, 25 November 1981, folder 24, A-4 Bestensee, Kreisarchiv Dahme-Spreewald, Luckau.
[91] Chronik der Schule Bestensee, 25 November 1981, folder 24, A-4 Bestensee, Kreisarchiv Dahme-Spreewald, Luckau.

How else could one quantify (or qualify for that matter) "friendship?" Despite reciprocal agreements between the German and Soviet schools, these meetings would have been no less forced than the larger voluntary youth events. Hannelore Rose, born in 1953, recollected in a 2018 memoir child's perspective on school excursions.

Rose grew up in Altes Lager near Jüterbog which had some of the highest concentrations of Soviet troops in the GDR. Her father was a Baltic German from Riga who served in the Wehrmacht during World War Two. Since he was bilingual in German and Russian, he served the local government in Altes Lager as an interpreter after the war. Due to her father's occupation, Rose grew up with closer contact to the Soviets than average. Considering this background, the role of school excursions plays a relatively minor role in Rose's memoir of growing up in Altes Lager. Her recollections concern less the actual content of school excursions for cultural programs with the Soviets and more the perceived strangeness of some of the Soviet officers present and their wives. She could identify the "freshly imported" officers who had just arrived from the Soviet Union, wearing all their medals on their uniforms with their wives wearing "old-fashioned" clothing."[92] "You often had the impression that they came from the deepest reaches of Siberia, from where time somehow stood still." [93] She noticed the difference between the recently arrived officers and their wives and the ones who had been in the GDR for a while in that the "newer" wives wore more modern clothing after obtaining it from local, East German shops. As with Katja and Heike, the memory of these encounters had little to do with

[92] Hannelore Rose, *Russisches Konfekt* (Renate Wullstein, 2018), 36. Unlike in Western militaries, Soviet officers at formal occasions wore all their medals on their uniforms in lieu of more tidy sets of ribbons on the lapel.
[93] Ibid, 37.

SED ideological goals, but it was exposure to the Soviet neighbors nonetheless, albeit in a controlled setting.

Local chapters of the DSF and local governments clearly put great organizational effort into endearing German youth to their Soviet neighbors in order to engender friendships to the Soviets in the younger generation. Youth events and school excursions in the framework of sanctioned contact with Soviet personnel had multiple impacts. While they did not necessarily achieve a top-down instilling of genuine friendship with the Soviets in all cases, they did at least expose young people to "the Russians" in contexts and circumstances that otherwise would have been impossible. The first-hand experiences of youth participants suggest that while the Soviets were stereotyped as other in their midst, there was a genuine feeling of interest and curiosity towards them that existed outside of the state's ideological goals.[94] Students may not have held too much interest in mastering the Russian language or in discussing the intricacies of Soviet literature, but there was some level of fascination and interest in the Soviets as people and neighbors.

Still, the by the late 1960s, Soviets' overall reluctance to participate in friendship events, coupled with concerns surrounding uncontrollable interactions between GDR citizens and Soviet soldiers, resulted in DSF's reduced emphasis on cultivating friendship events.[95] However, while the DSF deemphasized meetings in the context of "months" of Soviet friendships, these continued on a smaller scale and through bilateral cooperation programs (*Patenschaften*) between Soviet schools and German ones, as seen through the Bestensee school. Local DSF

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[94] See also Niethammer, "Juden und Russen im Gedächtnis der Deutschen."
[95] Müller, O Sowjetmensch, 41.

chapters, and *Kreis* governments did their best to utilize the proximity of local Soviet garrisons to arrange constructed contact.

Spontaneous Friendship: Soviet Homecoming Parade in Finow in 1968

As we have established previously, after 1967, the DSF reduced its emphasis on cultivating personal friendships between GDR citizens and the Soviet military personnel. Massive Soviet-German friendship "Months" were also scaled back in favor of more consistent and ritualized events, opting to instill friendship to an abstracted Soviet "people." Due to East Germany's growing military autonomy, the SED wished for people to see the Soviets not purely as superior role models, but as partners and military allies—*Waffenbrüder*. The hastily organized 1968 homecoming celebration for Soviet troops from crushing the Prague Spring in Eberswalde demonstrates this evolving friendship dynamic, especially since it was not organized through cooperation of the DSF and the *Kreis*, but through the local government only.

The development of an increased emphasis on *Waffenbrüderschaft* came from the USSR. While the Cold War had hot moments during the Khruschev era, in actuality the Soviet Union reduced its conventional forces to reduce tensions with NATO and because Khruschev favored nuclear proliferation. The Warsaw Pact under Khruschev was more of an alliance on paper only, in favor of sole Soviet dominance. After Brezhnev took power in late 1964, the Soviets adopted a more aggressive strategy—the USSR began a massive military buildup of its conventional and nuclear forces to gain superiority over NATO, which coincided with conventional buildups in other Warsaw Pact states. Brezhnev also opted for more direct cooperation with his allies thus the Warsaw Pact began resembling more of an actual military alliance, with the Soviets

integrating East Germany's forces in its war plans.[96] In the early to mid-1960s, the GDR also began hosting several large multinational wargames: Quartet in 1963 followed by October Storm in 1965.[97]

Local communities near major exercise grounds and points of military traffic staged events and propaganda in recognition of East Germany's increased role in ensuring peace. One of the strangest and consequentially largest events that Eberswalde experienced was a spontaneous homecoming parade and gathering for returning Soviet troops from the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

On August 20, 1968, Operation Danube commenced with over 250,000 Warsaw Pact troops pouring into Czechoslovakia. The NVA's direct participation in the invasion was scrapped at the last minute by personal order of Brezhnev, who feared increased Czechoslovak resistance given the relatively fresh memories of Nazi occupation. The bulk of the invasion force nevertheless marched into Czechoslovakia from the GDR. The "Central Front," which comprised the bulk of the invasion and included the First Guards Tank Army, Twentieth Guards Army, and as well as the Sixteenth Air Army were all of the GSFG, marching from staging points in Saxony. Days earlier, the Deutsche Reichsbahn provided the Soviets with thirty-one trains to facilitate the deployment of the Eleventh Guards Army from the Soviet Baltic Military District to the Czechoslovak border.[98]

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[96] Umbach, *Das Rote Bündnis*, 581.
[97] Joerg Morre and Andreas Weigelt, *Das Manoever* (Berlin: Deutsch-Russisches Museum Berlin-Karlshorst, 2016), 6.
[98] Hoffmann and Siegfried Stoof, *Sowjetische Truppen in Deutschland*, 118.

Despite widespread international attention and condemnation of the invasion, press coverage of the invasion in the GDR was limited. The August 22 issue of the Berliner Zeitung, tucked away on the eighth page, included an article stating that "Socialism in the ČSSR has been protected" and that Czechoslovak citizens welcomed and thanked the brother armies for rescuing them from nefarious counterrevolutionary forces.[99] Three months later, after the dust of the invasion had settled, the GSFG forces that took part in the invasion were redeployed back to their garrisons in Germany.

Despite the intentional downplaying of the invasion, the SED chose to organize homecoming celebrations for returning Soviet troops across the GDR. It is unknown whether it was a decision by Ulbricht, the GSFG, the party at large or a combination thereof, but we do know these were probably spontaneous and hastily organized. For the celebration of troops of the Twentieth Guards Army returning to Finow, the *Kreis* drafted the planning documents two days before the event on November 13, 1968.[100] Per the plan, a large column of armored vehicles loaded with soldiers were to parade on a designated route in Finow and then converge on a main square in the town. Soviet generals would arrive and join several local GDR officials on a stage where the officials would give the generals flowers whereupon a local official would give a speech followed by a few words by the Soviet general. Once the vehicles came to a halt, local citizens and schoolchildren could greet the Soviets and give them presents.

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[99] "Sozialismus in der CSSR wird geschützt," *Berliner Zeitung,* August 22, 1968.
[100] Based on the dating, the original date of the event appears to have been 12 November. Ablaufplan für den Empfang der Sowjetischen Einheiten des Kreises Eberswalde am 13. Nov. 1968 in Finow. November 11, 1968, folder 14780, B.II.Finow, Kreisarchiv Barnim

Unlike the Bernau 1964 planning documents, the plans make no mention of broader political-ideological objectives and simply detail the logistics of the event. The *Kreis* tasked local VEBs and a PGH[101] with creating large banners with the slogans—"long live German Soviet Friendship, Druzhba ("Friendship), and we welcome our Soviet friends"—which would be hung along the parade route in Finow and at the main event space, a square called *Kleiner Stern,*[102] located not far from the airbase and Soviet garrison in Finow. The local residential council council (*Wohnbezirkausschuss (*WBO) and local party council arranged for local businesses and schools to make the gifts participants would give to Soviet soldiers (flowers, small packages, knickknacks).



Figure 4: Photograph of the welcoming event in Finow. An Mi-4 helicopter is flying overhead. Dieter Kempfert, 1968, photograph. O.II Kempfert 23170, Kreisarchiv Barnim.

[101] *Produktionsgenossenschaft des Handwerks*
[102] The site today is a shopping mall in Eberswalde.



Figure 5: A Soviet Officer and his family in November 1968.Dieter Kempfert, 1968, photograph. O.II Kempfert 23170, Kreisarchiv Barnim.



Figure 6: Soviet troops and East German children on a BTR-152 APC. Dieter Kempfert, 1968, photograph. O.II Kempfert 23170, Kreisarchiv Barnim.

By 1967, there was already a sponsorship agreement between the Humboldt Oberschule and Finow and the garrison, who would prepare gifts for the soldiers on important holidays, so there already would have been procedures on how to do this. The organizers would also put great detail into constructing and arranging the sound system so the *Soviet Friends* could hear the address and speeches, suggesting that *they* were the main emphasis and not the German crowd.[103] The local councils were also responsible for informing the public that the event was taking place, and arranging for school children to attend, which they had to accomplish in two to three days. Given the public's general lack of awareness surrounding the Soviet deployment to Czechoslovakia two months before, having to hurriedly prepare gifts for soldiers and attend an adjoining mass event must have been quite jarring. Neither the event nor planning documents made any reference to the invasion, either. The undertaking would have necessitated more direct cooperation with the Soviets than usual, though, like the 1964 friendship event in Bernau, the documents are vague about the details of Soviet participation, giving only a range of times when the Soviet column would come through, and indicating that the crowd and delegation would simply have to wait for them. Even the name of the Soviet general who would be speaking remains unknown.

Photos taken by a local photographer of the event give us a glimpse of what it looked like. The photographs were intended to be included in press releases for the SED. The main mass of people at the center of Figure 4 are mostly Soviet servicemen. The bulk of the crowd (not pictured) remained on the margins, waiting to give the Soviets their gifts and greet them. The central focus of the event was not Soviet culture or civilization, but Soviet military power

[103] Wir sind Dabei, 1980, folder 5603, R, Kreisarchiv Barnim.

and the Soviets as *Waffenbrüder*. GDR and Soviet flags are side-by-side, evoking partnership. On the stage, a delegation of *Kreis* officials and young FDJ members stood with the Soviet delegation, evoking an ideal picture of local youth. The photographer also captured pictures of Soviet families (Figure 5), humanizing them as well shots of excited youth climbing on the vehicles with Soviet personnel (Figure 6).

Again, the way the *Kreis* and the Soviets staged the event has little to do with what the Soviets were returning *from* or why they had been there. Instead, it offered an opportunity to showcase the evolving focus of German-Soviet friendship. In fact, opacity about *why* the event was occurring would have played in the SED's favor. A resident of Jüterbog, when speaking of similar homecoming event at the same time, noted that no one questioned it but simply went along with it as with other mass demonstrations.[104]As with many similar events, youth and children are a focus, both on the stage and the gift-bringers to the Soviets. It would have been exciting to climb on the vehicles and see the Soviet neighbors up close and in such a large display. Perhaps the experience would not necessarily engender "friendship" as such, but it would engender familiarity and an acceptance of an abstract propagandized construct of "Russians," but *their* "Russians."

The 1968 homecoming celebration of Soviet troops in Finow demonstrates a shift in German-Soviet friendship—from massive displays of ideologically choreographed celebrations of Soviet culture to a more pragmatic affirmation of military solidarity. In contrast to earlier events planned far in advance by mass organizations, this hastily arranged parade and celebration emphasized Soviet strength and partnership over cultural exchange, reinforcing an image of the

[104] Conversation with N.J. 11/08/2023.

Soviets as reliable *Waffenbrüder.* Despite, or more correctly because of the lack of transparency about the invasion of Czechoslovakia, the parade created a powerful visual narrative of unity with the Soviets, particularly for the local youth who interacted with Soviet soldiers and climbed on vehicles (Figure 3). This spontaneous display of solidarity further entrenched the Soviets as a visible and accepted part of local life.

Municipal-Soviet Cooperation: Working for the community, Soviet-German Friendship in in the 1970s

As established previously, massive German-Soviet friendship campaigns ceased after 1967 due to a combination of factors. These included the introduction of the five-day workweek, which eliminated several major holidays including May 8, logistical issues, such as Soviet reluctance due to the Soviet commanders' desire to limit the potential for uncontrolled contact between GDR citizens and Soviets. Yet, in the 1970s, under the new Honecker regime, the DSF, the *Kreis,* and party and mass organizations continued to organize friendship meetings and other cultural events, albeit on a smaller scale. An examination of Friendship activities during this period reveals also an increased propagandization and practice of hiring out local Soviet servicemen for manual labor tasks in the community. In effect, the propaganda narrative shifted away from simply glorifying Soviet civilization as a role model and as *Waffenbrüder* but as neighbors doing good for the community. *Kreis* officials could try to build relationships with local garrison commanders and get (nearly) free labor, while demonstrating peacetime *Waffenbrüderschaft*. These factors had the unintended effect, at the same time, of increasing the visibility of Soviet soldiers in the community, which increased empathy and familiarity among the locals. Partially informed through preexisting stereotypes, and partially through witnessing

malnourished, hungry soldiers, created a lasting perception of the Soviets as "a*rme Schweine,*" but accepted features of daily life.

Eberswalde-Finow's monthly periodical, *Kultur-Informationen Eberswalde-Finow,* detailed cultural events, tourism opportunities to other Eastern Bloc states, and Soviet-German friendship activities. The cover of the November, 1976 issue featured children gathered a Soviet military band, continuing the theme demonstrating the vanguard generation's constant exposure to Soviet culture.[105] In that year the local DSF held a Week of German Soviet friendship in November, on occasion of the October Revolution.

If we compare to the 1964 friendship month in Bernau, Eberswalde- Finow Friendship Week 1976 is much less heavy-handedly ideologically driven. None of the events are specifically honoring Soviet personages or Brezhnev or have a stated political-ideological goal. Most of the events were musically-oriented—concerts of Soviet military bands and Soviet folk dances, such as a performance by a Kazakh folk-dance group at the Walzwerk metalworking plant.[106] There were two designated friendship meetings—between construction workers who had recently renovated the *Haus der DSF* and garrison soldiers as well as between schoolchildren and Soviet pioneers, who were probably children of officers. Overall, the relatively small-scale of German-Soviet Friendship week reflects broader changes since the late 1960s of ending large-scale events. Based on the scale, it suggests less of a focus on aggressive friendship cultivation across a broad spectrum and a more adhoc effort to increase good relations between the garrisons and the surrounding community.

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[105] Kulturinformationen Eberswalde-Finow, November 1976, folder 8796, R, Kreisarchiv Barnim, Eberswalde.
[106] Woche der Deutsch-Sowjetischen Freundschaft, November 1976, folder 8796, R Kreisarchiv Barnim, Eberswalde.

Figure 7: Cover of Kulturinformationen/Eberswalde-Finow, May 1976, R, 8796. Kreisarchiv Barnim.

In anticipation of the thirty-fifth anniversary of the end of World War II, the *Kreis* government of Eberswalde in 1980 published a book called *Freundschaft für Immer*, a collection of news articles, columns, and testimonies that sketch out a snapshot of local German-Soviet friendship over the previous ten years.[107] The *Kreis* wanted to showcase the best examples of good relations between the community and the Soviet garrison. Among the newer initiatives over the previous ten years was women's club *Klub der Freundschaft*. Established in 1970, the fifty-member women's club connected local Soviet women (mostly likely wives of officers) with local Eberswalde women. The stated goal was for GDR women to "familiarize" Soviet women with working and living conditions and cultural life in the GDR as well as with region's (the "Red Finow Valley") socialist history. While bearing some superficial resemblance to a modern *Integrationskurs*, it had nothing to with training Soviet women to work in the GDR (that would have been illegal), it would have been centered more on facilitating cultural understanding. But one thing that the collection demonstrates is a growing emphasis on propagandizing the ad hoc Soviet labor detachments that helped with various manual labor jobs throughout town. Detailed very prominently was one example from 1974. In writing for an article for the periodical a worker wrote: to accomplish their quotas for 1975, the pipeline construction firm in Finow had to perform construction work to move machinery and production equipment to other buildings. Because other construction firms wouldn't be available for months, they had to do it themselves but did not have enough staff to do it on time. The managerial staff then suggested they use their contacts with the neighboring Soviet garrison to provide them with workers:

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[107] *Freundschaft für Immer*, 1980, folder 5603, R, Kreisarchiv Barnim, Eberswalde.

> At first, we didn't dare hope that the unit would be able to provide us with the necessary workers over the specified period. But then, suddenly, they appeared! And [stayed on the job] with the exception of a few days for the entire construction period. There were language difficulties at the time, but these were overcome with the help of sign language. Our Soviet friends immediately understood movements we demonstrated, even without words…with jackhammers in hand, they threw themselves with real enthusiasm at the iron-hard foundations. Thanks to their energetic help, our target was even shortened by a month…. Here once again was true friendship in action.[108]

What is striking that, even in this propagandistic context, the employee freely admits to staffing shortages and inefficiencies that drove them to needing to turn to the Soviets in the first place, but that must have been outweighed by the *Kreis's* desire to showcase an example of Soviet help. The language barriers described also undermined the prevailing goal of universal Russian fluency in the GDR, though there were significant numbers of bottom-ranked enlisted men from non-Russian republics that did not speak Russian. There also were clearly informal (and potentially undesirable) contacts between the firm and certain garrison officers to make that possible. What they don't mention is whether they compensated the Soviets, which they probably did, but it would have probably been less majestic to mention the schnapps, cigarettes, and food they gave them.

Soviet garrisons allowing soldiers to do manual labor in surrounding communities was not new, nor was the mention of labor help as a part of propaganda. No garrison was short of

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[108] Sowjetische Freunde halfen uns beim Lösen betrieblicher Schwerpunktaufgaben, 1980, R 5603. Kreisarchiv Barnim, Eberswalde.

bored soldiers who would claw at the chance to leave the confines of the base.[109] However, typically, mention of Soviet labor concerned large-scale efforts such as assisting with grain harvests and disaster aid. [110] What was new was the frequency and candidness of showcasing Soviet labor as key friendship propaganda, was. At least in Eberswalde, contracted Soviet labor is certainly more prominent by the 1970s.

The May, 1976 issue of the *Kultur-Informationen* periodical prominently features Soviet troops helping with the groundwork of building the anti-fascist memorial in the Hans Ammon park in central Eberswalde in the framework of subbotnik volunteer labor (Figure 5). There was a clear intent to increase the visibility of Soviet soldiers to average citizens doing work that directly benefitted the community and demonstrating "Friendship" in action. In another sense this could have another effect on advancing friendship without the immense logistics of managing friendship meetings and unpredictable Soviet officers. Sometimes the *Kreis* hired out Soviet troops for larger assignments and compensating them, participating in most gray areas within the GDR economy.

In July 1974, Soviet troops performed extensive maintenance on the Weidendamm, a large park area in central Eberswalde. In coordination with the VEB *Stadtgärtnerei*, troops braved the July heat, performing extensive landscaping work, digging out and filling underground cable lines. The city estimated that the troops had done 3,000 marks worth of work,

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[109] Particularly for enlisted men and conscripts, life in the barracks could be incredibly dreary, monotonous, and even violent, Silke Satjukow, *Besatzer "Die Russen" in Deutschland 1945-1994* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH, 2008), 114-115.

[110] Press examples extolling Soviet help in harvest, Christa Drechsel, " Sichtbare Ergebnisse unserer Freundschaft: Erich Mückenberger sprach vor Sowjetischen "Soldaten, Sergeanten und Offizieren," *Neues Deutschland*, January 28, 1967.

and, due to the extensiveness of the labor, rewarded the commanding officer 600 marks in cash, which was unusual since cash exchanges between the Soviet military and East Germany were normally forbidden.[111] In additional recognition for the Weidendamm project, that October, the municipality gifted the garrison two electric guitars and a complete drum set to be used for that year's anniversary of the October Revolution, which were probably intended for the garrison musical ensemble. [112] As there were several garrisons in and around Eberswalde, it is impossible to know with which unit specifically the *Kreis* made these arrangements but it is clear that the local government had built a relationship with that particular garrison commander. Based on the level of communication involved, it would seem there were more channels open to request labor detachments than to organize friendship events, because the Soviets achieving benefits from this: material rewards and morale boosts for the troops to get out of the garrison. Quid pro quo. The normalization and propagandization of Soviet labor work in towns helped normalize their presence and in turn normalize informal relationships between firms and municipal services and Soviet garrisons. Beyond Eberswalde, and in other places that had large troop garrisons, Soviet street labor was commonplace, in the case of Jüterbog, troops shoveled and plowed snow during the winter.

In Strausberg, there was an informal relationship between the German and Soviet fire departments.[113] The Soviet fire brigade also regularly participated with the Strausberg volunteer fire department to put out civilian fires. There was even a saying in Strausberg during that time,

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[111] Niederschrift, 8 August, 1974, folder 12656, C.II.RdStE, Kreisarchiv Barnim, Eberswalde, Germany.
[112] Perhaps the instruments seen in the November 1976 Kulturinformationen issue were awarded from this incident Stellv. d.Bürgermeisters f. Planung an Gennossen Hammermeister, 17 October 1974, folder 12656, C.II.RdStE.
[113] The risk posed by a storage facility in which hazardous materials were there stored necessitated a dedicated Soviet fire brigade.

"If something's burning, then the Friends are [already] there."[114] Even though the Soviets were not integrated into the municipal emergency reporting system, when they listened for when local radio chatter mentioned a fire, after which the fire bridge would rush to the Strausberg volunteer fire department and then follow the German firefighters to the emergency. All this was done without official arrangements.

Witnessing Soviets performing labor for their community, did not inspire awe for a superior Soviet civilization among East German civilians. Rather, it introduced civilians to friendly, yet gaunt and timid soldiers from far reaches of the Soviet empire. While officers with their sharp uniforms, income and well-dressed wives conveyed status and a sense of the hierarchy within the Soviet army—officers versus gaunt and malnourished enlisted men. Empathetic Germans eagerly gave them food. In Altes Lager, Hannelore Rose's father, who spoke Russian and had connections to Soviet officers as an interpreter, worked with the DSF to hire out Soviet soldiers to assist in maintenance of agricultural equipment when production quotas were falling short. Her father always made sure they received a warm meal. "They got lemonade and a warm meal, usually a stew with bockwurst. It absolutely had to be something that included meat or sausage. The soldiers were thankful and worked diligently. For them it was a kind of reward [to work there]. To get out of the barracks, away from the dreariness. It was a welcome change of pace. My father made sure that the midday meal somehow included meat. He also made sure there was lemonade, which they loved."[115]

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[114] *Wenn's brennt, dann sind die Freunde da.* Interview with Gerd-Ulrich Herrmann, 11/23/2023.
[115] Rose, *Russisches Konfekt*, 13.

In Eberswalde, a resident recalled, "Of course my parents got annoyed when they [the Soviets] messed up the hill near the house during maneuvers by nevertheless would send me to bring them drinks, because they were really just poor guys (*arme Schweine*)."[116] Another Eberswalde resident recalled being sent to deliver sandwiches to soldiers on labor duty on the road.[117]

There was clearly a widespread perception of poor quality of life at Soviet bases and seeing gaunt, seemingly malnourished Soviet soldiers. Yet the quality of life on Soviet bases, especially in terms of food quality and availability depended on time, location, military branch, and, most importantly, the garrison commander. For example, the air force was generally better fed than the army. One Soviet veteran recalled during his tour in 1974-1975 in Forst Zinna (near Jüterbog), the food was disgusting, but when he was transferred to Prenzlau, the provisions were good.[118] Soviets troops in Germany, on average, especially officers, were also paid better and better equipped than those stationed in the USSR and elsewhere.[119] Regardless, while interactions and sight of Soviet labor details may have given ground to a broader perception of poor quality of life, the Soviet soldiers at large were certainly stereotyped in this way.

By the 1970s, there was evolving a more practical, localized form of friendship that extended beyond official friendship campaigns. The *Kreis's* use of soviet labor detachments recast the Soviets less as ideals of civilization and as quiet contributors to local well-being. While locals' encounters with the Soviets through labor reinforced stereotypes of the Soviets as

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[116] Email exchange with V.H. 01/28/2024.
[117] Conversation with Frau G. 8/8/2023.
[118] Correspondence with GSFG veteran, 3/17/2025.
[119] Aleksander Trybin, "Chem kormili i kak platili Sovetskim soldatam v GDR?," *Moskovskij Komsomolets*, February 24, 2020, https://karel.mk.ru/social/2020/02/24/chem-kormili-i-kak-platili-sovetskim-soldatam-v-gdr.html.

underfed and miserable, they humanized them in ways that large-scale propaganda never fully achieved. Friendship was evolving less as an abstract concept of international socialism and more of a functional and accepted coexistence.

Conclusion

What began as a nebulous concept invented in the postwar period, "Soviet-German Friendship" evolved over the following decades into a complex set of practices that blurred the line between propaganda, policy, and everyday life. Local officials were not merely passive transmitters of central directives but active mediators who had to reconcile the state's political goals with the realities of coexisting with the massive Soviet military presence In doing so, they navigated Soviet reluctance, citizen indifference, and the unpredictability of cross-cultural and transnational contact.

Early friendship campaigns, such as the 1964 Bernau events, relied heavily on ritualized and contrived encounters and presentations intended to instill socialist solidarity. Yet participants' experiences tell less of actual ideological conviction but instead a mix of intercultural curiosity, boring ritual, and candid conversation. Despite the unevenness of these encounters, they nonetheless contributed to an increasingly normalized Soviet military presence. Especially for younger generations, Soviet soldiers increasingly appeared not as an abstract nation but as visible people who were embedded in the local environment.

By the 1970s, a more pragmatic form of interaction emerged as the state scaled back staged encounters. Local governments increasingly cooperated with Soviet garrison through informal labor arrangements on local projects, bringing Soviet troops into everday public spaces. These interactions presented Soviet less as representatives of a superior civilization than as

ordinary, often overworked conscripts—*arme Schweine* but nonetheless a part of the local visual-sensory landscape.

The success of German-Soviet friendship was not ideological transformation but rather helping to facilitate the normalization of Soviet troop within the rhythm of daily life. Over time, repeated encounters embedded the Soviet military within the sensory landscape of GDR communities. The following chapters turn to these everyday experiences more directly by examining how non-visual sensory encounters shaped East German perceptions of the Soviets far beyond state ideology.

Chapter Two: Soviet Smellscapes: Olfactory Normalization and the Collapse of Artificial State Boundaries, 1960s-1970s

The memoir of Hannelore Rose, who grew up in Altes Lager, begins with a visceral and traumatic experience from when she was four years old in 1957. While playing with her sister outdoors, she heard a loud explosion near where a group of Soviet soldiers were building a fence. During the digging, a soldier struck an old Wehrmacht landmine, causing it to detonate, making a loud explosion. She decided to investigate the source of the noise, whereupon she noticed an unnaturally *sweet burning smell*. The blast killed the soldiers instantly. She describes the scene in gruesome detail, "Curious, I walk across the street and see legs, heads, and parts of the torso. A severed leg with a boot still attached is lying right in front of me, and there are many more beside it. Everything is bloody. [Today,] I can still see half a leg as a horrific image in front of me, with lots of tendons sticking out of it. They looked like discarded sewing threads. The sweet smell comes from burnt human flesh. I can still smell it."[120] Twenty years later, a MiG-21 crashed near the town during a training accident. As she rode by the crash site on her bicycle, she could recognize the same scent from her childhood, reinforced in a new experience that would be similarly permanently ingrained in her memory.[121]

That she attached smell to this traumatic experience with the Soviets is no accident. Smell is one of the most powerful senses in terms of human memory. The human brain's olfactory cortex, which identifies smells, is adjacent to the amygdala and hippocampus, which manage emotions and memory respectively. When someone smells something emotionally

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[120] Hannelore Rose, *Russisches Konfekt* (Renate Wullstein, 2018), 7.
[121] Ibid, 8.

meaningful, the hippocampus can "file" that scent away permanently. Even after decades, a smell can evoke the same emotional response and memory as it did when it first occurred.[122] Rose's recollection illustrates a broader dynamic: sensory experiences did not merely accompany the Soviet presence—they structured how it was lived, remembered and ultimately normalized. The fact that she chose to begin her memoir with such a visceral sensory event speaks to the recollective power of smell as a key pillar of her experience with the Soviets.Indeed, the very title of her memoir, *Russisches Konfekt* (Russian Candy), evokes a distinct sensory connection. These olfactory encounters formed part of a wider sensory world in which the Soviet military became embedded.

While the previous chapter focused on visual environments driven by *seeing* Soviet troops, the following two chapters focus on *invisible* sensory effects of the Soviet presence on East Germans' experience. While interpersonal interaction between East German civilians and the Soviet military occurred, the simple fact remains that most locals living in adjacent communities did not develop personal relationships with the Soviets or regularly interacted with individual soldiers. Yet the Soviet military was encountered daily nonetheless. Its sensory effects permeated everyday life regardless of direct contact.

This chapter focuses on smell as a key medium through which the Soviet presence became both pervasive and uncontainable within the GDR. Particularly after the 1957 *Stationierungsabkommen*, and into the consumer-oriented Honecker years, olfactory encounters played a central role in shaping the gradual normalization of the Soviet military within everyday

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[122] Molly McDonough, "The Connections Between Smell, Memory, and Health," *Harvard Medicine*, Spring 2024, https://magazine.hms.harvard.edu/articles/connections-between-smell-memory-and-health.

life. In this chapter, I examine three examples of the role of smell in shaping locals' lived experience and relationship with the Soviets as well as its role in state reactions to control it.

First, I examine the 1965 Soviet-caused Bernau water contamination disaster. The smell of trichlorethylene (TCE) in the water system tipped off local state authorities that Soviet negligence caused degreasing solvents to leak into the ground water. This initiated a multi-month resource heavy cleanup effort where Bernau officials used the smell of TCE as a barometer to gauge the extent of the disaster and whether mitigation efforts were working. Of equal importance was obfuscating and control the spread of information to shield the Soviets from blame. The event demonstrates both the diagnostic power of smell and the limits of state control over its political implications.

Next, I explore two vectors of scent that the state was powerless to control: Soviet gasoline (colloquially known as "*Russensprit*)" and Soviet perfume. Heavy perfumes worn by Soviet women as well as the distinctive smell of ubiquitous Soviet gasoline spread through an extensive black-market economy integrated themselves in people's lived experiences, became a part of collective memory, and normalized the Soviet presence but in a way that existed beyond state control over the relationship between the Soviets and GDR citizens. Through repetition, they transformed from markers of foreignness into familiar features of the local environment, normalizing the Soviet presence in ways that operated beyond official friendship narratives.

Overall, I argue that the normalization of the Soviet military presence at the local level depended less on state-directed friendship initiatives than on processes that unfolded beyond the state's control. Paradoxically, this lack of control facilitated normalization. Because the state could neither fully contain nor regulate the olfactory outputs of the Soviet presence, these

sensory intrusions became integrated into everyday life through repeated exposure and unconscious immersion. Smell reveals how the Soviet military permeated East German lived experience in ways that transcended physical boundaries and ideology. As will be covered in the next chapter, the negative *sonic* impact (i.e sonic booms, military activity) of the Soviets that the state was utterly powerless to control led to decreased confidence in the state, particularly in the 1980s.

This chapter draws on a combination of municipal (*Kreis*) government files, oral histories, Stasi files, as well as more nontraditional sources such as online posts and comments on German automotive and *Ostalgie* internet forums. State documents help reveal official actions and responses in monitoring and combatting Soviet-caused environmental disturbances and pollution as well as revealing the limits of what the state could control. As with the previous chapter, I draw upon several of the nineteen-semi structured oral histories I conducted during 2023-2024.[123] Statements from the interviews as well as those collected from online forums illuminate smell's capacity to trigger vivid memories of the past and to better define the extent of local smellscapes.

Method/Historiography

In adopting a sensory frame of analysis, this and the following two chapters build on a wider literature of sensory histories, but particularly the burgeoning field of sensory histories of the Cold War.[124] Previous work has largely argued that human sensory perception can be

[123] See the Method/Sources section in the Introduction for clarification of oral history methodology.
[124] Examples of sensory histories include Annales School works, such as Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* (Harvard University Press, 1986). Frank Krause, *Geruchslandschaften Mit Kriegsleichen* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Academic, 2016). Cold War:

governed in a Foucauldian sense. In this frame of analysis, one considers that human perception of the physical world can be socially learned, culturally shaped, and be historically specific.[125] In the context of highly politicized lived reality of the GDR and the wider Cold War, the desire of those in power to control and regulate perceived senses amounted to what such scholars term "sensory warfare." One example would be during the Berlin Airlift when Americans provided malnourished children with relatively nonnutritive Wrigley's chewing gum and Hershey's chocolate whose unique taste and packaging would endear them to the West. While sensory warfare of course includes such clearly intentional efforts to influence thought and behavior via sensory perception, another facet deals with the unintentional sensory biproducts of military activity. During the Soviet War in Afghanistan, the *sight* of the AN-12 transport aircraft flying back to the USSR demoralized Soviet soldiers because they carried the zinc coffins of fallen comrades, earning the plane the moniker *chyornyy tyul'pan*—"the black tulip," becoming a symbol of death and hopelessness in the face of losing to a tenacious foe. This real negative effect of sensory warfare on morale through sight was assuredly not an intentional one by the Soviet Air Forces.

Sensory warfare, chiefly of the unintentional variety was a key factor in shaping not only the experiential reality of GDR locals and how they remembered it later in certain communities,

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[125] Bodo Mrozek, ed., *Sensory Warfare in the Global Cold War: Partition, Propaganda, Covert Operations* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2024), 6. "Sensory Warfare" expands on the larger subfield of sonic histories, specifically Steve Goodman's work and terminology of "Sonic Warfare." Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*, Technologies of Lived Abstraction (MIT Press, 2010). Other relevant works bordering sonic history include: Nicholas Cull, "Reading, Viewing, and Tuning in to the Cold War," in *Cambridge History of the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2010.); V Erlmann, *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening and Modernity* (Bloomsbury, 2004); P Szendy, *Szendy, P. (2007), Listen: A History of Our Ears. New York: Fordham University Press* (Fordham University Press, n.d.); H Schulze, "The Body of Sound: Sounding Out the History of Science Sound Effects, 2 (1): 196–208," *Sound Effects* 2, no. 1 (2012).

but it also influenced people's relationship to the state. The military's generation of nonhuman "actants"[126] (noise, smells, tastes, visual effects) could transcend and thoroughly undermine the very artificial barriers that the Soviets from surrounding communities, effectively introducing chaos and uncontrollable circumstances into a situation the state wanted firmly rooted under control. Therefore, the state made limiting the impact of these effects a top priority.

The GDR state at the local *Kreis* level and further up the chain was constantly concerned about negative sensory impacts—maneuver damages to sonic booms, small arms fire to road and water contamination—anything that could negatively impact the public's perception of the Soviet "Friends" and undermine the great effort of friendship propaganda efforts as discussed in the previous chapter.

The marked increase in complaints (*Eingaben*) by GDR citizens due to such impacts in the 1970s and 1980s (particularly noise) adds nuance to the participatory dictatorship thesis initially put forth by Mary Fulbrook and refined by others such as Paul Betts and Eli Rubin.[127] With the general rise in living standards after Honecker and a larger consumer economy, GDR citizens became more vocal about problems affecting their daily well-being. The Soviets inadvertently generated a political arena where citizens complained about negative (chiefly sensory) impacts via official state channels, but, despite treaties with the USSR, the state was largely powerless to physically limit these impacts from the Soviets. Instead, the state justified the ostensibly negative effects as necessary to defend against Western imperialism, or they

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[126] This term as its used in Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), see Mrozek, *Sensory Warfare in the Cold War*, 149.
[127] Paul Betts, *Within Walls: Private Life in the German Democratic Republic*, (Oxford University Press, 2012), Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker*, (Yale University Press, 2008), Eli Rubin, *Amnesiopolis: Modernity, Space, and Memory in East Germany*, First edition (Oxford University Press, 2016).

simply covered for the Soviets by obfuscating such impacts to protect their chief ally and mollify domestic concerns. Whereas (as Betts has argued) citizens could pressure the state into protecting their private affairs using official channels, managing concerns due to military activity was far messier and more complex for the state. In other words, sensory effects of Soviet military activity complicated and sometimes even undermined the participatory dictatorship of the GDR.

The 1957 *Staionierungsabkommen* established the modalities and rules for the "temporarily" stationed Soviet Forces in Germany and defined the boundaries and rules between the GSFG and East German communities. The treaty's only purpose was not to merely establish good will and cooperation between the two states, but for the GDR state to better regulate its own citizens within the presence of a chaotic, opaque, foreign military. Despite its efforts, the task of controlling the relationship and interaction between their constituents and the Soviets proved challenging. As discussed in Chapter 1, even in the context of highly orchestrated German-Soviet friendship events, despite accounting for numerous variables; just allowing a space where unscripted human interaction could occur could already have proven counterproductive from the state's perspective.

If controlling personal interactions was difficult, then controlling sensory effects of the Soviet presence was nearly impossible. One of these effects was smell. This section covers how the Soviet military presence altered the "smellscape" of East German communities through vectors such as women's perfume and gasoline and contributed to both a further acceptance of the Soviets but also enabled further avenues for people to function outside the state.

For the present chapter, in my analysis, I draw upon scholarship in Cold War olfactory sensory history, particularly Bodo Mrozek's integration of Actor-Network Theory with the idea

that nonhuman "actants" trigger sensory responses that transcend physical boundaries (e.g. military base fences). I also adopt Mrozek's and Stephanie Weismann's methods on the theory of smellscapes, as discussed below, to better illustrate how olfaction impacted everyday lived experience. As recent work on the anthropology of smell have shown, is that smell is all-to-often overlooked as a key pillar of human experience, even though much of it remains unconscious. Anthropologist Mojca Ramšak argues that the loss of smell caused by early variants of COVID-19 caused a "sensory vacuum" as people lost the ability to perceive the world olfactorily and lost the basic joy of eating.[128]

The concept of the "smellscapes," coined by geographer J. Douglas Porteous proposes that, like soundscapes or landscapes (etc.) smell can be spatially ordered and tied to place.[129] To account for the general ephemerality of smell itself, as smells generally occur at specific times when the odorant is heavy enough in the air, Porteous also invented the terms "smell event" and "smell mark," which one can use to construct cohesive smellscapes. For example, daily life in the home and in the community can contain weekly smell events such as on laundry day (detergent/ fabric softener/steam), baking day, mowing day (freshly cut grass) etc.[130] These collective smell events, then coalesce into cohesive smellscapes. Smell events can also be individual unique moments where a person smells something impactful enough to earn a permanent place in their memory. In turn, smell marks are a characteristic odor's that a person

[128] Mojca Ramšak, *The Anthropology of Smell* (Springer, 2024), 1-9.
[129] See J. Douglas Porteous, "Smellscape," *Progress in Physical Geography: Earth and Environment* 9, no. 3 (1985): 356–78.
[130] Ibid, 367.

associates with a specific source in a similar way how commercial products and foods are designed to have a distinctive smell for branding purposes.

Mrozek, for example, demonstrates how environmental pollution and herbicides along the Berlin Wall's "death strip" along with the smells of corpses became major discussions upper-level diplomacy between East and West Germany. He also writes about how the inner German border was "odorized" with powerful chemicals such as turpentine to prevent animals from crossing either side and triggering motion sensors.[131] In both cases, these transnational smellscapes were areas of permeability—they transcended the artificial political borders of Cold War Germany, ingraining themselves in vivid memories of civilian locals on both sides. Yet, as he notes, there is clear evidence that East and West Germany developed distinct smellscapes within everyday life influenced through consumerism, environmental, and circumstantial factors.[132] Stephanie Weissmann, in her study of the Cold War Polish perfume industry points out that notoriously "stinky" Soviet perfume advanced anti-Russian/Soviet stereotypes built on preexisting historical animosity.[133]

The 1965 Bernau Disaster

Olfactory intrusions by the Soviets into local smellscapes were sometimes merely benign factors of daily life, but some also precipitated real crises that local state authorities had to manage, such as the 1965 Bernau water contamination catastrophe. The disaster revealed the deep interconnectedness between Soviet bases and adjacent communities. As the catastrophe

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[131] Mrozek, *Sensory Warfare in the Global Cold War*, 12, 147-161.
[132] Ibid, 159.
[133] Stephanie Weismann, "Between Soir de Paris and Red Moscow: Olfactory Front Lines in Polish Perfumery," in *Sensory Warfare in the Global Cold War* (Penn State University Press, 2024), 41-53.

shows, smell was a nonhuman actant that penetrated the community as well as a tool and barometer the state used to determine just how deep the Soviet impact on the community was.

Since most Soviet military facilities were repurposed Wehrmacht infrastructure and located very close to GDR residential and industrial areas, utilities were shared, particularly sewer lines as well as water sources. This Soviet dependence on municipal infrastructure was highlighted when water issues emerged. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, *Kreis* officials for Eberswalde were reporting that the rapid expansion of local heavy industry was causing major water shortages in the city, despite the city never having had water issues before 1945. In 1957, the city was barely meeting half its needs to supply drinking water to the town and for local industries. In 1962, only sixty-two percent of water needs had been met.[134] Despite this improvement, Eberswalde was still far short of fulfilling its water demands. This situation led to mandatory water shut-offs at certain hours and a general rationing of water resources. During those years, the local branch of the National Front (local representatives for the SED) received and processed numerous citizen complaints (*Eingaben*) from residents complaining about disruptions to the water supply.[135] At the same time, the city was also grappling with problem of supplying enough water to one of the Soviet garrisons, indicating that the Soviets too were experiencing the same water issues as local GDR citizens.[136] Even behind concrete walls and barbed wire fences, with bakeries, pig stalls, and self-sustaining electric generators, water was a resource the Soviets could not procure themselves. Yet, this interdependence could work both

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[134] Einschätzung über das ernste Problem der Wasserversorgung der Stadt Eberswalde u. eingeleitete Maßnahmen zur Abhilfe, 1963. Folder 24094, D.I.RdKE, Kreisarchiv Barnim.
[135] National Front Nordend to Rat des Kreises, March 27, 1961, Folder 24094, DIRdKE, Kreisarchiv Barnim. *Eingaben* are discussed in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4.
[136] Dadeweig to Soviet Commandant Eberswalde, August 23, 1960. Folder 24094. DIRdKE, Kreisarchiv Barnim.

ways, and with potentially disastrous consequences, as what happened in the nearby city of Bernau in 1965.

During the night of March 13, a worker in the filtration room of the water supply facility in Bernau noticed a peculiar *chemical smell* in the room. The worker immediately informed an onsite specialist who confirmed the unusual smell, and more than that, they also determined the odor originated from the water intake, leading to one of the main wells from where the town sourced its drinking water.[137] After notifying the local and Berlin water authorities, the municipal (*Kreis*) council, and hygiene inspector, they determined that the well was funneling potentially dangerous contaminants into the city's drinking water supply. According to the official report, they shut down the intake to the well (and possibly two additional wells) before the contaminated water could be distributed to the city. Once this was done, the chemical smell abated.[138] As it turned out, the contaminated well was located directly beneath the vehicle maintenance facility of the Sixth Guards Motor Rifle Division stationed in Bernau.[139] About a week later, the municipal government assembled a crisis commission and obtained permission from the Soviet commandant to access the vehicle maintenance area. During the inspection, the Soviets made sure their own commander was present along with a physician. The exact location where the leak

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[137] Bericht über Havarie an der Wassergewinnungsanlage Bernau—Verseuchung eines Brunnens der Trinkwasserversorgung Bernau durch chem. Flüssigkeiten. March 20, 1965. Folder 19098, EIRdKB, Kreisarchiv Barnim.

[138] The Crisis Commission reports only the main contaminated well was shut down, but the official Stasi report on the incident says they shut down three wells.

[139] Olaf Kersten et al., *Garnisonen Der NVA Und GSTD: Zur Nutzung Der Mililtärischen Standorte von 1871 Bis 2010* (Verlag Dr. Köster, 2011), 146. The cleaning facility was built by Germans in 1959 overseen by *Spezialbau* Potsdam according to the corresponding Stasi file. Eine Verseuchung des Trinkwassers in Bernau/Frankfurt/Od. Folder 1028. MfS ZAIG. Stasi-Unterlagen-Archiv. Berlin..

was occurring was the base's vehicle washing station. Grass and other vegetation in the area were dead.

The chemical that was leaking into the groundwater was trichloroethylene (TCE), a potent solvent commonly used as an industrial degreaser that the Soviets were using to wash their vehicles.[140] It is worth noting that TCE emits an odor only at high concentrations, so it is likely the city's water supply had already been contaminated by lower amounts. According to the city's analysis, consuming 1mg of the substance orally would have been enough to be fatal.[141] Negligent handling and storage practices of the chemical caused the disaster: the holding tank for used TCE was not emptied on a regular basis and so it overflowed, creating a "pond" of TCE in the soil, the storage drums of the chemical that were offloaded from trains were stored only fifty meters away, additional spillages through transferring the solvent to the storage tanks.

Much of the city's water supply had to be shut down, prompting the *Kreis* to send regular convoys of trucks filled with water and additional temporary pipelines laid to compensate.[142] The Stasi became involved and embedded its own personnel in the crisis command center as disaster mitigation and cleanup efforts ensued, no doubt in an additional effort to ensure information on the exact cause of the disaster would be hidden from the public. Shortly after the disaster, the Frankfurt (Oder) district newspaper *Neuer Tag* asked the Crisis Commission if they should

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[140] As a motor rifle division, the Sixth Guards Division would have fielded soft-skinned vehicles, tanks, and armored personnel carriers and infantry fighting vehicles. The main accident report states the Soviets were washing tracked vehicles (*Kettenfahrzeuge*). Six regiments were stationed in Bernau at the time, including a motor rifle regiment and a mechanized reconnaissance regiment. See also "6th Guards Motorised Rifle Division," accessed March 30, 2026, https://www.ww2.dk/new/army/msd/6gvmsd.htm

[141] Trace amounts of TCE in municipal water supplies in the United States have been correlated with increased miscarriages in women and increased risk of cancers. TCE is less toxic as an air pollutant. "Trichloroethylene Hazard Summary," Environmental Protection Agency, 2001.

[142] Eine Verseuchung des Trinkwassers in Bernau/Frankfurt/Od. Folder 1028. MfS ZAIG. Stasi-Unterlagen-Archiv. Berlin.

publish an article about the catastrophe. The Commission's response was only that they would "let them know."[143] No article was ever published. Still, they had to make the public aware about the extensive water shortage. Radio broadcasts and trucks outfitted with loudspeakers drove around the town with the message:

"Dear residents of Bernau!
Technical problems have occurred in the city's drinking water supply facilities. Their repair will likely take several days. Residents are asked to avoid any unnecessary water use to ensure smooth supply. This appeal is directed particularly at state enterprises and institutions. All necessary measures are underway to restore normal operation as quickly as possible."[144]

Covering up the disaster and shielding the Soviets from public ire from poisoning the water supply was just as important as the recovery efforts. To local state authorities, the local National Front office receiving *Eingaben* about disruptions in the water due to domestic technical issues would have been more palatable than receiving complaints about and blame toward the Soviet *Freunde*. It would better serve state officials for local citizens to complain about domestic issues that were ostensibly under the *Kreis's* control instead of those caused by an external actor such as the Soviets.

The water supply facility conducted regular smell tests as cleanup efforts progressed. Like some gasolines, TCE has a sweet, pleasant aroma like ether or chloroform. It has an odor threshold (to be smellable) at twenty-eight ppm. Thus, the inciting "smell event" of the two

[143] Meldespiegel, 1965, Folder 19098, EIRdKB, Kreisarchiv Barnim.
[144] Durchsage für Stadtfunk und Lautsprecherwagen. 21 March 1965. Folder 19098, EIRdKB, Kreisarchiv Barnim.

workers who originally detected the TCE would be repeated in the context of measuring the remaining reach of the contamination. The initial assessment declared the at least two wells had been contaminated purely based on smell (one well's odor was stronger than the other). The contamination was then confirmed through sending water samples to a laboratory in East Berlin. The official report detailed exactly how the smell tests were conducted but made no mention of requests for any type of air measuring devices or sophisticated tools while descriptions of the drilling and soil extraction procedures are meticulously detailed. It is possible that the only measuring devices to conduct the smell tests were the technicians' noses.

The *Kreis* and resources from East Berlin and elsewhere did most of the heavy-lifting of the disaster management. This instance, as noted, also revealed a Soviet dependance on the town—for its water. Municipal-Soviet-communication is scarce, and the Soviets appear to have taken their own measures independently. The logbook in the immediate days after notes, "The Friends are requesting blasting material. We don't know why."[145]

The Soviet-caused TCE contamination essentially bore a localized smellscape within the public utility's infrastructure. Localized, because a high-enough concentration of TCE didn't spread far enough to expand the smellscapes into Bernau proper. The TCE smell meant environmental risk, to be sure, but it also a ruptured the veil separating the Soviet world from the East German one. In this case, that rupture could have proven deadly and deeply damaged locals' perception of the Soviets. Due to its limited scope, this was a case where the state was able to control and contain an obviously negative smell event to prevent the spread of invisible contaminants. Verification of the disaster's containment through smell was thus as equally

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[145] Meldespiegel. 1965. Folder 19090. D.I.RdKE. Kreisarchiv Barnim. Eberswalde.

important as the removal efforts. Admittedly, if the smell had reached people's homes through their kitchen faucet, the smell itself would have been of less concern than toxic chemicals. At the actual contamination site, the odor would have been much higher and more concentrated. Workers operated boring machines at the site where they extracted the TCE from them for further transport. According to the crisis commission, six of these workers were entitled to hazard pay from working a combined 217 hours in a pit of TCE.[146] To those workers, who were undoubtably smelling TCE, its odor burned into their memory, nothing could have obfuscated the fact that Soviets nearly poisoned a whole town. Given the large number of resources expended towards the cleanup efforts and personnel involved, it would have been difficult to conceal the cause of the disaster fully.

The cleanup efforts took a total of four months—wrapping up in July, 1965 after East German cleanup crews removed approximately eighteen tons of TCE from the contaminated earth whereupon they loaded the chemicals onto train cars for disposal.[147] While the immediate threat was contained, the damage was unfortunately permanent—to this day Bernau sources its water from *Kreis* Barnim, rather than the local sources contaminated by TCE. The *Teufelsee* (Devil's Lake) located close to the chemical vehicle wash facility took on a new meaning as the community gradually became fully cognizant of the disaster. How much the community really knew during the disaster and its aftermath is difficult to determine.

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[146] Einsatz von Bohrgeräten im Zuge des Katastropheneinsatzes im Kreis Bernau. 31 March, 1965. Folder 19090. D.I.RdKE. Kreisarchiv Barnim. Eberswalde.
[147] Schirmacher to Soviet Commandant Bernau, July, 1965. Folder 19090. D.I.RdKE. Kreisarchiv Barnim. Eberswalde.

The 1965 disaster reveals the permeability of the boundaries between Soviet military installations and adjacent communities. Sharing critical infrastructure like water system served as one pathway of permeability. Smell became a tool that alerted municipal workers to the problem and then provided a way for the town to track and monitor its containment. For the laborers operating the drilling machines to extract it from the earth, the chloroform/ether smell would have filled the air, burning itself into their noses, lungs—and memories. The GDR's infrastructural vulnerabilities, the result of physical interconnectedness with its ally, became smellable. While through the combined efforts of multiple GDR state organs, from the *Kreis* to Berlin laboratories, to the Reichsbahn, to the East German army, they could contain the disaster and largely obfuscate its cause from the public, it took great effort and resources to do so.

This was certainly not the first nor the last instance East German officials protected the Soviets by shielding them from public knowledge of their negative impacts. For example, in the 1960s, the Soviets caused multiple railroad accidents that resulted in numerous fatalities. Each incident went un-or-underreported in GDR press with little-to-no mention of fatalities much less that the Soviets were to blame.[148] Ensuring German-Soviet friendship and goodwill from the general population required more than general propaganda and friendship events, it meant trying to hide the public from the many bad sides of the *Freunde*. But keeping a separation of all scents from the Soviet world was impossible, but in the case of Soviet perfume and gasoline, these scents firmly permeated everyday life to the point that they simply became more within the *Duft* of the GDR itself.

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[148] Kevin Rudoph, "Deutsche Reichsbahn: Unfall Bei Leipzig Mit 54 Toten | MDR.DE," May 15, 2022, https://www.mdr.de/geschichte/ddr/wirtschaft/verkehr/reichsbahn-unfaelle-leipzig-100.html#sprung1.

Smellscapes of Normalization, 1970s

The Bernau disaster demonstrated how scent could be both a tool and potentially harmful actant forcing the state to engage in all possible means to contain it. On the other hand, mundane scents generated by the Soviets ironically were much more impactful. Popular discourse in Germany has explored how the GDR had a distinctive smell (*Duft*) but the Soviet impact on said *Duft* is overlooked.[149] Former East Germans frequently ascribed specific scents to Soviet troops: the "bitingly sweet" smell of cheap cigarettes with *machorka* (Ukrainian-grown tobacco), food smells like cabbage soup or shashlik, and other scents.[150] After arriving home one day to see that someone had broken into their garden, an East German expressed relief that it was "only a Russian" who had done the crime, as they were only known to steal food, not valuables. They could sense Soviet soldiers olfactorily, "You could smell it, the Russians had their own soaps and perfumes."[151]

Soviet-generated scents integrated themselves into everyday lived experience and locals consciously recognized them as originating from the Soviet military. The Soviet impact on everyday East German smellscapes was further evidence of a state of normalization and acceptance of the Soviets, but these impacts occurred organically and outside the confines of the state system. Jens Müller, a local from Wittstock, once recalled, "You knew that the Russians were around from the smell of their gasoline and the perfume of their garishly (*grell*) made-up

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[149] "Geruchsgeschichte - Auf Der Suche Nach Dem Duft Der DDR," accessed September 16, 2025, https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/geruchsgeschichte-auf-der-suche-nach-dem-duft-der-ddr-100.html.
[150] Silke Satjukow, *Besatzer "Die Russen" in Deutschland 1945-1994* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH, 2008), 96, 219.
[151] Ibid, 251.

women…"[152] Soviet perfume and gasoline were distinctive enough in scent to be recognizable as smell marks to locals. Heavy-smelling perfume reinforced stereotypes of Soviet women while widespread whiffs of Soviet gasoline demonstrated its integration into local barter economies and served to fuel the emerging consumerist GDR's desire for mobility visa-vis cheap gas.

Jens Müller's statement referencing perfume and gas as his primary association with the Soviets is not an outlier. Across oral histories, gathered testimonies, and nostalgia internet forums, contemporary witnesses reference those two scents often, further demonstrating smell's power in memory. Through evaluating those testimonies and historicizing those senses in their original active context, the scent's (or rather, actant's) power in shaping lived experience becomes clear.[153]

Perfume

Interviews with former residents routinely note how Soviet officer wives were identifiable with heavy makeup (*übermäßig geschminkt*) but also through pungent, powerful perfume.[154] Soviet women, who were generally spouses of officers, had the same amount of freedom afforded to their husbands. They lived in off-base *Russenviertel* housing and often worked jobs for the Soviet military or in illegal capacities in German firms and farms. Even if locals never talked to them, much less developed personal relationships, their scent could leave lasting impacts.

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[152] Thilo Gehrke, *Das Erbe Der Sowjetarmee in Deutschland: Eine Bild- Und Textdokumentation* (Köster, 2008), 19.
[153] Historicizing senses is discussed in Paula Hamilton, "The Proust Effect: Oral History and the Senses," in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History* (Oxford University Press, 2012).
[154] Interview with Christian Gilde, 11/14/2023, Thomas Gerlach, "Abzug aus Deutschland 1994: Sehnsucht nach Russland," *Die Tageszeitung: taz*, April 10, 2014, https://taz.de/Abzug-aus-Deutschland-1994/!5044718/.

Bernd, a resident of Eberswalde recalled one such smell event while catching a public bus from Biesenthal to Eberswalde, "The bus was full of officers' wives who must have been on their way back from Women's Day celebrations and they were properly drunk (*angetütet*). The bus smelled like the typical Soviet perfume—*Krasnyi Mak*. There was a cloud of it in the bus."[155] It is worth noting that his statement arose from purely being asked to describe his life in Finow during the Cold War, I did not ask him any questions about Soviet officer women or smells in general. Yet, due to olfaction's key role in reconstructing personal experiences, this vivid experience of experiencing the pungent perfume came back readily, even to the point where he still remembered what brand of perfume it was. Indeed, Soviet perfume was notorious throughout the Eastern Bloc for being overly strong/stinky. In Poland, the scent of strong Soviet perfume evoked an association within the collective memory for Soviet and earlier Russian oppression.[156] Soviet perfumes such as the ubiquitous Red Moscow were available in East Germany and presented locals options beyond what was available in Intershops but in places like Eberswalde and elsewhere, smell events like the one Birk experienced nevertheless created lasting scent-associations with Soviet women. In contrast to the Polish case, this association was not necessarily one of oppression, but rather an olfactory *reminder* of Soviet influences and integration in daily life.

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[155] Interview with B., 07/10/2024

[156] Poland had a highly lucrative domestic perfume industry that anchored its scents toward Western European/particularly French perfumes. Polish perfumes were exported widely in the Eastern Bloc, including East Polish perfumes had a reputation for being higher quality than Soviet ones. The main Polish perfume marketed towards women, Pani Walewska, named after Napoleon's Polish lover, created collective scent associations with Polish nationalism and the West. See Stephanie Weismann, "Between Soir de Paris and Red Moscow: Olfactory Front Lines in Polish Perfumery," in *Sensory Warfare in the Global Cold War* (Penn State University Press, 2024), 41-53

Soviet perfume integrated itself into memory that both evoked otherness but as well as familiarity with the Soviets, while also upending the Soviet military as a purely masculine force. Perfume signaled the Soviet presence in local smellscapes from a cultural perspective. The scent of perfume ingrained itself into everyday mundane experiences ranging from walking on the street or riding the bus. Yet while perfume's role in smellscapes was more specific to engendering feelings and attitudes towards Soviet women in the GDR, Soviet gasoline had a much more impactful effect.

Russensprit

A further-reaching impact on local smellscapes was the smell of Soviet military gasoline, which the Germans affectionately called *Russensprit*. Because of its distinct chemical composition, the fuel emitted a characteristically sweet odor that made it immediately recognizable. The scent was not only noticeable through passing Soviet vehicle columns. Through a vast black-market economy between Soviet personnel and East Germans, *Russensprit* circulated widely, finding its way into East German vehicles form Trabants to Wartburgs. The smell that these cars emitted with *Russensprit* embedded itself into everyday mobility.

The underground Soviet fuel economy goes back to the immediate postwar. Reports going as far back as October 1945 described local mayors bartering oil for gas.[157] As the consumer economy improved in the GDR in the 1960s and 1970s and there were (relatively) more German cars on the road, this demand for military gas also increased. Soviet military-grade

[157] An den Herrn Kommandanten in Letchin, October 8, 1945, November 7, 1945, 11 January 1946, Folder 10, KAMOL B. 106 Ortwig, Kreisarchiv Märkisch-Oderland, Seelow, Germany.

fuel was cheap (in one case one Ostmark per liter) and was compatible with East German cars' two-stroke engines as long as motorists pre-mixed the fuel with adequate ratio of motor oil.[158]

In some cases, Soviet officers ran local gasoline black markets and would organize regular and large to sales to both individuals and organizations.[159] This illicit activity caught the attention of the Stasi, who from at least the mid-1970s began having IMs report on *Russensprit* sales. Examples include one case where a Soviet soldier in Fürstenwalde regularly sold several large 100-liter barrels to the employees of a state enterprise (VEB).[160] In another case, a Soviet officer with an enlisted man were essentially using a dump truck as a mobile gas station where locals came at regular intervals and exchanged empty gas twenty-liter cannisters for full ones in exchange for cash.[161] The Stasi identified one of the patrons and found he worked for the Frankfurt (Oder) District Council. Soviet gasoline had indeed penetrated the upper-reaches of regional government.

While the Stasi, understandably, was concerned with the larger gasoline sales, eyewitness accounts paint a picture of a much larger decentralized barter economy. One account stated that, rather than delivering gas in cannisters, a soldier or officer would simply use a syphoning hose to drain the gasoline from his truck into the customer's jerry can. Particularly if enlisted men were involved, who typically had no use for ostmarks, they exchanged gas for the old gold standards

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[158] According to one eyewitness on the internet forum "Heizöl Und Nitromethan - Simson Tuning - Simson Forum - Simson S50, Simson S51, Simson Schwalbe KR51, Habicht, Sperber, Schwalbe Und Mehr," accessed September 7, 2025, https://www.simsonforum.net/thread/13716-heiz%C3%B6l-und-nitromethan/.
[159] Via so-called "Mafia Structures" – see Satjukow, *Besatzer*, 12.
[160] Bericht. Inf. Durch MA "Schulz" über Benzinverkauf durch sowj. Armee. 10 June 1976, folder V 1049/78 Bd.2. KD Fü-walde, Stasi-Unterlagen-Archiv.
[161] Bericht. Inf. Durch MA "Schulz" über Benzinverkauf durch sowj. Armee. 26 April 1978, V 1049/78 Bd.2. KD Fü-walde, Stasi-Unterlagen-Archiv.

of cigarettes, schnapps, but also small electronics like hand-held radios.[162] Another recalled acquiring gas from simply driving to the nearby military exercise area (which assuredly was restricted) and having the gas siphoned from Ural and ZIS trucks, and BTR APCs. “Where we lived, the Russians delivered gas to entire villages.”[163]

Russensprit was a commodity that was sold and bartered spontaneously even without semi-organized networks. A local from Wittstock recounted a collision in 1985 where he was hit by a Soviet truck while driving his moped. Since the Soviet vehicle was on the road illegally, he decided to not risk trouble with the authorities and did not report the accident. In addition to supplying parts to help fix the damaged moped, the Soviets gave him seven twenty-liter cannister of *russensprit* in exchange.[164]

The claim that the sale of *russensprit* was so widespread and ubiquitous to the point of selling gas to entire villages is not mere hyperbole. In June 1969, according to a report by village council of Klobbicke, a drunken Soviet soldier allegedly stole property in Eberswalde and ventured to the village for safety. He banged and kicked on a local’s door and demanded entry and initiated a heated exchange. Ultimately, the resident refused to open the door, prompting him to flee elsewhere. The man who lived in the apartment described the assailant as wearing an athletic track suit and, “judging by his attire and accent, appeared to be a member of the Soviet armed forces, like those who come often to the village to sell gasoline and other goods.”[165] A

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[162] Interview with Christian Gilde, 11/14/2023
[163]Armored Personnel Carrier. “Heizöl Und Nitromethan - Simson Tuning - Simson Forum - Simson S50, Simson S51, Simson Schwalbe KR51, Habicht, Sperber, Schwalbe Und Mehr,” accessed September 7, 2025, https://www.simsonforum.net/thread/13716-heiz%C3%B6l-und-nitromethan/.
[164] Written testimony by TK, 2/22/2024.
[165] Besondere Vorkomnisse in der Gemeinde Klobbicke. 17 June, 1969. Folder 24501. D.I.RdKE. Kreisarchiv Barnim.

village official later questioned several villagers with the man's description and they claimed a man matching that person's description had been seen the previous week and on the day of the disturbance and wanted to sell gas to the village.[166] It is telling that the first immediate association that town officials and apparently village locals came up with was the sale of *Russensprit*, implying that this would have been a common occurrence, even if it was a different individual. Klobbicke was certainly a village to which one could follow their nose.

Extant Stasi reports on illicit gasoline sales are scattered and fragmented and generally focus on more conspicuous, higher volume cases.[167] The reports also depend on singular (or several) informants who were tasked to watch specific Soviet military bases and roads. Indeed, and understandably, the much higher volume of illicit weapons and ammunition sales between Soviet troops and GDR citizens would indicate a higher level of interest and allocation of resources. An interesting point of departure between the Stasi reports and eyewitness accounts for the power of *Russensprit*'s smell.

German automotive and nostalgia blogs and internet forums make repeated and often unprompted references to the smell of *Russensprit.*[168] Accounts recall its smell as *unique*, ranging from unnaturally sweet and pleasant to disgusting, but as well as with a certain fondness

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[166] Ibid.
[167] Of the hundreds of Stasi files made available to the author by the Stasi-Unterlagen-Archiv dealing with Soviet-German crime in the GDR, only two deal directly with illicit gasoline.
[168] Interview with Christian Gilde, 11/14/2023, Interview with Oliver, 06/04/2024. "Typischer DDR-Trabant-(Zweitakt-)Geruch - Gemischt - PappenForum.De," accessed September 7, 2025, https://pf31.pappenforum.de/thread/35956-typischer-ddr-trabant-zweitakt-geruch/; "Geruch Wie Aus Den Kindertagen..... : Andyrx," accessed September 4, 2025, https://www.motor-talk.de/blogs/andyrx/geruch-wie-aus-den-kindertagen-t4821226.html; "Könnt ihr euch noch an den Duft der DDR erinnern?," Thread, Forum DDR Grenze, January 8, 2014, https://www.forum-ddr-grenze.de/t12462f45-Koennt-ihr-euch-noch-an-den-Duft-der-DDR-erinnern-5.html.

and reverence. One user recalled that though there were different types of Soviet military gas, all of which came directly from the Soviet Union, after all the most popular one that was sold was the thinnest, beige-colored and leaded "76er" gas "that smelled uniquely sweet. That was probably on purpose to differentiate military gas from normal gas."[169]

The chemical compound benzene, naturally occurring in crude oil and added to gasoline to increase its octane levels, gives all gasoline a somewhat sweet smell. Whether the unique smell of the *Russensprit(s)* was caused by its octane levels, lead content or other additives is difficult to determine but what is clear is that its scent differed substantially from domestic East German gasoline. This means that even though most domestic East German gasoline came from the Soviet Union as well, Soviet military gasoline was clearly different. This unique smell and its apparent ubiquity from being used in East German cars greatly altered local smellscapes.

A universal pattern among these witnesses is that the smell of the gas was so unique that when one was driving behind someone or when a car drove by or was idling, one could always tell that the car was running on *Russensprit.* As one stated, "you could always follow your nose, the scent would lead the way, and you'd know which village the Trabant or motorcycle was heading to…I'd love to smell that again." Another recalled, "What I liked most was the smell when the Russian convoy drove through our village. The roaring sound of the V8 engines, with their occasional misfires, was also unforgettable. When we walked along the sidewalk with our

[169] "Heizöl Und Nitromethan - Simson Tuning - Simson Forum - Simson S50, Simson S51, Simson Schwalbe KR51, Habicht, Sperber, Schwalbe Und Mehr," accessed September 7, 2025, https://www.simsonforum.net/thread/13716-heiz%C3%B6l-und-nitromethan/.

schoolbags, the exhaust pipes of the trucks were right at eye level. That smell of naphtha was simply indescribable."[170]

On one thread for enthusiasts for Simson motorcycles, a user asked a technical question of optimal fuel mixtures for a Simson bike. This prompted a response from another to share his memory of mixing Soviet diesel fuel with regular gasoline causing the bike to emit an awful-smelling smoke.[171] A user started a thread on another automotive forum asked why the exhaust of vintage Trabants today smell different than what he remembers as a child. This prompted another response, "Russian gas! When I was a child, when the Red Army was out for maneuvers, they would always drive through our village. A very peculiar exhaust smell would linger in the air…I wonder if anyone else still remembers that."[172]

A resident of Eberswalde had a more neutral but still memorable stance, "*Russensprit* just somehow smelled different."[173] While *Russensprit* did not smell *good* to everyone its clear uniqueness to its consumers was defined by its own smell mark, just as commercial products are crafted with unique scents to distinguish themselves from competition.[174] By the mid-1970s, *Russensprit*, was firmly establishing itself as an underground competitor to domestically available gas. The nonhuman actant, its scent, was integrating itself firmly into consumers' personal GDR smellscapes along coalescing in the general *Duft* of the GDR.

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[170] "Typischer DDR-Trabant-(Zweitakt-)Geruch - Gemischt - PappenForum.De," accessed September 7, 2025.
[171] "Heizöl Und Nitromethan - Simson Tuning - Simson Forum - Simson S50, Simson S51, Simson Schwalbe KR51, Habicht, Sperber, Schwalbe Und Mehr," accessed September 7, 2025, https://www.simsonforum.net/thread/13716-heiz%C3%B6l-und-nitromethan/.
[172] "Geruch Wie Aus Den Kindertagen..... : Andyrx," accessed September 4, 2025, https://www.motor-talk.de/blogs/andyrx/geruch-wie-aus-den-kindertagen-t4821226.html.
[173] Interview with Oliver, 06/04/2024.
[174] Porteous, "Smellscape", 373.

Taking into the consideration the oral history interviews and message boards recalling *Russensprit*, there is a version of the Proust Effect occurring where recalling adjacent experiences brings forth "involuntary" memories of Soviet gasoline.[175] The message boards are not specifically Soviet-related but rather either more generally GDR-themed or automotive. That even relatively vague questions revolving around vehicles in general or youth or childhood recollections consistently bring forth visceral recollections of *Russensprit* speaks to its power and meaning at that time and the actant's effect on their lived experience and overall memory growing up in the GDR.

The local smellscapes generated by *Russensprit* reveal several things. There was a clear ubiquity of *Russensprit* in areas that where East Germans had access to Soviet soldiers willing to sell it. Some conclusions can be drawn. The widespread use of *Russensprit* in East German cars seems to have increased in the mid-1970s. This happens to coincide with a major increase in the production of Trabants in the GDR whose production reached 100,000 units per year starting 1973, up from just 30,000 in 1964.[176] More East German cars on the road would have simply meant an increase in demand for cheap gas. At the same time, the average cost of a liter of normal domestic gas was around 1.50 Ostmarks per liter, while *Russensprit* could be closer to 1 ostmark or even less and could bartered for without cash. Considering Trabant's twenty-four-liter gas tank, filling up with *Russensprit* was markedly cheaper. As Eli Rubin has noted, many East German car owners had a strong sense of *Eigen-Sinn*, GDR state-sponsored ideology

[175] Hamilton, "The Proust Effect, 2."
[176] E. Rubin, "The Trabant: Consumption, Eigen-Sinn, and Movement," *History Workshop Journal* 68, no. 1 (2009): 27–44, 35.

emphasizing creativity and self-reliance.[177] They were demonstrably car savvy and were accustomed to self-maintenance since repairs were expensive and few would have been willing to risk going back on a decade-long waiting list for a new car.[178] Thus, it is not hard to imagine that someone completely managing their own maintenance would be comfortable with adapting oil/fuel mixtures using *Russensprit* to the vehicle. This phenomenon of "*Eigen-Sinn*" paradoxically led to people to instinctively not rely on official state channels and to find their own solutions to problems. Tapping into the Soviets' strategic motor pool reserves would have been an easy way to avoid more expensive alternative gas prices.

There is also a key difference here when one compares the impact of *Russensprit* on smellscapes to Soviet perfume. While the perfume did not seem to have the clear impact of negative connotations toward Russia/the Soviet Union on East Germans that Poles had towards Soviets, it attached clearly foreign and strange connotations towards Soviet officer wives living in East Germany.[179] The smell of *Russensprit*, on the contrary, emitted from a wholly non-human and in many cases not even from a Soviet source. The scent's association with growing up such as in the schoolchild's recollection or using the scent to extrapolate where cars were heading indicates a subtle yet powerful unintended impact of the Soviet military presence. Furthermore, attaching the use of *Russensprit* to this ethos of self-reliance that East German workers were

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[177] Originally coined by Alf Lüdkte, *Eigensinn* has ingrained itself in common parlance in East German historiography to illustrate the agency of East Germans within the "oppressive" or constraining institutional structures of the GDR in a variety of contexts within daily life, see Andrew Port, "The Banalities of East German Historiography," in *Becoming East German: Socialist Structures and Sensibilities after Hitler* (Berghahn Books, 2013), 5.
[178] Ibid, 36.
[179] See Weismann, "Between Soir de Paris and Red Moscow."

supposed to adhere shows that Soviet gasoline could be integrated into distinctly East German lifeways, even if it meant working outside of the state.

Russensprit's impact on the consumerist stage of the GDR as well as its influence on the smellscapes show the subtle yet powerful impact of the military presence and enough less-than scrupulous Soviet officers and soldiers willing to meet local demand for fuel. More important, however, was the gasoline and its smell integrated itself into people's perceived reality during the height of consumerist GDR. Unlike trichlorethylene, the state could not obfuscate the origin of its scent, much less control. But its consequence was that it unintentionally caused normalized feelings towards the Soviets within the framework of symbiotic black-market relationships.

Conclusion

Smell reveals a two-sided normalization of the Soviet military presence in the GDR. The odor of trichlorethylene in the municipal water system exposed how tenuous and vulnerable the boundaries between the Soviets and adjacent communities really were. The state could only contain the disaster through the complex web of local and upper-level state organs, including the Stasi and the cooperation of the at times unreliable Soviets. The smell of TCE encapsulates the ever-present threat Soviet activity could have but also highlights a period where the state was doing its utmost to protect the Soviets, particularly from the standpoint of the Stasi. Less than two decades later, the Stasi would actively be spying on the Soviets amid increasing disillusionment between the two countries as the GSFG increasingly became a liability for the GDR's functioning participatory dictatorship.

Yet at the same time, (admittedly more benign) other smells such as heavy perfumes and sweet-smelling gasoline absorbed themselves into local smellscapes and thus everyday life. The

smell of *Russensprit* came to represent self-reliance and a symbiosis with the Soviet military that wove itself what one of the things that East Germans loved most: mobility.

These examples highlight a paradox that characterizes East German smellscapes. These actants could be disruptive and uncontrollable but at the same time integrated. Non-human smells disregarded the *Stationierungsabkommen* and scoffed at state propaganda, a clear threat to the state but one that only struggled to manage. But as with perfume and gasoline, these joined the fabric of daily life but through means outside of the state.

By the late 1970s, Soviet smells as a sense largely adapted well to the GDR, but sound on the other hand could not be normalized as easily. As Betts has already demonstrated, by the 1970s and 80s, East Germans became increasingly more concerned with noise as a societal disruptor at the domestic level.[180] This applies to the Soviet case as well—sonic booms, tanks maneuvers, and low-flying aircraft could not be tolerated as easily.

[180] Betts, *Within Walls*, 159.

Chapter Three: Soviet Soundscapes: Complaint and the Limits of the Participatory Dictatorship, 1970s-1989

By the 1980s, the vast military training area around Wittstock had ballooned to 142 square kilometers, an area larger than San Francisco. Soviet units from across East Germany came to the site to simulate the full breadth of conventional warfare with NATO: armored warfare, small arms combat, artillery strikes, and air raids on a mock West German airfield. Carl Krause lived with his wife on a modest farmstead in Schweinrich, a village that lay near the border of the training grounds. Recording his experiences in the early 1990s, Krause recalled vivid memories of experiencing military exercises that would last for days:

> The shot just behind the forest was so powerful that the old house trembled, and I often feared for its structural integrity. Sometimes they fired at night, so that we were startled out of sleep, unable to fall back asleep, and waited anxiously for the last shot. My wife, in such moments, was ready to sell everything [the house] again. She often found it unbearable. Exercises during the day were often accompanied using attack helicopters, bristling with weapons of every caliber, up to and including missiles. They reminded one of oversized hornets. On their approach to the firing range, they often flew directly over our property. We heard their buzzing and the cracking of the rotors grow threateningly louder until they passed low over us...[181]

[181] Krause, Carl. "Erinnerungen an Die 'Schießplatz' Und Den Weg Zur FREIen HEIDe." In *Bürgerinitiative FREIe HEIDe: Bombodrom, Nein Danke!* Espresso, 2000, 31.

Another resident from the same area recounted, "When visitors or vacationers came to us, words like "state of war" (*Kriegszustand*) were spoken. Indeed, the didn't end for us in 1945, we found ourselves at the very front of the combat zone."[182]

As these accounts attest, many of these villagers were essentially living in a sensory purgatory where childhood experiences of World War Two continued well into adulthood, creating layers of trauma. These are reinforced by the *sounds* of warfare—the sensory experience. The Soviets in that context were not real people but abstracted generators of inhuman auditory experience. Helicopters are not just machines piloted by people, but gigantic oppressive insects. Locals who lived near such training areas or air bases have vivid memories of the auditory experience of military experience, nearly invariably characterized by the sounds of nocturnal flights and gunfire disturbing sleep or rumbling tanks through the neighborhood. Echoic memory, human sensory memory for sound, lasts only a few seconds, but if significant and repeated, migrates into storage in the brain, becoming long-term memory.[183] These auditory experiences were frequent and repeated. In contrast to smell, which was oscillated between negative to positive to ambiguous, the *sound* of the Soviets was usually negative, not only in terms of unpleasantness but that they caused tangible physiological damage (i.e. disturbing sleep). Eyewitness accounts recall that they simply had to learn to live with it.[184] But evidence points to the fact that the overall problem of noise was ever-present and a major issue bordering on obsession from both the state officials' and locals' perspective.

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[182] Ibid, 28.
[183] Alain, Claude, David L. Woods, and Robert T. Knight. "A Distributed Cortical Network for Auditory Sensory Memory in Humans." *Brain Research* 812, nos. 1–2 (1998): 23–37.
[184] Interview with Christian Gilde, 11/14/2023. Hannelore Rose, *Russisches Konfekt* (Renate Wullstein, 2018), 34.

Following the previous chapter, this one looks at sensory effects of *sound* by the Soviets on the neighboring East German population. Soviet-derived smell and sound overlapped in similar ways. Just as military activity and proximity to Soviet personnel created unique smellscapes, so too did those same factors generate soundscapes in East German civilian areas that were largely outside of state control. As another type of non-human actant, sound too penetrated physical barriers— "closed" areas (*Sperrgebiete*) that were officially inaccessible to the general population helped create soundscapes that served to define lived experience, particularly in areas close to military exercise areas and airbases. Unlike smell, which acted through subtlety and ranged from being negative to benign, to even positive, the sonic impact of the Soviets was almost always objectively negative. Sound was not a vector of normalization, but of tension. But like smell, the GDR government was powerless to control it. Sound was a major source of citizen complaints (*Eingaben*) directed towards the local and national government. This chapter lays out the trail of sonic-derived complaints from the mid-1970s to 1989.

I argue that soundscapes generated by Soviet military activity undermined the "participatory dictatorship" of the GDR. The state-generated culture of complaint encouraged citizens to submit petitions on individual problems, but in the case of the Soviets, the state was almost completely powerless to mitigate the problem and instead could only measure and monitor which at times served only to minimize its severity. By the mid-1980s, the problem of Soviet noise had become such a major issue that it had evolved into a symbol of the GDR's inability to protect its citizens from the most severe consequences of Soviet military activity. Ultimately, this led not to a huge wave of anti-Sovietism, but an eroded confidence in the GDR state institutions from the perspective of normal citizens. This eroded confidence and increasing

disillusionment towards the state in 1980s was part of the broader and growing environmentalism movement in the country which came out of a general dissatisfaction with state officials' abilities to mitigate environmental damage of all types.

This chapter examines how ordinary East Germans experienced and complained about Soviet noise and how the GDR tried but failed to mitigate the problem. It achieves this through analyzing *Eingaben* and their handling by the state bureaucracy as well as Stasi reports including upper-level correspondence among top GDR leadership. In doing so, I demonstrate how Soviet soundscapes not only played a major role in shaping everyday lives but how they indirectly aided the downfall of the GDR.

Method/Historiography

As with the previous chapter, the present one explores another aspect of sensory warfare by the Soviet military presence—sound. Methods of historicizing and achieving sensory histories of sound in how they have affected populations by political forces have, perhaps unsurprisingly, come from musicology and adjacent fields.[185] It is important to note that the term "sonic" in this subfield is quite broad—encompassing virtually any artificial source of sound and its effects on people. Historian and dubstep musician Steve Goodman (Aka Kode9) coined the term "sonic warfare" (which Cold War historians have expanded to "sensory warfare" as discussed in the previous chapter) as, "…the use of force…via a range of acoustic machines (biotechnical, social, cultural, artistic, conceptual), to modulate the physical, affective, and libidinal dynamics of

[185] See Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford Univ. Press, 2006). Paul Virilio et al., *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, Radical Thinkers (Verso Books, 2009). Jacques Attali and Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

populations, of bodies, of crowds."[186] Goodman was primarily concerned with intentional usage of sound as a weapon of war to instill atmospheres of "fear and dread" in populations or, in other words, to produce a "bad vibe."[187] He uses, for example, the Israeli military's use of "sound bombs" during the war in Gaza in 2005. While not destructive in the traditional sense of toppling buildings, these still had immense psychological effects of trauma on the intended targets, not the least of which was disturbed sleep.[188] During the most recent war in Gaza, *The Guardian* has reported on Palestinians in Gaza being "terrified" of the night because of the buzzing sound of Israeli drones, gunfire, and screams of neighbors in the absence of light and only being able to hear as the primary sense to perceive the environment.[189]

While sound's effects in armed conflicts, be they intentional (JU-87 Stuka dive-bomber sirens in WWII) or incidental (sounds of combat), are most obvious, sonic effects of military activity or rather sonic warfare are not limited to "hot" conflicts or moments of real conflict. Recent studies have explored sonic effects as devices of the Cold War such as dueling propaganda broadcast speakers across the Taiwan strait in the 1970s.[190]

Beyond purely intentional usage of sound, there is another branch of sonic warfare scholarship focused on parsing out sonic histories of military occupation, particularly regarding

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[186] Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*, Technologies of Lived Abstraction (MIT Press, 2010), 10.
[187] Ibid, xiv.
[188] Ibid, xiii.
[189] Kaamil Ahmed et al., "'I Hate the Night': Life in Gaza amid the Incessant Sounds of War," World News, *The Guardian*, October 17, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2024/oct/17/i-hate-the-night-life-in-gaza-amid-the-incessant-sounds-of-war.
[190] Dayton Lekner, "Breaking the Aquatic Sound Barrier: Hearing Yourself and Your Enemy Across the Taiwan Strait," in *Sensory Warfare in the Global Cold War* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2024). See also Jose Manuel Lopez Toran, "Hearing Korea, Seeing Cuba: NO-DO as Sonic and Visual Propaganda in Francoist Spain," in *Sensory Warfare in the Global Cold War* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2024), 131-145.

the recent US occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.[191] Through the sounds of armed combat, music, and other sounds of military occupation to extract the human phenomenological experience. Others have expanded this to more generalized sonic histories of sustained contact and coexistence between military bases and neighboring civilian communities. Kevin Sliwoski, for example, has studied the sonic relationship between the US Naval Base Subic Bay and the adjacent city of Olongapo in the Philippines from the 1950s to 1970.[192] Sliwoski builds off Jürgen Osterhammel's thesis that military bases are modern (post-WWII) bastions of colonialism and empire.[193] As a key logistical and naval base during the Vietnam War, it was a hubbub of "occupation sounds" such as noises of construction, ships, and small arms gunfire from US marines in the neighboring jungles. Sliwoski articulates the collective sonic impact of the occupying forces as "self-noise." He argues that the "self-noise" of the US Navy was politicized and influenced contemporary discourse about the US Navy's role in the Philippines.[194] The Navy's use of musical performances to improve local relations to Filipinos while also being indifferent to the (mostly negative) impacts of bothersome noise speaks to enduring colonial attitudes between Americans and Filipinos while also highlighting sound's role as expression of control. More than this, Sliwoski's study demonstrates how the self-noise of the naval base produced a unique soundscape, or (to use his words), "sound world." As he notes, "Sound can

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[191] See L Gilman, *My Music, My War: The Listening Habits of US Troops in Iraq and Afghanistan* (Wesleyan University Press, 2015); J.M Daugherty, *Listening to War: Sound Music, Trauma, and Survival in Wartime Iraq* (Oxford University Press, 2015); J.R Pieslak, *Sound Targets: American Soldiers and Music in the Iraq War* (Indiana University Press, 2009).
[192] Kevin Sliwoski, "Loud Town, Quiet Base Olongapo City, Subic Bay and the US Navy, 1950-70," in *Sonic Histories of Occupation: Experiencing Sound and Empire in a Global Context* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 125-147.
[193] Jürgen Osterhammel, *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Markus Wiener Publishers, 1995).
[194] Sliwoski, "Loud Town, Quiet Base", 142.

occupy space and consciousness, reality, imagination and memory. In the case of Naval Base, Subic Bay, sound collapsed spatial boundaries. It penetrated and permeated daily life on either side of the base's gates."[195] In that sense, there was no discreet US Navy and Filipino world, but that they blended to create a transnational space through sound.

This same concept also applies to the East German context, both in the sense that Soviet military activity bled easily into surrounding communities but also its growing politicization and importance in daily life in the GDR. In contrast to smell, noise was a major issue in the home and without, and the negative sonic impact of Soviet military activity further heightened noise's politicization in the latter half of the GDR. There is a major uptick in *Eingaben* and official complaints about Soviet noise beginning in the early-to-mid 1970s through 1989. This is no accident or a case of circumstantial unevenness in the archival record. As Paul Betts has argued, the stereotypical German desire for "peace and quiet" in the GDR was hardly an issue in the 1950s and 1960s because of a lack of acknowledgement of "harmful" sounds in the legal system, but also a general acceptance that bothersome noise was a necessary step in building socialism.[196] This changed in the 1970s as the GDR became more consumer-oriented and as Honecker shifted towards addressing the basic living conditions and the general housing crisis.[197] Shorter workweeks, increased vacations, and more leisure time simply meant that East Germans were more exposed to noise pollution on a regular basis.[198] The state was also increasingly

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[195] Ibid, 143.
[196] Paul Betts, *Within Walls: Private Life in the German Democratic Republic* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 159.
[197] See Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (Yale University Press, 2008), 365, Eli Rubin, *Synthetic Socialism: Plastics & Dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic* (University of North Carolina Press, 2008).
[198] Paul Betts, *Within Walls, 159.*

interested in controlling noise so workers could have adequate rest at home to be more productive workers. While Betts was discussing an increased obsession with peace and quiet as it pertained in the home as evinced by rising disputes and *Eingaben* directed at noisy neighbors, the same absolutely applies to the increase in discourse surrounding Soviet military-generated noise pollution in the same time period. People navigated the same state channels to complain about noisy neighbors as they did to voice concern about their Soviet "Friends." But whereas Betts argued that the apparatuses of neighborly noise complaints demonstrated the Fulbrookian participatory dictatorship[199] as largely functional, the issue of Soviet noise exposed a major chink in the armor of the socialist system. Like the US Navy in the Philippines, the Soviets *were* largely indifferent to the negative impacts of noise pollution, and perhaps more so, because they were not beholden to the same need for positive optics in the Eastern Bloc as the USA was in West Germany. As such, the East German state's hands were largely tied in pushing the Soviets towards actionable solutions beyond exercising the polite rhetoric of socialist solidarity. Indeed, this comparative inability to act increased public disillusionment towards the state towards the end of the GDR. As Thomas Fleischman has pointedly argued in his environmental history of the GDR, it was pollution that ultimately drove people to the streets.[200] As this chapter will show, increasing *Eingaben* towards noise pollution was contemporaneous to emerging environmentalist movements in 1980s and rising citizens' initiatives as other environmentalist histories of the

[199] Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State.*
[200] Thomas Fleischman, *Communist Pigs: An Animal History of East Germany's Rise and Fall* (University of Washington Press, 2020).

GDR have discussed.[201] As such, the Soviets themselves were an external actor unknowingly contributing to these movements.

Soviet "Self-Noise"

The "self-noise" of Soviet military bases and their military activity in general generated a vast array of sounds, creating a unique soundscape. Since many Soviet bases were directly adjacent to populated German areas, a vast array of sounds embedded themselves into daily life. Soviet orchestra ensembles were a key feature of propaganda and for exposing East German youth to high culture. Officer housing in particular was often preexisting sections of towns that were cordoned off into distinct *Russenviertel*.[202] Residents were exposed to the sounds of Soviet domestic life: one could hear clanking of aluminum dishware from inside apartment windows behind the walls.[203] Drunken Soviet officers crowded East German bars with singing and general cacophony fueled by vodka imbibed through the infamous *Sto-gramm* (100-gram) shot glasses.[204] Activities on bases themselves were also audible due to proximity. Larger Soviet garrisons were outfitted with loudspeakers to play music during morning PT exercises, roll calls on the parade grounds, and for giving out orders on-base. In at least one case in Cottbus, the noise from base loudspeakers was so loud that local citizens complained about it to the Cottbus

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[201] Julia E. Ault, *Saving Nature under Socialism: Transnational Environmentalism in East Germany, 1968-1990* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 4; Scott Moranda, *The People's Own Landscape: Nature, Tourism, and Dictatorship in East Germany*, Social History, Popular Culture, and Politics in Germany (The University of Michigan Press, 2014); John Alexander Williams, *Turning to Nature in Germany: Hiking, Nudism, and Conservation, 1900-1940* (Stanford University Press, 2007).
[202] A central section of Eberswalde was cordoned off until the early 1970s. see Eberhard Wühle, "Die Sowjetischen Besatzungstruppen in Eberswalde Und Deren Versorgung Durch Die Handelsorganisation Spezialhandel Und Den VEB Spezialbau," in *Eberswalder Jahrbuch 2006-2007* (Verein für Heimatkunde zu Eberswalde e.V., 2006).
[203] Silke Satjukow, *Besatzer "Die Russen" in Deutschland 1945-1994* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH, 2008), 34.
[204] Rose, *Russisches Konfekt,* 14.

district (*Bezirk*).[205] When the local SED consulted with Soviet officers about the noise issue, the Soviets replied simply there was nothing they could do: the garrison is large and time allotments to carry out specific routines are set in stone from high command and immutable. Indeed, this intransigence and tacit indifference to the effect to self-noise on surrounding communities characterized not only the relatively benign noises to the highly disruptive. As indicated in the beginning of the chapter, the loud inhuman noise of armored vehicles and aircraft became a major source of tension, creating hostile local soundscapes for locals. While certain aspects of Soviet self-noise certainly contributed to normalization as smell did (see chapter 2), sound from vehicles and aircraft were intrusive, disruptive, and physiologically damaging.

Tank Noise—1970s

Over 11,700 kilometers of roadways were designated as *Marschstraßen* in the GDR, authorized for the use of and to bear the weight of tanks and other armored vehicles. For comparison, the entire autobahn network in the GDR barely reached 10,000 kilometers.[206] For many, tanks on roadways were in imminent proximity to homes. An Eberswalde resident recalled, "I always lived with the Russians in front of my door. My parents have a house in Ostend, [a neighborhood on the eastern side of Eberswalde] so we naturally had contact with the *Panzerstrecke* right outside our front door, but also on the way to school."[207] However, in a common contravention of the *Stationierungsabkommen*, the Soviets did not restrict themselves to

[205] Klärung der Angelegenheit in der sowjetischen Garnison Sachsendorf auf Grund der schritlichen Information durch die KL Cottbus-Stadt der SED. November 2, 1988, folder 4003. 930 SED BL Ctb. BLHA Potsdam.
[206] Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk and Stefan Wolle, *Roter Stern über Deutschland: sowjetische Truppen in der DDR* (Landeszentrale für politische Bildung in Sachsen, 2001), 7.
[207] Email correspondence with V.

designated “tank roads” and often crossed through city streets and villages out of convenience or to bypass other obstacles. While the sight of tanks and their smell (see chapter 2) may have instilled a fascination in some, including at least one resident who recalled being allowed to play and climb on them when they passed through her village,[208] this did not take away from their most obvious effect— they were loud. Carl Krause of Schweinrich lived very close to the area in the Wittstock training grounds where Soviet forces would practice tank driving and conduct maneuvers. Since he lived right at the entrance of the training area, he was often witness to them passing through Schweinrich, “When tanks drove through a residential street, everything shook and quaked. The street back then was still paved with old cobblestones.”[209]

While the majority of those affected by Soviet-generated noise recognized the necessity of Soviet military activity, many did not suffer in silence. A considerable bulk of archival data of the Soviet presence in Germany are citizen-submitted petitions (*Eingaben*), complaints written by local citizens to municipal officials (who had the ability to escalate the *Eingaben* higher up the bureaucratic chain) petitioning local officials to intercede on their behalf to the Soviets to mitigate such impacts. Much of the recent scholarship of the GDR has considered *Eingaben* as an essential feature of the participatory dictatorship, with estimates suggesting that around half of the entire adult population of the GDR (around six million people in 1989) submitted an official letter at least once.[210] This was in fact the system working as intended—the SED officials encouraged the use of *Eingaben* as legitimate means by the which the state could address the people’s needs. Mary Fulbrook has addressed the apparent paradox of *Eingaben* in the dictatorial

[208] Interview with K. and H., 02/26/2024.
[209] Krause, Carl. “Erinnerungen an Die ‘Schießplatz,’ 31
[210] Fulbrook, *The People’s State*, 363.

system in that complaints were not necessarily vehicles of dissent, but ways for the population to voice concerns about problems that affected them in all aspects of life and encouraging the state to address them. The key feature of *Eingaben* is that they were individual petitions and not based in collective organizations which could breed counter movements. In this way *Eingaben* helped to proliferate the so-called *Meckerkultur* (complaint culture characteristic of the GDR), but in a way that allowed people to politically participate in the GDR without undermining the state, and, indeed there is a correlation between the rise of *Eingaben* towards the end of the Ulbricht era to a marked decrease in workplace strikes and open in dissent in comparison to the early GDR.

Much of scholarly work concerning *Eingaben* has dealt with how the nature of complaints shifted over time, such as how in the mid-to-late 1960s, almost half had to do with housing problems whereas the mid-1970s saw a rise in complaints on environmental problems to the 1980s when there was a marked explosion of complaints on nearly all aspects of daily life.[211] But what this scholarship has so far not addressed in great depth was a very large proliferation of complaints towards the Soviets in the 1970s, largely due to negative sensory and environmental effects. While *Eingaben* directed toward domestically related issues were at times actionable by the state and provided real solutions or could lead to genuine understanding of why a problem could not be solved, complaints about the Soviets put the state in an impossible position. Neither high-level functionaries nor local officials simply could not directly influence the conduct of the Soviet military beyond friendly communication. While their response to complaints about the Soviets, in line with *Eingaben* in general, did indicate a level of genuine concern for the people's

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[211] See Eli Rubin, *Amnesiopolis: Modernity, Space, and Memory in East Germany*, First edition (Oxford University Press, 2016), Paul Betts, *Within Walls*, Thomas Fleischman, *Communist Pigs*. Hope M. Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall: Soviet-East German Relations, 1953 - 1961*, (Princeton Univ. Press, 2005).

opinion, the utter inability of the state to handle Soviet-caused issues certainly undermined confidence in the state.

In March 1974, Heinz-Dieter Haustein wrote an *Eingabe* to the Bernau municipal council, complaining about the "considerable noise pollution" caused by frequent nocturnal Soviet tank noise on Breitscheidstrasse, disturbing the neighborhood's sleep.[212] In following the formal and formulaic bureaucratic deference characteristic of these letters Haustein noted also, "[while] it is clear that there is a military and military-political necessity for these movements within the framework of our defense readiness, there is also another side to this."[213] Haustein explains that for years the Soviets never used the street until recently because of a blocked exit at the train yard due to construction (that was never reopened), forcing them to drive through the residential area on their way tank depot in northern Bernau. Haustein urged the city to finishing repairing the exit so the Soviets could return to the old traffic pattern. He makes a note for the changes toward the public good during the Honecker years, in emphasizing that eliminating the noise pollution would "allow farmers and workers to get restful sleep after a hard day's work."[214]

Haustein was not making the *Eingabe* only for himself but for the residents on his entire street, which, normally would not have been allowed, which means that he must have had some kind of lower-representative function (he was also an economist in the GDR). [215] Nevertheless, a month later, the municipal council wrote back to him that his concern had been passed on to the relevant authorities to "undertake the necessary consultations to change the situation."[216] This

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[212] Haustein to Lück, March 16, 1974. Folder 25209, EIRdKB, Kreisarchiv Barnim, Eberswalde.
[213] Ibid.
[214] Ibid.
[215] See *Fulbrook*, *The People's State*.
[216] Lück to Haustein, April 23, 1974. . Folder 25209, EIRdKB, Kreisarchiv Barnim, Eberswalde.

typical response, and for many citizens, this would have meant simply waiting for the state's response, but Haustein seemed to take matters into his own hands. In July he wrote a letter directly to the Soviet garrison commander of Bernau.[217] Of course, Haustein did not actually know who the Soviet commander was, so he began with "Dear Comrade Commander!"[218] Writing in competent and deferential if stilted Russian, Haustein essentially repeats the same complaint as the *Eingabe* he wrote to the German municipality—emphasizing their noise pollution on locals' sleep patterns. Haustein then asks the commander if he could order his combat engineers (sappers) to create a new exit ramp from the train station which would have been a shorter, more practical route for the troops while helping residents sleep.

Unfortunately, we cannot know from the archival record how the situation was, if ever resolved, or even if Haustein's letter ever reached the Soviet commander's desk, but the incident is telling on several things. The noise pollution must have been bad enough that Haustein became frustrated to the point of being willing to circumvent the state-*Eingabe* resolution pipeline and petition the Soviets to intervene in the problem. The "problem" in question, to require the Soviets to build a road that the state would or could not build to prevent Soviet tanks from using residential streets. This serves to highlight the factor of Soviet noise pollution as a third party to the East German citizen-state dynamic. In both cases, the intended solution did not involve asking the Soviets to find another way out of the train station that did not involve going on residential streets, but to use state (or perhaps the Soviets') resources to merely redirect the

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[217] Haustein to Soviet Commander, July 30, 1974, Folder 25209, EIRdKB, Kreisarchiv Barnim, Eberswalde.
[218] He would have been trying to write to the head of the Sixth Guards Motor Rifle Division, but the opacity of Soviet command structures to the East Germans, even to local government outside of the NVA or perhaps the Stasi made meaningful communication difficult. See "6th Guards Motorised Rifle Division," accessed October 22, 2025, https://www.ww2.dk/new/army/msd/6gvmsd.htm.

Soviets somewhere else without solving the underlying problem. Everyone knew the Soviets were more or less free to do as they pleased, the *Eingabe*'s flaws were more apparent here when one added the Soviets to the equation. All the same, while the municipality was in fact interested in solving the problem, their ability to improve the situation in a meaningful way was limited. Where the state could not intervene directly in the affairs of the Soviets, they turned to more technocratic solutions—monitoring and measurement.

Rising interest in the concept of "peace and quiet" in the 1970s (see Betts) in the home as essential to a productive work force also drew the notice of local governments to the very real effects of armored vehicles on city streets on disturbing home life, particularly sleep. In April, 1973, the GDR decreed that buildings had to be 100 meters away from high-decibel streets, particularly those frequented by armored vehicles which are much louder than domestic cars and trucks. In July 1973, the Cottbus District (*Bezirk*) Hygienic Inspection Institute conducted a study on auditory effects of tank noise on homes from distances of 100 meters away in Gaglower Strasse in Cottbus, an area not far from the main Soviet military installation and the Sachsendorf train station, used as a Soviet logistics point.[219] Placing steel rods into the earth at thirty and one-hundred meters away from the street, they measured noise levels (in decibels) from a group of seven tanks driving past the rods at ten and forty-five kilometers per hour respectively. [220] The study found that the outdoor noise from a passing tank reached about sixty-two decibels (slightly

[219] Cottbus itself in the 1970s hosted the Thirty-Fifth Independent Guards Landing-Assault Brigade. Such units were helicopter-based assault troops and included vehicle, anti-aircraft, and artillery battalions. See "35th Independent Guards Landing-Assault Brigade," accessed October 22, 2025, https://www.ww2.dk/new/vdv/35gvodshbr.htm.
[220] Panzerlärm im Bereich der Gaglower Straße Cottbus, August 16, 1973, folder 23349, 801 RdB Ctb, BLHA Potsdam.

louder than the din of a busy restaurant) at a distance of 100 meters.[221] Calculating for noise-dampening indoors, the study found an overall indoor noise level of fifty-two decibels, three decibels lower than the maximum permissible level of fifty-five decibels. Sixty decibels are generally considered to be the threshold at which one can be woken up from sleep.[222] Thus, the study concluded that effects of tank noise were "hygienically insignificant" and that area in Cottbus was within regulations.[223] At first glance, this would seem that the state was making a true and honest effort to address the rising problem of Soviet-produced noise for the good of public health. However, it is likely that the inspectors framed the study in such a way to produce a favorable result through its conditions and by being deliberately ambiguous.

Since the test was conducted with an exact number of armored vehicles (seven) and at every specific speeds of ten and forty-five kilometers per hour respectively, it is likely that it was not an exact measurement of a real-world scenario but rather using vehicles for the specific purpose of the test, either conducted in coordination with the Soviets, or perhaps more likely, the NVA, which had a nearly identical arsenal of Soviet armored vehicles. The study also leaves out what kind of "tank" was even used, which makes a substantial difference. In contrast to English, where the word "tank" is generally unambiguous in its meaning as a military term, the equivalent term *Panzer* in German is more flexible. *Panzer* usually means "tank" as in English, but (especially in technical and military contexts) it can also be a shorthand for any armored vehicle,

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[221] "Noise Comparisons," accessed October 22, 2025, https://www.chem.purdue.edu/chemsafety/Training/PPETrain/dblevels.htm.
[222] Though this level can be lower, see C. Maschke et al., "Nocturnal Awakenings Due to Aircraft noiseFNx01. Do Wake-up Reactions Begin at Sound Level 60 dB(A)?," *Noise and Health* 6, no. 24 (2004): 21.
[223] Panzerlärm im Bereich der Gaglower Straße Cottbus, August 16, 1973, folder 23349, 801 RdB Ctb, BLHA Potsdam.

such as smaller and quieter armored personnel carriers (APCs). The standard Soviet *tank* at the time was the T-64A (deployed to the GSFG in the early 1970s)[224] which weighed thirty-eight tons and had a 700-horsepower diesel engine.[225] Meanwhile a BMD-1 APC, used by the local air assault regiment in Cottbus, was much lighter at 7.5 tons and 240 horsepower. In essence, the results that the study produced are much more consistent with a light armored vehicle than a main battle tank, which would have produced closer to ninety decibels from its much louder engine. Since armored units could have traversed the same area on their way to the relatively close to the Lieberose training grounds,[226] the findings of the Cottbus study are simply insufficient at addressing the full range of Soviet vehicles' ability to annoy neighborhoods and disturb sleep. Considering the previous example of tank noise in Bernau, which would have most likely been caused by Soviet T54/55 tanks just inches away from people's homes, mere regulatory measures could not account for the inherent unpredictability of military operations. Moreso, it showcases state limitations in responding and adapting to potential strains from Soviet military activity on the East German population. The Cottbus acoustic study represented that the state could to some extent quantify and measure sonic impacts of Soviet forces but ultimately had little influence in compelling the Soviets to adhere to their own domestic regulations that

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[224] The T-64A was first deployed to the GSFG in the early 1970s. While being the most advanced tank at the time, older models such the base T-64, T-62, and older T-54/55s were present. Hans-Albert Hoffmann and Siegfried Stoof, *Sowjetische Truppen in Deutschland und ihr Hauptquartier in Wünsdorf 1945-1994: Geschichte, Fakten, Hintergründe* (Köster, 2017), 142.

[225] "T-64," accessed October 22, 2025, https://www.armyrecognition.com/military-products/army/main-battle-tanks/main-battle-tanks/t-64-main-battle-tank-russian-army.

[226] Horst Henkel et al., *Sperrgebiete in der DDR: ein Atlas von Standorten des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit (MfS), des Ministeriums des Innern (MdI), des Ministeriums für Nationale Verteidigung (MfNV) und der Gruppe der Sowjetischen Streitkräfte in Deutschland (GSSD)*, BF informiert, 34 (2015), Bundesarchiv, Stasi-Unterlagen-Archiv, 2022.

were designed without the Soviets in mind. This became even more clear as the 1980s approached and with it the increasing tempo of noise complaints due to aircraft.

1980s: Growing Complaints

In September, 1979, the ZAIG (Central Evaluation and Information Working Group) division of the Stasi for the Potsdam District, published a report noting ever-escalating negative incidents by Soviet troops towards the civilian population.[227] The report noted increases in petty and violent crime committed by Soviet soldiers along with "avoidable" road/maneuver damages, traffic collisions, accidental weapon discharges, and careless ammo dumping and other problems, the damages of which the GDR had to foot the bill. The ZAIG[228], who compiled such reports from *Eingaben* and from the *Volkspolizei*, recommended gathering more information for the *mitigation* of such incidents. While such incidents had been occurring for the duration of Soviet presence in Germany, it was during this time that GDR state, particularly the Stasi began to actively and, in an almost hostile manner, take an ever growing interest in the negative effects of the Soviets, perhaps *because* the state's inability to deal with such problems reflected poorly on the Honecker regime.

A few months later in December 1979, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, igniting a ten-year conflict that profoundly affected Soviet politics, society, the military, and helped lead to the USSR's eventual collapse. The faraway war also affected the GSFG. Experienced personnel were rotated out of Germany and redeployed to Afghanistan to reinforce the Fortieth Army

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[227] Information über ausgewählte operative bedeutsame Vorkommnisse mit Angehörigen der Sowjetarmee, September 5, 1979, folder 946, MfS BV Pdm AKG, Stasi-Unterlagen Archiv, Berlin.
[228] *Zentrale Auswertungs-und Informationsgruppe.*

engaged with the Mujahadeen.[229] The war also bred *Afgantsy*, battle-hardened Soviet servicemen and officers who formed an influential elite within the Soviet military, but one riddled with trauma and PTSD, low morale, less discipline and general disillusionment.[230] Certain *Afgantsy* rotated to East Germany, where lasting psychological issues led to increases in suicides, desertions, and other erratic behavior throughout the 1980s.[231] Moreover, inter-Soviet ethnic tensions in the army remained a recurrent problem within the GSFG. While exact ethnic compositions of Soviet units are difficult to determine across time, the late 1970s 1980s saw increases in desertions and disciplinary problems among soldiers from non-Russian Soviet Republics, many of whom did not speak Russian and faced racial and ethnic discrimination and abuse on bases.[232] As the war in Afghanistan progressed, unit restructuring and reorganization in the GSFG created additional stress on the ground. These combined effects proved alarming to the GDR state and caused the Stasi to actively monitor the Soviet forces and keep closer track of their negative impacts towards GDR citizens. But ultimately, what would prove to be most impactful was the rising trend of aircraft noise complaints.

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[229] For example, in August, 1985, the Sixth Guards Motorized Rifle division stationed at Bernau was reorganized into the Ninetieth Guards Tank Division due to unit reorganizations. This was likely to compensate for the transfer of the Sixth Guards Tank Division to the Belarusian SSR in 1979, VI Feskov, *Vooruzhennye Sily SSSR Posle Vtoroi Mirovoi Voyni: Ot Krasnoy Armii k Sovetskoi* (Scientific and Technical Literature Publishing, 2013), 404. See also "6th Guards Tank Division," accessed April 2, 2026, https://www.ww2.dk/new/army/td/6gvtd.htm.

[230] See Svetlana Aleksandrovna Aleksievich and Andrew Bromfield, *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2023); Russia (Federation) et al., eds., *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, Modern War Studies (University Press of Kansas, 2002); Henry Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union* (Duke University Press, 1983).

[231] Crimes committed by Soviet soldiers peaked in 1984, amounting to approximately 2.5 percent of all reported crime in the GDR. See Silke Satjukow, *Besatzer "Die Russen" in Deutschland 1945-1994* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 240-41.

[232] Various contemporary reports suggest this, Tagung der gemischten Deutsch-Sowjetischen Kommission in Ost Berlin, 1977, folder 361, MfS HA II, Stasi-Unterlagen Archiv. Suche nach vermissten Sowjetischen Soldat, 1986, folder 6301, MfS HA VII, Stasi-Unterlagen-Archiv. Großfahndungen nach Personen, 1986-1989, folder 438, BDVP Pdm, BLHA Potsdam. See also Roger R. Reese, *The Soviet Military Experience: A History of the Soviet Army, 1917-1991*, (Routledge, 2001), 152.

1980s: Aircraft Noise

In October 1981, First Secretary of the Potsdam District Günther Jahn wrote to Honecker about the further increase in the severity and frequency of negative Soviet impacts in his district.[233] Basing his assessment no doubt on incident data and Stasi-collected *Reaktionen der Bevölkerung*, he did not sugarcoat the fact that the rising frequency of incidents were "detrimental to our political work and pose an acute threat to our citizens."[234] While his assessment noted that public discontentment was localized to specific incidents, and the public largely remained understanding of the national security necessity of the Soviet presence and were not anti-Soviet, he was worried that, at that current trend of incidents, could lead to more general negativity. Jahn was adamant that these problems could not be solved at the local or district level, and that there needed to be upper-level talks and dialogue with the Soviet high command in Wünsdorf and higher administrative organs of the GDR. Not-so-well-hidden among the reassurances that the bond of *Waffenbrüderschaft* remained strong between Germany and the USSR, there was a clear anxiety that the Soviets were increasingly becoming a liability and posing a clear threat to the state's legitimacy, especially given the Honecker regime's great efforts to placate the population's desire for an adequate standard of living. Of the main ongoing issues brought to Honecker's attention was aircraft noise.

The Soviet Sixteenth Air Army operated out of numerous airbases throughout the GDR, many of them located immediately next to densely populated areas (Figure 8). Over the next several years, noise complaints regarding Soviet aircraft kept coming in. With complaints

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[233] Jahn to Honecker, October 19, 1981, folder 946, MfS BV Pdm, Stasi-Unterlagen-Archiv, Berlin.
[234] Ibid.



Figure 8: Map of Soviet airbases in the GDR. James McGinty, *Topographische Karte Der DDR*, Bundesamt für Kartographie und Geodäsie, 1: 200,000.

particularly increasing in frequency after the beginning of glasnost and perestroika, and especially from 1987 to 1989. *Eingaben* and municipal discussions kept emphasizing aircraft noise in areas close to airbases and small arms fire and artillery close to military exercise areas.[235] Despite efforts by the state to communicate work with the Soviets on reducing noise pollution, little appeared to have an actual effect on the ground, in including multiple efforts by the Stasi to directly intercede with the Soviets in response to negative complaints by local people.[236] Soviet generals appear to have generally agreed that some changes were in order, but little effect was made on the ground. In 1985, an anonymous letter to the *Staatsraat* from *Kreis* Pritzwalk still recognized the national security necessity of military exercises but complained that promises made by the Soviets to reduce noise pollution were not kept.[237]

The rapid increase in *Eingaben* for noise complaints in the 1980s against the Soviets fits into the broader trend of increasing *Eingaben* in general in the GDR.[238] But what stands out is the relative quietude over such issues in the preceding decades. Contemporary witnesses recall, that, while noise was indeed annoying, they ultimately got used it and "just lived with it"[239] partially because, in line with party expectations, disturbances were necessary to peace. While the increase in the 1980s certainly has ties to Fulbrook's thesis of an overall growing dissatisfaction with the Honecker regime visa-vis the participatory dictatorship, changes in

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[235] Ausgewählte Vorkommisse im Zusammenhang mit Angehörigen der GSSD, 1985, folder 946, MfS BV Pdm, Stasi-Unterlagen-Archiv.
[236] Major General Böhm to Colonel Androsov, April 1, 1987. Folder 29992, Mfs HA II, Stasi-Unterlagen-Archiv.
[237] Zusammenfassende Einschätzung über Vorkommnisse und Lageerscheinungen im Zusammenhang mit Angehörigen der GSSD im Bezirk Potsdam. December 5, 1985. Folder 1119. MfS BV Pdm Abt VII. Stasi-Unterlagen-Archiv.
[238] Fulbrook, *The People's State,* 377.
[239] Interview with Christian Gilde 11/14/2023, Rose, *Russisches Konfekt*, 25.

Soviet equipment, organizational, and doctrinal changes may have contributed to a more invasive noise emanating from airbases and training grounds.[240]

From 1986 to 1987, the Cottbus *Bezirk* council received multiple complaints from residents living in (current-day) southwest Brandenburg regarding excessive aircraft noise from the Soviet airfield near the village of Welzow. This trail of complaints and the district's response both speak to the growing problem of Soviet noise.

In their *Eingabe* from April 1986, married couple Ingelore and Günther L. complained about excessive "intolerable aircraft noise" caused by newly stationed aircraft operating during the weekly flight day schedule three times per week.[241] Soviet jet aircraft flew at extremely low levels (probably 100 meters) over the course of several hours, three times per week on designated "flight days". The couple noted their credentials as health service workers and measured the noise levels as reaching upwards of 130 decibels during low-level flights, reaching the pain-threshold of hearing and risk of permanent hearing damage if subjected to increased exposure. The couple emphasized that they previously were "accustomed" to excessive flight noise from living at that location for the past thirteen years during Soviet flight exercises, but that things had gotten measurably worse in recent weeks. The fact that the couple must have acquired noise measuring equipment to document the decibel level speaks to its severity.

What were these "new aircraft?" The Eleventh Independent Reconnaissance Aviation Regiment of the Sixteenth Air Army, which flew out of Welzow airfield (Figure 9), was the

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[240] Hoffmann and Stoof, *Sowjetische Truppen in Deutschland*, 203-204.
[241] Gesundheitsgefährdende Fluglärmbelästigung im Raum Neupetershain-Welzow, verursacht durch tieffliegende und durchstartende Flugzeuge, April 21, 1986, folder 23349, 801 RdB Ctb, BLHA Potsdam.

culprit of the noise.[242] As it happened, just before the first *Eingaben* started coming in, the regiment started flying cutting-edge Su-24MRs[243], replacing the older Yak-28PPs[244] the regiment had been flying since 1970.

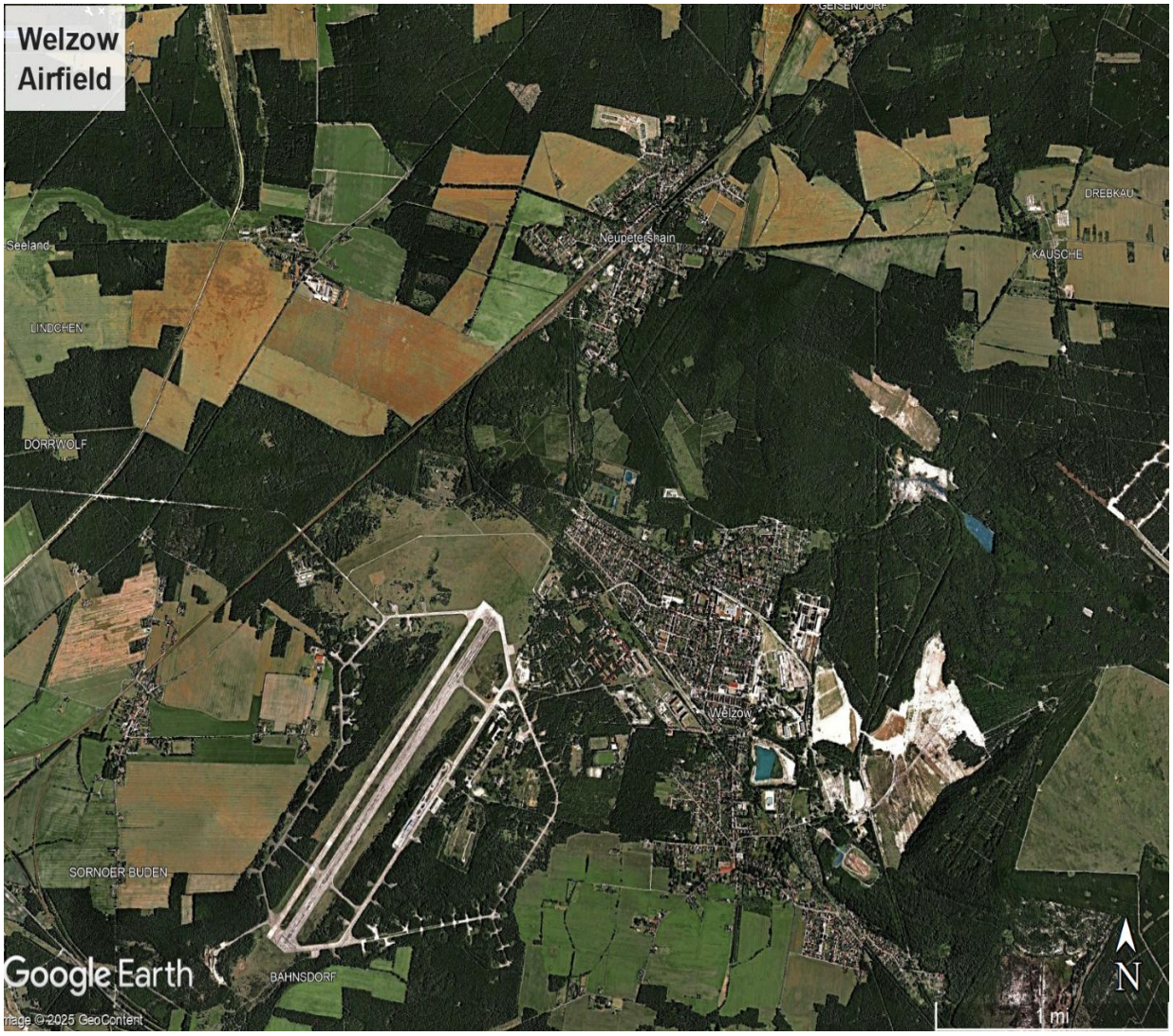

Figure 9: Satellite image from 2000 of the airfield at Welzow with its Cold War layout still intact, Author/Google Earth.

[242] Freundt and Büttner, *Rote Plätze*, 170.
[243] NATO name "Fencer." "Su-24MR FENCER-E (SUKHOI)," accessed November 5, 2025, https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/russia/su-24mr.htm.
[244] NATO name "Firebar." Was retired from service in the 1980s. see "Yak-28 FIREBAR," accessed November 5, 2025, https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/russia/yak-28.htm.

The Su-24MR, which is a reconnaissance variant of the base model of the SU-24, has a much more powerful turbojet engine than the older Yak-28PP, thus creating a much higher potential for excessive noise.[245] This was also not an isolated incident. The phenomenon of the introduction of advanced aircraft onto Soviet airbases exacerbating noise complaints had a similar effect on airfields that flew MiG29s[246] (which was one of the loudest aircraft in the Soviet arsenal) such as in Wittstock. The new (and louder) aircraft coupled with aggressive training maneuvers, particularly through using afterburners at very low altitudes produced (nearly) deafening noise.

In official response to the (and perhaps others) *Eingabe,* local *Kreis* and district officials consulted with the couple and other locals from the area, instructed the mayor of Neupetershain to track the number of residents suffering from the noise disturbances and to have local District environmental officers conduct regular noise measurements.[247] The district was also considering costs and the possibility of installing noise-dampening windows and other soundproofing materials on homes. Finally, District Cottbus officials met with Soviet officials who agreed to end low-level flights over Neupetershain and the surrounding areas, or at least reduced to a minimum. The *Eingabe* was then officially marked as "answered."

If that were the end of the story, it would be a showcase of the *Eingabe* system's effectiveness at resolving conflicts and improving lives. Alas, almost a year later, another round

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[245] As it is still used by the Russian Air Force today, the Su-24 has a reputation for being excessively noisy as evinced by more recent complaints and lawsuits by citizens of Chelyabinsk. See "V Cheli͡abinske Snova Zameri͡at Uroveň Shuma Ot Poletov Istrebiteleĭ SU-24 Iz-Za Zhalob Naseleniia," *Interfax*, November 24, 2011, https://www.interfax-russia.ru/ural/news/v-chelyabinske-snova-zameryat-uroven-shuma-ot-poletov-istrebiteley-su-24-iz-za-zhalob-naseleniya; "Pravitel′stvo Poruchilo Rospotrebnadzoru Zamerit′ Uroveň Shuma Ot Su-24," *74 RU Chelyabinsk*, December 25, 2013, https://74.ru/text/gorod/2013/12/25/59478651.

[246] NATO name "Fulcrum."

[247] Eingabe—Fluglärmbelästigung in Neupetershain, June 1986, folder 23349, 801 RdB Ctb, BLHA Potsdam.

of (even more aggressive-sounding) *Eingaben* came rolling onto the District Councilor Irma Uschkamp's desk.

About a year later, a resident of Welzow, Waltraud A. wrote to the district councilor, saying that extreme noise pollution from the airfield had been going on unabated for about a year, with flight training days occurring each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. [248] The *Eingabe* included rigorous data collection of the noise pollution. On a single day, she recorded sixty-seven low-level flights over the village from 3:30pm to 11:45pm, noting the planes used afterburners each go-around, heightening the noise considerably. "The burden is greater at night, as sleep becomes impossible, my two daughters (ages 3 and 5) are left unrested after only three hours of sleep. On the worst nights, I have to give them sedatives."[249] Sometime the training flights would occur until almost two in the morning. She also emphasized that the extreme noise issues made simply spending time outdoors impossible, "the low-altitude overflights [make it seem like] the aircraft are only a few meters above the roof. When this happens as our children play outside, they instinctively throw themselves to the ground, clearly in a state of shock afterwards."[250]

Waltraud's *Eingabe* also includes detailed references to East German sound studies conducted at the Technical University in Dresden on permanent hearing damage from noise exposure to at 120 decibels for thirty minutes. She also noted the Soviet noise pollution was in flagrant contravention to GDR community noise ordinances that mandated no more than 40 of interior noise during the day to 30 decibels at night, noting the flight noise exceeded those

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[248] Eingabe Extreme Lärmbelästigung, April 12, 1987, folder 23349, 801 RdB Ctb, BLHA Potsdam.
[249] Ibid.
[250] Ibid.

volumes "by a wide margin."[251] What is particularly noteworthy is that she was not even requesting the District to intercede to request the Soviets to stop the training flights (clearly that did not work) but rather to further investigate soundproofing their homes from the extreme noise. Since the 1970s, the GDR had been putting increased efforts into scientific research to implement better environmental regulations, Waltraud was merely aligning her complaint with state-sponsored science.[252]

Over the summer of 1987, more *Eingaben* came in, with repeated demands that their requests be taken seriously and to receive a definitive answer to their complaints. There is also a clear pattern of multiple individuals complaining that the noise phenomenon was directly correlated to the introduction of the new aircraft in 1986 (the SU-24s), and that before it was a relatively peaceful coexistence with the airfield during the previous twenty years the Soviets operated from it, as one wrote, "the new jet aircraft introduced since 1986 create such severe noise that, as a person with a nervous condition, I am seriously concerned for my health."[253] The same *Eingabe* goes on to say:

> I fully support the measures for maintaining world peace outlined at the 11th Party Congress of the SED. Naturally, I and nearly all citizens of Welzow agree that reliable military protection is essential for peace. But military protection cannot mean that, while humanity is saved from attack, citizens are psychologically ruined several nights per week until 2 a.m. from this unbearable noise. Other residents were informed that training

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[251] Based on her statement, the GDR noise restrictions were even tighter compared to the early 1970s as seen with the earlier example of Bernau with the armored vehicle noise.
[252] Ault, *Saving Nature under Socialism*, 9.
[253] Eingabe von Ingeborg K. May 14, 1987. folder 23349, 801 RdB Ctb, BLHA Potsdam.

> flights would end on 1 March 1987, returning to normal operations, yet the situation continues. Our socialist local governments strive to meet citizens' material and cultural needs and ensure their well-being in pleasant surroundings. I therefore ask that this situation be investigated and that I receive a positive decision in accordance with legal provisions.[254]

The wording was certainly toeing the line between following the forumalic *Eingabe* protocol to being increasingly hostile towards local authorities. The citizens were not merely "blowing off steam" to vent their problems to the district, they urgently needed actionable solutions that would lead to a tangible reduction in Soviet aircraft noise. Things became more heated in a subsequent *Eingabe* from Waltraud to district councillor Uschkamp, citing an article she wrote in the *Lausitzer Rundschau*, noting that all problems need to be resolved jointly with GDR citizens, retorting, "therefore, it is incomprehensible to me that I have received no reply whatsoever to my *Eingabe*."[255] At least according to the archival record, the state took no further action in 1987 in regarding the noise at Welzow other than having meetings with citizens, and no further direct action appears to have been taken with the Soviets. The Soviets were clearly an external factor on the local soundscape that the state was utterly powerless against and that locals had to deal with.

Although there are only a handful of *Eingaben* authored by a few individuals, it is possible to extrapolate a much wider problem. In the 1960s and 1970s, the US Department of

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[254] Ibid.
[255] Bearbeitung meiner Eingabe wegen extremer Lärmbelästigung, July 20, 1987 , folder 23349, 801 RdB Ctb, BLHA Potsdam.

Defense developed the concept of community "annoyance" in response to negative acoustic events such as from aicraft and small arms fire/artillery.[256]

To measure community "annoyance," the DoD also helped develop the idea of Day-Night Average Sound Level (DNL) which is an average of the noise level that communities are exposed to in a twenty-four-hour period, with extra weight of ten decibels during the overnight period from 10pm to 7am to account for increased noise sensitivity during sleep.[257] Since then, DNL has become a widely used metric for noise pollution in a variety of civil contexts.[258] Further studies have also been conducted specifically to account for aircraft and other transportation noise as a source of sleep disturbance. For example, an aircraft flyover of ninety-five decibels over a house (assuming decibel loss between fifteen and twenty decibels to account for open or closed windows) can expect to wake the inhabitants from sleep between fifteen and twenty percent of the time per noise event.[259] If we consider Waltraud's *Eingabe* which counted dozens of low-level flyovers in a single afternoon and evening, many of which occurred at night, and the decibel level in that case was probably much higher, it is no surprise that anyone would be driven to the brink of insanity from the noise and sleep deprivation.

In doing acoustic measurements to gauge collective community annoyance from airbases (which produce intermittent but very loud noise events), the DoD uses a weighted average of the

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[256] "Annoyance" defined as, "An emotional and attitudinal reaction from a person exposed to noise used as primary indicator of community response. Annoyance attempts to account for all negative aspects of effects from noise, e.g., increased annoyance due to being awakened the previous night by aircraft, and interference with everyday conversation." "Glossary – Department of Defense Community and Environmental Noise Primer," accessed November 11, 2025, https://www.denix.osd.mil/dodnoise/glossary/#annoyance.
[257] Ibid.
[258] See Naveen Garg, "On Suitability of Day-Night Average Sound Level Descriptor in Indian Scenario," *Archives of Acoustics*, June 13, 2019, 385–92, https://doi.org/10.24425/aoa.2019.128502.
[259] See Malcolm J. Crocker and Jorge P. Arenas, *Engineering Acoustics: Noise and Vibration Control* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2021), 205-242.

Aircraft Noise

A good predictor of annoyance at airfields with 50–200 operations per day is the maximum level (Lmax) of the three noisiest events.*

Percentage of population highly annoyed from aircraft noise

Maximum level (dBA)	Percent Highly Annoyed (%)
70	5
75	13
80	20
85	28
90	35
95	43

Figure 10: "What Is Noise and How Do We Talk About It? – Department of Defense Community and Environmental Noise Primer." Accessed November 11, 2025. https://www.denix.osd.mil/dodnoise/what-is-noise-and-how-do-we-talk-about-it/

DNL, community surveys, and averages of the maximum noise levels to quantitatively gauge the level at which a community is "collectively annoyed" (Figure 10). [260] For example, if the maximum sound level over a community is ninety-five decibels (equivalent to a jackhammer,

[260] See also R Rylander et al., "Re-analysis of Aircraft noise Annoyance Data Against the dB(A) Peak Concept," Journal of Sound and Vibration 36, no. 3 (1974): 399–406.

subway up close, or overflying aircraft), then that correlates to approximately forty-three percent of people in the community being "highly annoyed" (Figure 5).

Given the fact that the entire Neupetershain/Welzow area had to deal with frequent and disruptive training flights of (baseline loud) Su-24s conducting low-level flights at 100 meters over the community at practically all hours of the day over the course of at least a year, it would suggest a combined community annoyance level significantly higher than forty percent. Even if the district could somehow add additional soundproofing to homes, it is unlikely it would have made that large of a difference, given that the community was already giving substantial complaints towards not only indoor noise and sleep but on the general ambient noise of the community itself. Based on the multiple *Eingaben* that also contained worries about being forced to move away from the community because of the extreme noise speaks to this. It was not simply infrequent noise of disturbing sleep, but the Soviet self-noise from the airfield was generating an extremely hostile soundscape stretching over the whole area that made it a negative experience to simply *exist* there. The sonic presence of the thoroughly inhuman noise of Soviet aircraft was actively undermining and eroding the careful separation between the GDR and the Soviet world. Moreso, the Soviets as an extranational party and their lack of enforceable (in practice) accountability made the inability of the GDR to meet those specific needs of its people as the Soviets were largely outside of their control.

Regarding the nature of *Eingaben,* Mary Fulbrook argues, "...*Eingaben* were at least to some extent 'system sustaining.' They confirmed the possibility of drawing attention to shortcomings in a system that, while imperfect in practice, was nevertheless developing on the right lines and could in principle be improved." Critiquing within the *Eingaben* system, she

claims was not to attack the state system for its own sake, but to contribute to actually solving problems.[261] This however seems more to apply to problems that the state was more in a position to deal with, particularly ones that were in its direct purview or issues that were not immediately threatening to life and well-being. Considering the internal memos on the state's response to the Neupetershain/Welzow *Eingaben* as well as concerted efforts taken to at least record and measure the problem of noise, the state was clearly concerned about the problem and expressed a genuine interest in improving the situation on the ground. However, as the example of aircraft noise *Eingaben* shows, after the state initially met with the Soviets about the noise issue, and after the Soviets allegedly promised to rectify the situation and thereupon took no action on that promise, there was little more action to be taken. The Soviets operated on their own accord and knew it. Moreover, the increasingly hostile wording of the *Eingaben*, bordering on droll sarcasm towards the Cottbus district chairperson as to her apparent inaction on the noise issue, points to a critical gap in this "system sustaining" institution of the GDR. If the state couldn't do anything to compel the Soviets to mitigate physiologically damaging noise, then what good were they? The previous strategy of the Ulbricht and early Honecker regime to obfuscate and redirect negative Soviet problems was no longer sustainable.

The ongoing noise problems in Neupetershain/Welzow were of course not isolated incidents but proving to be more common. It was becoming clear that by the late 1980s, noise complaints were not individualized complaints pointing to specific incidents but rather indicative of a broader erosion of trust in local authorities to improve their daily lives. Indeed, the urgency of trying to deal with negative Soviet impacts as a whole garnered what comes across as tacit

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[261] Fulbrook, *The People's State,* 372.

hostility towards the Soviets as the 1980s progressed, and it extended beyond intrusive issues of the sonic. Soviet soldiers who committed crimes off base were, on at least some occasions, apprehended and questioned by the East German police and not immediately turned over to the Soviets as had been common practice for decades prior.[262]

Indeed, the increased boldness and thinly veiled hostility in these *Eingaben* fits into the broader public's dissatisfaction towards environmental issues by the late 1980s. The Welzow complaints in 1987 occurred about a year after the Chornobyl disaster. As Julia Ault has argued, Chornobyl heavily emboldened movements across the Eastern Bloc. In the GDR, it became much more publicly accepted and, through Western support, unrest towards pollution in general was becoming more widespread.[263] The boldness in these *Eingaben*, coupled with increasing attempts to hold officials accountable to problems they could not keep, integrates these incidents into wider public frustration on environmental issues during this period. It was precisely this frustration that drove citizens toward founding citizens' initiatives in the GDR to provide actionable solutions to problems that could not be solved through submitting complaints alone.[264]

By 1989, Soviet flight noise complaints remained a major political problem, and, similar to efforts by the GDR Ministry of the Interior to revise the *Stationierungsabkommen* with the

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[262] As in one incident in 1987 where a panicked Soviet soldier was caught stealing on someone's property and then tossed a live grenade at his pursuer, grievously injuring him, was interrogated by the *Volkspolizei.* Aktenvermerk zum Vorkommnis mit den Soldaten der GSSD, April 30, 1987, folder 143, BvFs Pdm KD Neuruppin, Stasi-Unterlagen-Archiv. Berlin. The most famous example is the Forst-Zinna rail catastrophe in January, 1988 where a *Reichsbahn* passenger train collided with a T-64 tank on the tracks, killing six people and injuring thirty-three people. The tank driver instructor and the student were interrogated at length by East German police and more impactful was the fact that the incident was featured as front-page news in GDR newspapers that directly indicated that the Soviets were responsible. See "Schweres Eisenbahnunglück in Der Nähe von Forst-Zinna," *Neues Deutschland*, January 20, 1988.This is contrasted with a similar incident that occurred in March, 1962 in Trebbin where public knowledge of the incident was actively suppressed. See Henrik Schulze, *Jammerbock IV: Sowjetarmee, Deutsche Streitkräfte Und Konversion (1945-2014)* (Im Selbstverlag, 2018).
[263] Ault, *Saving Nature under Socialism*, 18.
[264] Ibid, 117.

Soviets to address its shortcomings, it was too little too late.[265] The Soviet drawdown in the late 1980s and shift to a defensive stance may have made Soviet high command more malleable to persuasion. In October, 1989, less than a month before the wall fell, the East German Ministry of Defense requested the Soviets to establish limits on training flights. Training flights would be forbidden from 10pm to 6am and set altitude limits of 300 meters for fixed wing aircraft and 100 meters for helicopters.[266] The Soviets finally agreed, with compromise. Training flights were completely banned on Sundays, public holidays, and restricted on Saturdays to 730am to 3:00pm. The Soviets agreed to nighttime restrictions of 10pm to 6am, but only during the winter.[267] Nevertheless, the collapse of the GDR meant that it was now the FRG who would be dealing with the Soviets in a newly united Germany.

Conclusion

While the comparatively more benign aspects of the Soviet military's self-noise led increased an increased sense of familiarity, the intrusive and negative soundscapes they exposed major weaknesses in the GDR system. Like smell, sound disregards borders and artificial boundaries. To the residents of places like Cottbus, Bernau, Welzow, and Neupetershain, vehicle and aircraft noise literally shook and pierced their way into people's homes and into their private spheres. Noise disrupted sleep and had the capability to exact psychological and physiological strain.

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[265] See Karl-Heinz Schmalfuß, *Meine Wege nach Moskau: Erinnerungen und Reflexionen eines DDR-Generals* (Helios, 2011).
[266] Armeegeneral Keßler to Snetkov, October 13, 1989. Folder 115653, DVW1, Bundesarchiv, Freiburg im Breisgau.
[267] "Sofortmaßnahmen Gegen Fluglärm Beschlossen," *Neues Deutschland*, November 16, 1989.

The GDR's response to noise problems revealed key limitations of the participatory dictatorship. In this case, the *Meckerkultur* (complaint culture) of the GDR, which was meant to strengthen the state, instead worked *against* it when it came to Soviet noise. *Kreis* and district authorities accepted and processed *Eingaben* as intended, held internal and community meetings, corresponded with Soviet authorities, and monitored and recorded the problems. Much of this data worked its way into Stasi *Reaktionen der Bevölkerung* reports, sometimes landing on Honecker's desk. But all this was ultimately for naught because, in the end, the GDR lacked real authority or power to compel the Soviets to change their own tactical practices because, ultimately, it was Wünsdorf and Moscow, not Berlin who managed Soviet military policy on the ground. East Germany may have been a "super ally"[268] in a broader geopolitical sense, but not in matters that concerned ordinary citizens on the local scale. The Haustein tank noise case, the state-run Cottbus acoustic study, and the broader trend of increasing aircraft noise complaints in the 1980s all demonstrated that while the state did genuinely *care* and had a real vested interest in mitigating Soviet sonic disturbances, they simultaneously admitted their powerlessness through an inability to act. It was this inability to act that further damaged already eroding trust in the state by the 1980s and helped contribute to a wider environmental consciousness in the GDR during its twilight years.

Residents of places like Bernau, Neupetershain, and Welzow followed the formulaic *Eingabe* language of socialist duty in their letters while expressing increasing frustration at the lack of action. In Bernau, Dieter Haustein took matters into his own hands and tried to deal with the Soviets outside of the state. In Neupetershain and Welzow, residents' letters became

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[268] See Hope Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall*.

increasingly sharper and more hostile in their language, further highlighting this erosion of trust and confidence.

The next chapter follows these tensions and how they evolved amid the simultaneous collapse of the GDR and the Soviet withdrawal from Germany. It will explore how the legacies of these soundscapes shaped community responses in the early days the united Federal Republic on the local level.

Chapter Four: Collapsing Visual and Sonic Boundaries: The Soviet Withdrawal from Wittstock, 1990-1993

Beginning in late 1992, demonstrators began marching along the perimeter of the Wittstock training grounds as part of a series of *Protestwanderungungen* (protest marches). Protestors carried banners reading, "Forty Years Were Enough!" and "Give the skies of our heath to the eagle, not the bombers" (Figure 11). Notably, these protests were directed not at the departing Soviet forces, but at the prospect of their replacement by the German military (Bundeswehr). While Soviet (officially now Commonwealth of Independent States, CIS)[269] troops continued field exercises, locals mobilized against a new military presence. These protests were not simply a product of politics in the newly reunified Federal Republic, but rather the culmination of decades of sensory coexistence with military power. Long-term exposure to Soviet military activity had both normalized the presence of militarized landscapes and heightened local sensitivity to their disruptive effects, shaping how communities understood and contested their environments after 1989.

This mobilization was an evolution of the shared sensory lifeworld that had developed between Soviet forces and surrounding communities over the preceding decades. As the political order of the GDR collapsed and the institutional barriers separating Soviet and East German spaces dissolved, residents increasingly sought to assert control over landscapes that had long been defined by external military forces. The protests as part of the so-called Freie Heide ("Free

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[269] After the collapse of the USSR in December 1991, German sources refer to former Soviet troops as "Commonwealth of Independent States" (CIS, or *GUS* in German) or simply "Russian." For greater continuity with the rest of dissertation and to emphasize that many troops stationed in Germany still hailed from former Soviet republics besides Russia, I continue to use the term "Soviet" or "Western Group of Forces" (WGF) to refer to them when describing events from 1992 to 1994.

Heathland") movement around northwest Brandenburg represented not only opposition to the Bundeswehr, but also an effort to reclaim sovereignty over a sensory environment that had historically been beyond their control.

Rather than marking a clean rupture, the Soviet withdrawal constituted a period of transition in which a shared sensory landscape was gradually reconfigured rather than abruptly dismantled. Many of the same dynamics that had characterized late socialist coexistence continued into the early 1990s, albeit within a shifting geopolitical context in which the Soviets could no longer operate with the same degree of impunity. In this sense, the chapter builds on arguments that 1989 did not represent a definitive endpoint for the history of the GDR, demonstrating instead how sensory and environmental continuities shaped both lived experiences and political behavior in concrete ways.

This chapter is structured into three parts. First, I examine the persistence of Soviet noise in Wittstock between 1990 and 1992, showing how familiar sensory grievances continued even as political authority shifted. Analyzing local press, the oral history of Wittstock chairman (*Landrat*) Christian Gilde, and municipal and Bundeswehr documents, this section highlights both continuities with late GDR complaint patterns and new uncertainties in negotiating with Soviet forces. Second, I analyze the reopening of the road between Schweinrich and Flecken Zechlin as a case of collapsing spatial boundaries, demonstrating how the removal of Soviet-controlled infrastructure enabled a reassertion of local sovereignty while also generating tensions with both withdrawing Soviet troops and German authorities. Finally, I trace the emergence of the Freie Heide movement in 1992, arguing that it represented not a rupture with the past, but a

continuation of local resistance shaped by decades of sensory experience—now redirected towards the Bundeswehr.

Overall, this chapter demonstrates that the sensory world produced by the Soviet military did not disappear with its withdrawal, but instead continued to shape how local communities, navigated, contested, and redefined military space in reunified in Germany.



Figure 11: Nineteenth protest march of the citizens' initiative "Freie Heide"' in Fretzdorf near Wittstock, Peter Sengpiehl, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, April 2, 1993.

Method/Historiography

The previous two chapters have laid a groundwork of understanding the East German relationship towards the Soviets via sensory approaches; both in terms of normalization (Chapters 1 and 2) and tension (Chapter 3). This chapter expands this into the early 1990s during the withdrawal period to demonstrate how these sensory effects continued and manifested in

different ways while the Soviets still maintained a military presence, but the GDR was politically dead. One of the main aims of this chapter is to show through the continuities of Soviet sensory impacts that the paradigm of the GDR continued (in some ways separate from political developments) in the early 1990s.

Historians, journalists, politicians, and other scholars have claimed that the period of 1989-1990 represents a second *Stunde Null* in modern German history, analogous to 1945 as a critical endpoint in contemporary German history, a break with the past and becoming a part of a "new Europe."[270] Or, to use Jennifer Allen's terminology, a "historical reset button."[271] The rapid and unexpected collapse of the GDR in 1989 and speedy (political) integration into the Federal Republic the following year fits easily into broader narratives that emphasize the triumph of liberal democracy over communism.[272] Like Nazism in 1945, the utter collapse of state socialism in 1989 in the GDR and the rest of the former Eastern bloc fits into an idea of Fukuyama-esque ideas of progress in contemporary German history, when the former GDR, now referred to as "the new *Bundesländer*," became part of Germany. Jennifer Allen has argued that these narratives have effectively constructed a 1989-1990 ending "myth," achieved through what she calls a "fetishization" of largely triumphalist narratives that overemphasize the political collapse of the GDR and reunification. While 1989-1990 fundamentally transformed Germany's

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[270] Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (Penguin, 2005),1; Ingo Schulze and Kersten Hensel, "Everyday Stories of Hope and Despair in Eastern Germany: Kerstin Hensel and Ingo Schulze Write about Life after the Wende," in *Textual Responses to German Unification : Processing Historical and Social Change in Literature and Film* (de Gruyter, 2001), 131.
[271] Jennifer Allen, "Against the 1989-1990 Ending Myth," *Central European History* 52 (2019): 125-147, 127.
[272] Timothy Garton Ash, *The Magic Lantern: The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague*, (Vintage Books, 2019); François Furet, *Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century* (University of Chicago Press, 2000).

political and economic landscape, an overemphasis on German reunification as a *Stunde Null* implies that the GDR simply vanished overnight. 1989-1990 as endpoint is also reflected in the historiography of the Soviet troop presence in Germany. Monographs that cover the Soviet military presence in Germany examine the period of Soviet withdrawal as a mere epilogue to the Soviet presence on East German soil.[273] Because the Soviet troop presence was inextricably tied to the GDR state and the wider Cold War, it is logical at first to tie the 1989-1990 myth as an endpoint to the Soviet-German story in East Germany. Works taking this perspective tend to consider the withdrawal as a political event and give less consideration to continuities from the GDR. Yet the Soviet withdrawal took years, and it occurred simultaneously with deep changes in daily life in the former GDR over that period. Therefore, exploring the Soviet withdrawal is key lens in further elucidating the transformative process and reshaping of every life during the early 1990s in former East Germany.

Daphne Berdahl's *Where the World Ended* and other works already considered the early post-*Wende* era as a time of gradual, transformative change within the former GDR.[274] Everyday practice and lived experienced had long reinforced the *Mauer im Kopf,* and so reunification was a shock that people would process for many years. While the continuation of certain cultural practices like the *Jugendweihe* shows the GDR lingered in memory and practice. The rapid dissolution of physical borders was an additional shock. In her ethnographic study of the East

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[273]Silke Satjukow, *Besatzer "Die Russen" in Deutschland 1945-1994* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH, 2008), Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk and Stefan Wolle, *Roter Stern über Deutschland: sowjetische Truppen in der DDR* (Landeszentrale für politische Bildung in Sachsen, 2001). Piotr Wołoszyn, "Nebeneinander, Miteinander, Gegeneinander? Das Stationierte Sowjetische Militär Und Die Zivilbevölkerung in Der DDR Und in Polen" (Dissertation, Europa-Universität Viadrina, 2015), Deutsche Nationalbibliothek.

[274] Daphne Berdahl, *Where the World Ended: Re-Unification and Identity in the German Borderland* (University of California Press, 1999); See also Edith Sheffer, *Burned Bridge: How East and West Germans Made the Iron Curtain* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

German border town of Kella, Berdahl noted that in 1990, "a year after the wall fell some people were still taking their feet off the gas pedal or reaching for their identity cards when they approached the site where a *Schutzstreifen* control point used to be located."[275] The internalization of the border was so strongly ingrained in people's minds that absence and the sudden severance of physical barriers carried with them effects akin to phantom limbs.[276] An attachment to physical borders is also evinced in that local officials tried to preserve sections of a three-meter fence that had surrounded and closed off sections of the town.[277]

Berdahl's study linking lingering GDR behavior and mentalities post-1990 have parallels to this study as well within the realm of a sustained sensory environment. As will be seen with the case of the Soviet withdrawal around Wittstock, the shock of the breakdown of physical barriers and artificial boundaries had similar effects. For decades, the world had also ended in the village of Schweinrich where the municipal road stopped and the road to the training grounds began. The intense desire to open the road and the complications that attended opening it demonstrate that the GDR in certain ways endured long after 1990.

As discussed in Chapter 3, rising disillusionment with rampant Soviet noise pollution caused by vehicles and jet aircraft was correlated with increases in *Eingaben* with the tone of the complaints becoming more outwardly hostile towards local officials. This was a part of a broader trend of environmental complaints in the 1980s among the general population that caused GDR citizens to found West-German-style citizens' initiatives to compel action from the

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[275] Berdahl, *Where the World Ended*, 154.
[276] See also Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Formation Series (Princeton University Press, 2006); See also Victor Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989: The Fall of the Soviet Empire* (Pantheon Books, 2009).
[277] Berdahl, *Where the World Ended,* 220.

government.[278] As will be seen, in the early 1990s this impetus toward collective action among GDR citizens continued throughout the Soviet withdrawal. These initiatives initially campaigned against excessive Soviet-derived noise pollution but then pivoted to campaigning against the planned Bundeswehr takeover of military sites. As Julia Ault has argued, as one of the only semi-independent institutions in the GDR, the Protestant church played an outsized role in grassroots environmentalism campaigns.[279] As it happened, the Freie Heide movement's founders included local protestant preachers around Wittstock and Schweinrich.

The Soviet withdrawal itself has largely been overlooked as a key part of the early years of German reunification until more recent historiography. As Jörg Morré and Christoph Meißner have rightly pointed out, "The withdrawal from Germany was barely noticed by contemporaries as it was overshadowed by the brilliant events that accompanied it at the beginning of the reunified German state."[280] Beyond the aforementioned focus on the 1989-1990 ending myth, the Berlin Wall's fall effectively made the Soviets as the guarantor of GDR state sovereignty obsolete overnight and German reunification sealed the fate of the hundreds of thousands of troops stationed throughout the Warsaw Pact. Another reason for the comparative lack of contemporary interest in the withdrawal is because it proceeded relatively peacefully and uneventfully, despite immense logistical challenges and the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

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[278] Julia E. Ault, *Saving Nature under Socialism: Transnational Environmentalism in East Germany, 1968-1990* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 117. See Also Christian Möller, *Umwelt Und Herrschaft in Der DDR: Politik, Protest Und Die Grenzen Der Partizipation in Der Diktatur* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019). Moranda Scott, *The People's Own Landscape: Nature, Tourism, and Dictatorship in East Germany.* (University of Michigan Press, 2014), 160; see also Kate Brown, *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters* (Oxford University Press, 2013).
[279] Ibid. See Also Christian Halbrock, ""Die Unabhängigen Umweltgruppen in Der DDR. 'Zwischenstand' Nach Zwei Jahrzehnten Aufarbeitung," *Zeitschrift Für Evangelische Ethik* 54, no. 3 (2013).
[280] Jörg Morré and Christoph Meißner, *The Withdrawal of Soviet Troops from East Central Europe: National Perspectives in Comparison* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021),11.

Contemporary anxieties among certain US military analysts that local Soviet commanders in Germany would go rogue, attack each other, or sell nuclear weapons on the black market were in the end unfounded.[281] In fact, recent work on the Soviet withdrawal from Germany and the rest of Central/Eastern Europe have shown that it was one of the most successful peacetime military withdrawals in recent history. It also allows us to grasp more fully the subtler impacts of post-*Wende* Germany's early history. Christophe Lorke has stated "… the withdrawal of the Russian armed forces can be interpreted as a barometer for the complex sensitivities of the young 'unified society.'[282] The Soviets, who were forced to adapt to utterly foreign administrative and economic structures in the rapidly changing environment of former East Germany allows one to observe the ruptures and continuities between the GDR and the post-*Wende* landscape more effectively, especially regarding environmental concerns. The closure of more than a thousand of military sites in the GDR ushered in the *Jahrhundertaufgabe* – literally, the task of a century. Environmental cleanup and repair and the issue of repurposing former military sites (*Konversion*) remain to this day salient issues.[283]

The Soviet Withdrawal

While German reunification dramatically changed the role of the Soviet military in former East Germany and in the rest of the Eastern Bloc, perestroika and glasnost had planted

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[281] Thomas-Durell Young, *Securing Eastern Germany and the Disposition of the Soviet Western Group of Forces* (Strategic Studies Institute U.S. Army War College, 1991).
[282] Christoph Lorke, "Shaping and Negotiating the Withdrawal, Soviet Russian Troops as Strangers in Unified Germany," in *The Withdrawal of Soviet Troops from East Central Europe* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021), 159.
[283] Evelyn Gustedt an d Markus Hennen, *Jahrhundertaufgaben: Blockade Oder Entwicklung von Räumen Durch Aufgelassene Konversionsflächen* (Verlag der ARL, 2024). See also Edwin Martini, *Proving Grounds: Militarized Landscapes, Weapons Testing, and the Environmental Impact of U.S. Bases* (University of Washington Press, 2015). David Sorenson, *Shutting down the Cold War: The Politics of Military Base Closure* (St. Martin's Press, 1998).

the seeds for an eventual departure years before. The Soviet quagmire in Afghanistan and myriad domestic problems in the Soviet Union meant that the military's role in society as well as its budgetary requirements would have to be reformed. In 1986, Gorbachev announced a strategy of "adequate defense" in Eastern Europe and the general doctrine of Soviet forces in Europe shifted permanently away from a purely offensive posture. In consequence, the Soviets unilaterally withdrew several field divisions stationed in Warsaw Pact member states in part to demonstrate to NATO that they were adopting a new policy of defense. In 1989, the Soviet Union reduced its defense budget for the first time and on July 1, the "Group of Soviet Forces in Germany" was renamed to the "Western Group of Forces" (WGF). General Boris Snetkov, commander of the Soviet forces in Germany wrote to GDR defense minister Heinz Kessler that the name change "in no way alters the 1957 *Abkommen* or the Four Powers Agreement."[284] Several months later, during the Leipzig protests, Honecker urged Moscow to deploy the WGF to save the GDR, but Gorbachev refused. Till the last, the Soviets never broke the 1957 treaty's provision to not interfere in GDR affairs. November 9, 1989, sealed the fate of Soviet troops in Germany, even though many in the upper echelons of the Soviet government had already been seriously discussing a major, if not complete drawdown of its forces in Eastern Europe. [285]

As German reunification became inevitable after the March 1990 elections in the GDR, negotiations began between Bonn and Moscow on the full withdrawal of Soviet forces from a united Germany. The Two Plus Four treaty included the stipulation that Soviet troops would

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[284] Snetkov to Kessler, July 1, 1989, folder 115654, DVW1, Bundesarchiv Freiburg.
[285] General Matvey Burlakov, who would ultimately oversee the withdrawal in the 1990s, remarked close before his death in 2011 that plans for a complete withdrawal from Germany were already being discussed in 1989. Ibid, 106.

vacate Germany by the end of 1994. An additional *Treaty on the Conditions for the Temporary stay in and Modalities for the Phased withdrawal of Soviet forces from the territory of the Federal Republic of Germany* was signed on October 12, 1990, which dictated the final details and effectively replaced the 1957 *Stationierungabkommen* as the main status of forces agreement. In conjunction with the phased withdrawals of troops stationed in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, some 540,000 Soviet troops and civilians would be evacuated from Germany at thirty-percent reductions each year.[286] The German government agreed to finance the withdrawal to the tune of twelve billion DM. Most of the funds went toward constructing housing for returning troops in the Soviet Union while the rest went toward garrison upkeep in Germany and for transport costs to send them home via air, land, and sea.[287] Since General Snetkov refused to manage the withdrawal, General Matvey Burlakov replaced him as the commander of the WGF in December,1990. Burlakov, who had already administered the Soviet withdrawal from Hungary, was ten years younger and was the only commander of the Soviet forces in Germany who was not a veteran of the Great Patriotic War. At the same time, the Bundeswehr established the German Liaison Command to the Western Group of Forces, led by Major General Hartmut Foertsch, to observe and coordinate with the Soviets on the withdrawal.

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[286] This included 122,678 equipment pieces, including vehicles and aircraft. Over 2.6 million tons of other equipment including almost 700,000 tons of munitions. Christoph Meissner, "The Withdrawal of the Western Group of Forces in Germany," in *The Withdrawal of Soviet Troops from East Central Europe: National Perspectives in Comparison* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021). Thomas-Durell Young, *Securing Eastern Germany And the Disposition of the Soviet Western Group of Forces*.

[287] Ibid, 120. Financing was also provided based on the asset value of Soviet real estate in Germany that was calculated against German claims for compensation. The Soviets valued their assets at 10.5 billion DM including everything they invested in since 1945, while the Germans used 1990 values, which were lower and estimated high damage on the properties which lowered the value further. The Soviets intentionally hid environmental damages during the withdrawal so as to not lower property values.

It is important to note that one of great miracles of the withdrawal is that the dissolution of the Soviet Union throughout 1991 and the August Coup did not greatly disrupt the course of the withdrawal itself or cause mass chaos on bases in Germany. With the establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in December, 1991, leaders in Russia, the Central Asian republics, and Belarus attempted to turn the Soviet army into a CIS army under a unified command structure.[288] These efforts failed in early 1992 mainly because Ukraine, Moldova, and Azerbaijan favored forming national armies independent of the CIS.[289] On March 4, 1992, command of the Western Group of Forces transferred to the Russian Federation, who from then on facilitated the withdrawal. Troops from non-Russian former Soviet republics stayed on Germany under Russian command until their respective withdrawal to their home countries.

At the end of 1990, the Soviets had approximately 3,441 military personnel, 21,000 tons of materiel, thirty-three planes (MiG29s), and 1,428 vehicles around Wittstock which included the airbase at Alt Daber, the training grounds, the garrison facilities at Schweinrich and at Gadow-Glashütte, all of which had to be vacated by the end of 1994.[290] In other terms, the Wittstock *Kreis* alone contained ten Soviet facilities, comprising an area of 7,797 squaremeters, taking up fifteen percent of the entire municipality.[291]

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[288] Christoph Meissner, "The Search for a New Security Structure in Eastern Europe through the Example of the Dissolution of the Soviet Army," in *The Withdrawal of Soviet Troops from East Central Europe* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021), 89.
[289] Ibid, 82.
[290] "Die Etappen Des Abzugs | Truppenabzug 1991–1994 | Dekoder," accessed December 23, 2023, https://specials.dekoder.org/abzug-vyvod/karte/. Does not include smaller facilities such as the SAM base at Wulfersdorf Figures based on BArch BW55/99
[291] Überblick über Probleme mit WSSG, 1991, folder 974, Landratsamt Wittstock.

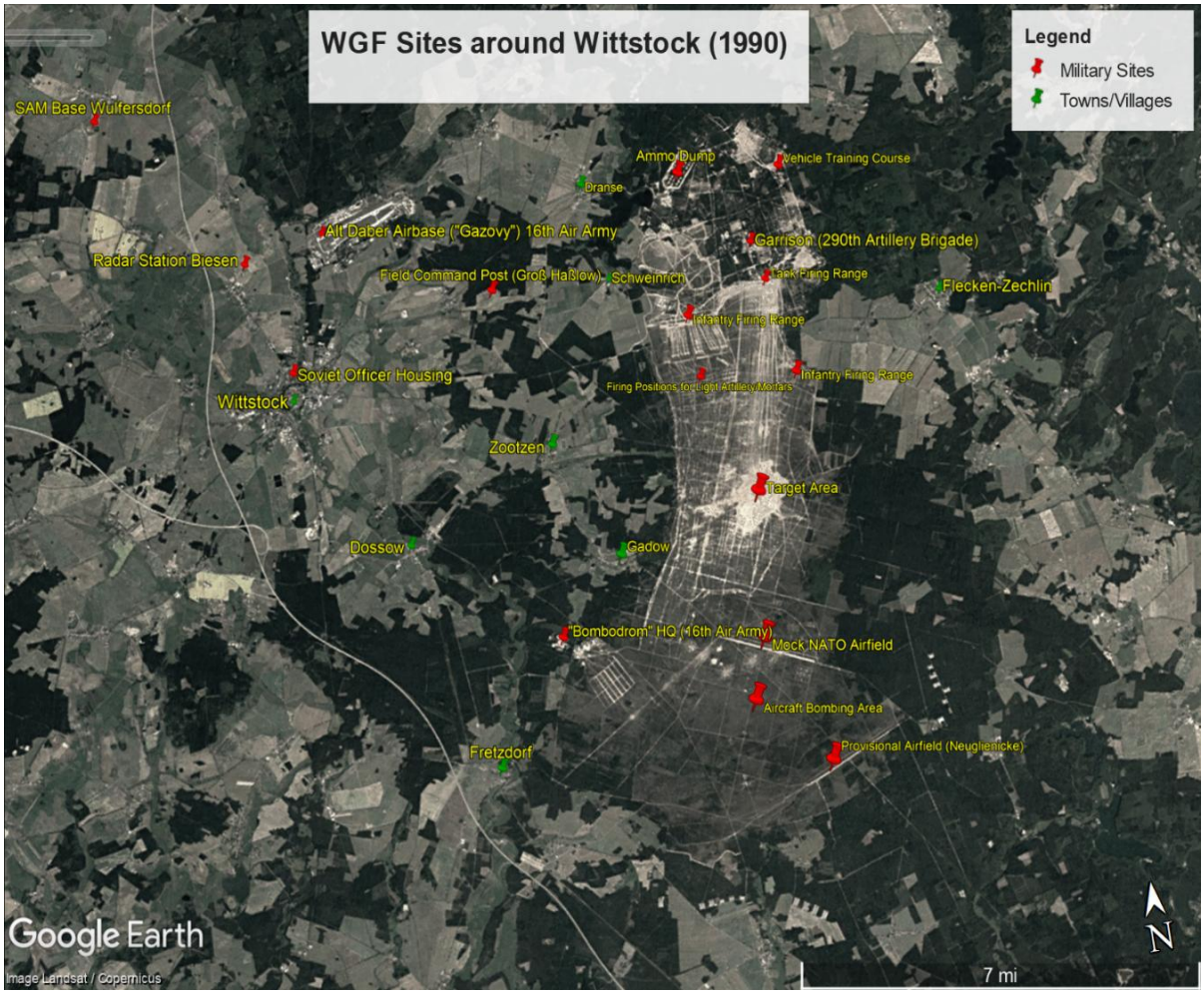

Figure 12: 1990 Satellite imagery of WGF sites around Wittstock, Author/Google Earth.

Early 1990: Citizens' Initiatives and Local Political Changes

In early 1990, the soundscape over Wittstock and its surrounding communities remained strikingly indifferent to the dramatic political transformation unfolding across East Germany. Despite new regulations introduced in late 1989 to restrict Soviet flight times and low-level maneuvers, aircraft noise, artillery fire, and training exercises continued to embed daily life

much as they had in the final years of the GDR. While political authority was shifting rapidly, the sensory presence of the Soviet military remained largely unchanged.

Multiple protests and grassroots citizens' initiatives across the GDR formed in protest of Soviet flight noise during spring 1990. A movement against the airfield near Leipzig at Brandis (Figure 8) collected over 6,000 signatures, demanding an end to noise pollution.[292] In Welzow (see Chapter 3), 2,500 people gathered at the market square for a public meeting on reducing flight noise. After the corresponding protest at the airfield was cancelled by local authorities at the last minute, a "riot" broke out among the angered participants who reportedly threw objects at the airfield fence and cursed at Soviet personnel.[293] At the same time, the Soviets complained to the Minster of Defense and Disarmament in May, 1990 of increasing incidents caused by GDR citizens against Soviet military assets, including drunken hooliganism. On April 2, 1990, a drunken GDR citizen was arrested for trespassing onto the Merseburg airbase (Figure 8) and trying to remove a tarp from a plane.[294]

While it suffered neither riots nor notable drunken incursions in restricted areas, Wittstock occupied a particularly intense position. The region sat at the intersection of several major Soviet military sites: the Alt Daber airbase, the artillery garrison and tank school near Schweinrich, and the vast military training area including the Bombodrom airstrike zone (Figure 12). The Thirty-Third Fighter Aviation regiment, flying MiG-29s from Alt Daber since 1985, contributed to one of the loudest operational environments in the Soviet arsenal. [295] Residents

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[292] Werner E. Ablass, *Zapfenstreich: Von der NVA zur Bundeswehr* (Kommunal-Verlag, 1992), 62.
[293] Ibid, 65.
[294] Ibid, 63.
[295] "33rd Fighter Aviation Regiment," accessed December 11, 2025, https://www.ww2.dk/new/air%20force/regiment/iap/33iap.htm. Lutz Freundt and Stefan Büttner, eds., *Rote Plätze:*

contended not only with flights form the airbase, but also with aircraft across the GDR performing maneuvers and bombing runs at the Bombodrom in addition to artillery and small-arms fire. Although there is a gap in the archival record of pre-1989 complaints, the intensity of local mobilization in 1989-1990 and oral testimonies point to a steady escalation of frustration since at least the mid-1980s.

As shown in Chapter 3, the Soviet military functioned as an external force within the GDR's participatory dictatorship, undermining the effectiveness of citizen complaints and contributing to growing disillusionment. By early 1990, this dynamic began to shift. Citizens continued to submit *Eingaben* but increasingly combined with them new forms of collective action that operated beyond state mediation and structured in a way that expected tangible results. Citizens' initiatives based on the West German model became more common in the late 1980s as complainants craved what they perceived as more effective solutions to problems.[296]

A focal point of Soviet-derived sensory and environmental conflict was the village of Dranse north of Schweinrich (Figure 12). As a logistical node with a rail station used by Soviet forces, the village was at the intersection of Soviet military infrastructure and East German local life. Its eponymous lake bordered directly on the training area where Soviet vehicles operated and were washed along the shoreline, contributing to water contamination. The proximity of

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Russische Militärflugplätze, Deutschland 1945-1994: Fliegerhorste--Aerodrome--Militärbrachen (AeroLit-Verl, 2007), 103. See also Lutz Freundt, *Himmelstürmer: Flugunfälle Und Fliegergräber Der Sowjetamree in Deutschland* (Aero Lit Verlag, 2008).

[296] Julia Ault, *Saving Nature under Socialism*, 117.

these activities to a major local resource (children's summer camps were located in the area and the lake was used for swimming) generated tensions throughout the GDR period.[297]

In early 1990, these longstanding grievances gave rise to new forms of organized resistance. Barely two months after the fall of the Berlin Wall, residents formed the citizens' initiative "Save the Dranse Lake!" In February, organizers—including Dranse's mayor Krupa—planned a protest and issued a set of demands that combined environmental and sensory concerns: an end to Soviet loading operations at the railway station, ban on vehicle traffic along the lakeshore, environmental remediation, the reopening of the road between Schweinrich and Flecken Zechlin, and strict limits on training flights, including a ban on low-level maneuvers which produced the most devastating levels of noise.[298]

What distinguished this initiative from earlier forms of protest was its insistence on direct engagement with Soviet commanders. Organizers invited not local officers but also representatives of the WFG's high command, the Bombodrom leadership, local German officials, and the press. The invitation—addressed simply to "the high commander of the Western Group of Forces"—underscored both the opacity of Soviet command structures and the community's determination to confront them directly.[299]

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[297] In addition to environmental concerns, the high traffic of Soviet soldiers in the area caused further tensions and incidents. For example, In August 1987, drunk Soviet soldiers trespassed onto a summer camp (*Ferienlager*) on the nearby Grieb Lake and tossed a tear gas grenade into a bathroom on the premises, injuring thirty-nine children, Ausgewählte Vorkommnisse mit Beteiligung von Angehörigen der GSSD, August 28, 1987, folder 29992, MfS HA II, Stasi-Unterlagen-Archiv Berlin.

[298] Rettet den Dranser See! Meeting, February 11, 1990, folder 978, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR, Neuruppin.

[299] Krupa to Soviet High Command, January 31, 1990, folder 978, Landratsamt Wittstock Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.

This approach is particularly striking given that similar concerns had already been raised through established channels. Weeks earlier, a response from the State Water Oversight Board addressed an *Eingabe* submitted by Mayor Krupa regarding pollution of the lake. That complaint prompted a meeting between local German officials and Soviet officers, resulting in an agreement to halt certain polluting practices and adhere to environmental regulations. Yet key issues, most notably flight noise, remained unresolved, and the extent of Soviet compliance was uncertain. The Soviet representative at the meeting, Lieutenant Colonel Yuri Sviridov, who was the air force commander at the Alt Daber garrison, had limited to no authority over the army units operating in the Dranse Lake area, highlighting the fragmented nature of Soviet command.[300]

This decision to proceed with the protest *despite* this apparent resolution reveals a deeper continuity with late GDR dynamics: a persistent lack of confidence in mediated solutions. Rather than relying on German authorities to negotiate on their behalf, local actors sought to bypass intermediary structures altogether. In doing so, they adapted established practices of complaint to a new political context, combining them with public protest and direct demands for accountability.

Although it is unlikely that high-ranking commanders attended the February demonstration (much less General Snetkov), other Soviet representatives were present to receive the initiative's demands. [301] Internal documentation suggest that some concessions followed,

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[300] Gnausch to Krupa, February 2, 1990, folder 978, Landratsamt Wittstock Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.
[301] Gilde to Training Ground Schweinrich Commander, June 21, 1990, folder 977, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.

including restrictions on vehicle activity along the lakeshore. More broadly, the initiative helped establish a pattern for subsequent interactions between local communities, German officials, and Soviet forces. What had once been experienced as an accepted and inevitable feature of daily life increasingly became the object of organized resistance and direct negotiation.

On May 9, 1990, *Kreis* Wittstock held the first free municipal elections in a generation, electing Christian Gilde as *Landrat*.[302] Gilde (born in 1946) grew up in the village of Dossow near Wittstock, with the Soviet training area practically on his doorstep, was thoroughly of the postwar generation and had known the Soviets as neighbors his entire life. As a child, he was fascinated by watching Soviet tanks and aircraft on maneuvers and found common soldiers to be friendly.[303] The Soviet visual and soundscape was a fact of life to him, something that "we just lived with," as he put it.[304] But he was also not an ardent follower of state socialist ideals. A convinced Christian, he was discharged from the NVA prematurely for refusing to state the soldier's oath. By 1990, he had become a prominent social worker in both East Berlin and Wittstock when his associates encouraged him to enter politics.

Gilde's administration had to grapple with profound changes to the local social and economic landscape while also representing the community's complaints concerning the Soviets, who suddenly found themselves in a foreign country. The 1990 elections fundamentally changed local administration in East Germany; municipalities were no longer controlled by pre-approved SED functionaries and could exercise true local governance and make independent decisions that

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[302] Gilde was intially elected as an independent (*parteilos*) but joined the SPD in July, 1990; "Zusammensetzung des Kreistages Wittstock," *Märkische Volkstimme*, May 9, 1990; Eike Wzionek, "Neu im Amt: Christian Gilde," *Märkische Volkstimme*, May 31, 1990.
[303] Interview with Christian Gilde, 11/14/2023.
[304] Ibid.

were not handed down from above. Municipalities were now run by political outsiders, many of whom lacked built-in connections to the Soviets. By Gilde's own admission, "Up until the very end, I was never able to see through the organizational structure of the Russian army around Wittstock, especially with regards to who answered to whom."[305] Indeed, the airbase, the garrison at Schweinrich and the HQ of the Bombodrom at Gadow fell under different units and lower command structures. The airbase with the Thirty-Third Fighter Aviation Regiment, communication and maintenance battalions were subordinate to the Sixteenth Air Army at Wünsdorf, while the artillery brigade at Schweinrich answered to the Second Guards Tank Army in Fürstenwalde. To make matters even more opaque, the Bombodrom HQ at Gadow, too, fell under a different unit.

The isolation and relative self-sufficiency of the Soviet military facilities meant that there was no direct or convenient way for the surrounding communities to communicate with them. Under the controlled and regimented structures of the GDR, this situation was unproblematic, but in 1990, it was fast becoming a major liability. To rectify this early situation early on, the municipality tried to establish a direct phone connection to the airbase and the Schweinrich garrison but determined it would be too costly to implement.[306] For this reason, negotiations between Wittstock and the local garrisons took place through face-to-face meetings. While Wittstock managed to establish personal contacts with all local garrisons by 1992, this took considerable time and developed only gradually over the next several years.[307]

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[305] Hoch, Nels *et al*, *Bombodrom*, 41.
[306] Gilde to Colonel Ryabakon, 9/28/1990, Folder 964, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.
[307] Memo, 8/24/1992, folder 964, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.

The same sensory conditions that had contributed to the normalization—and contestation—of Soviet presence in the GDR now became the basis for new forms of political agency in the post-socialist context. Continuity in sensory experience did not produce passivity; rather, it provided the foundation upon which communities redefined their relationship to military power. This manifested itself most saliently in the beginning through collective complaint and mobilization against Soviet noise pollution.

Noise Complaints: Summer-Fall 1990

Negative effects of Soviet noise and military activity persisted largely unchanged throughout 1990, despite the dramatic political transformations underway. As of May, the Allied powers were still negotiating the Two Plus Four Agreement in Bonn, and the modalities of the Soviet withdrawal remained unclear. In this context, Soviet commanders continued to operate much as they had before, maintaining the high tempo of late-night training flights, bombing runs, and low-level maneuvers that had long disrupted local communities. What changed, however, was not the noise itself, but how communities responded to it. Drawing on the GDR practice of *Eingaben* while increasingly engaging in autonomous protest and collective action, residents developed a hybrid repertoire of complaint that combined institutional channels with direct pressure. In doing so, they were able—at least in part— to compel Soviet authorities to modify local flight practices, achieving outcomes that would have been largely impossible before 1990.

The increase in complaints that the Wittstock administration received in the first half of 1990 coincided with the spring-summer training season, which increased as the frequency and intensity of training flights surged. The extant records of oral/telephone complaints lack the detail of written letters but still notably lack the lofty and formulaic socialist language that would

have been standard procedure just months prior. Without the need to frame complaints within socialist ideology and the security of the Warsaw Pact, all that remained was the directness and expectation of action by local officials to intercede with the Soviets on the citizens' behalf. The complaints mainly originated from northern Wittstock near Alt Daber as well as the village of Herzsprung near Fretzdorf, which lay directly on the flight path of aircraft flying to and out of Alt Daber but also towards Bombodrom. They primarily concerned Soviet training flights at night, occurring up through 10:00pm and later, the noise disrupting sleep on weeknights.[308] Instead of citing GDR regulations, one complainant cited a newspaper article that stated the Soviets were banned from flying between 10pm and 6am, which would mean the air force was violating official agreements.[309]

When *Kreis* officials informed Lieutenant-Colonel Sviridov, commander of Alt Daber garrison, of the complaints, he issued his own response: the press was wrong. The agreement signed in December, 1989, which came into effect at the end of March, still allowed Soviets to fly until 2:00 am on weekdays (except Fridays); only on weekends were they not permitted to fly, according to orders from Wünsdorf.[310] As in previous years, local officials informed the original complainants of the lieutenant-colonel's response, essentially informing them that the Soviets were in fact following regulations, but that the *Kreis* was working with higher-level officials in the government to negotiate with the Soviets.[311] While this may have mollified citizens in previous years, this response was now unacceptable to the surrounding communities.

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[308] Eingabe, May 7, 1990, folder 977, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.
[309] Eingabe, April 25, 1990, folder 977, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.
[310] Sviridov to *Rat des Kreises*, May 29, 1990, folder 977, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.
[311] Noeske to Marx, June 12, 1990, folder 977, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.

As a result, complaints continued to bombard Gilde's office. In essence, the *Eingabe* system was still functioning as before, following the same sequence and format but now lacking socialist decorum but retaining local officials' desire to act upon and rectify those issues. There was also an increase (and general expectation) of greater transparency—officials' responses to complaints were less vague and the necessity of justifying Soviet military activity (promoting peace) seemed no longer a factor. But the problem of Soviet activity was still testing the new administration, of whether they had the power to compel the Soviets to abide by the community's needs.

As flight missions ramped up over the summer, so did protests and general public outcry. Nearby Neuruppin, hosting a relatively large airbase itself, was also the site of protests concerning flight noise. Protest organizers, many of whom were affiliated with the Protestant church such as pastor Heinz Karau,[312] were vociferous in making flight noise protests part of a broader continuum with the so-called Peaceful Revolution the year prior:

> Who doesn't remember the large demonstrations of the fall of 1989? What did they accomplish? They changed the world for us. Walls fell, the Stasi was disbanded, and the Stalinist government resigned. Life became different. We all learned to express our demands and wishes loudly and to see them through. One of our main concerns that remains unresolved is the enormous disturbance caused to the citizens by the Soviet military aircraft flying over Neuruppin and the bombing exercises in the northern part of the district.[313]

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[312] Karau was also the founder of a citizens' initiative in June, 1990 leading protests against the airbase in Neuruppin.

[313] "Großdemonstration am 21. Mai Der Kampf gegen den Fluglärm geht weiter," *Ruppiner Anzeiger*, May 20, 1990.

Nevertheless, local citizens' initiatives and protesters alike were frustrated by the fact that even though collective action was enough to topple the SED regime, the Soviets appeared to operate outside of local geopolitics. But the Soviets too seemed to be adjusting to the new reality, if slowly. Soviet commanders began to hold press interviews with local newspapers, demonstrating greater transparency but also the rigidity and slow tempo of military bureaucracy. Moscow's prioritization of withdrawing its forces from Hungary and Czechoslovakia first before Germany and the pending Two Plus Four Agreement did not result in immediate policy changes on the ground in the summer of 1990 based on a supposedly inevitable but as-to-be-yet decided withdrawal. In a press interview, the Soviet garrison commander of Neuruppin acknowledged the local community's frustrations about the noise but major changes in policy were "out of his hands" on the local level—the notoriously top-heavy Soviet command structures still prevailed.[314]

Colonel Butin, commander of the airbase in Neuruppin, noted in another press release that the reduct ion of Soviet flying times to 2:00 am on weekdays and cessation of flights on weekends was already a considerable concession made in coordination with Wünsdorf that—ostensibly— was made in response to widespread complaints and protests by local communities. The next step in discussion would mitigate the negative effects of extreme low-level flights. As of January 1990, the Soviets ceased dropping 500kg bombs at the Bomdodrom, switching to 250kg instead. Regardless, the increased tempo of bombing missions led to rumors that the Soviets were disposing of their stockpiles in Poland by dropping them on Germany— claims that

[314] "Sowjetische Militärpräsenz unverändert," *Ruppiner Anzeiger*, May 20, 1990.

Butin emphatically said were not true.[315] A Soviet commander having to dispel rumors to a local newspaper of course would have been unthinkable less than year earlier. The Soviets were realizing they had to engage with local communities.

Back near Wittstock, the villagers of Fretzdorf, a community of roughly 400 inhabitants, held a large protest and created a collective petition (*Eingabe*) in June with over 120 signatures demanding immediate changes of Soviet flight patterns and practices.[316] The villagers demanded a complete cessation of flights over Fretzdorf, ban on Soviet flights between 10:00 pm and 6:00 am and a "significant reduction of the overall noise burden through appropriate organizational measures."[317] Minus the lack of socialist framing, the language echoed those of *Eingaben* from Neupetershain and Welzow from several years earlier (see chapter 3), particularly with appeals to the health of the community, including the elderly and the sick. Fretzdorf indeed bore the brunt of negative Soviet self-noise. It lay directly on the flight path of both air traffic going in and out of Alt Daber as well as overflights toward the bombodrom, which could have been aircraft coming from anywhere in the (soon to be) former GDR. Since Fretzdorf lay further away from the airfields, they had less concern with takeoff afterburner noise, but low-flying aircraft on training mission still engaged the afterburners to test the engines.[318] The villagers of Fretzdorf were now petitioning not only the *Kreis*, but going straight to the newly created Ministry of Disarmament and Defense of the GDR, presumably with the hope of then influencing the negotiations happening in Bonn.[319]

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[315] "Friedenstauben," *Ruppiner Anzeiger*, May 27, 1990.
[316] Protest, June 12, 1990, Landratsamt Wittstock, folder 977, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.
[317] Ibid.
[318] "Friedenstauben," *Ruppiner Anzeiger*, May 27, 1990.
[319] Gilde to General Basov, July 2, 1990, folder 977, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.

At the same time, Gilde's office began having monthly meetings with local Soviet officers with interpreters and representatives of the press. In a sign of unprecedented openness, Gilde's team also began limited visits and inspections of Soviet garrison facilities and the training grounds, presumably the first Germans to set foot there outside of NVA troops since the war. A landmark meeting held at the Alt Daber garrison was held on July 2, 1990. Present for the first time was a Soviet Major General named Basov, a division-level commander[320] alongside airbase commander Sviridov and political officer (*zampolit*) Colonel Popokov.[321] The chief concern was to address flight noise complaints among the local community. General Basov proclaimed alterations of flight routes but most importantly restrictions on low-level flights—600 meters for fixed wing aircraft and 300 for helicopters. Reductions in the Thirty-Third Aviation Regiment at Alt Daber strength to thirty-two planes supposedly would reduce the frequency of overflights. While official broad changes to the dreaded 2:00 am flight time had to be made by Wünsdorf, the general announced that in reality they would be reduced by one hour, in an apparent concession in response to German protests and citizen initiatives.

Even if these concessions fell far short of local expectations, they marked a clear shift: Soviet forces no longer operated with the same degree of autonomy they had enjoyed before November 1989. Nevertheless, compliance remained uneven. Promised made at the command level were not consistently enforced, as evinced by nearly twenty subsequent noise complaints—primarily from Fretzdorf and Alt Daber—concerning continued low-level flights. [322] In response,

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[320] Likely the commander of the Sixteenth Guards Fighter Aviation Division, "16th Guards Fighter Aviation Division," accessed December 29, 2025, https://www.ww2.dk/new/air%20force/division/iad/16gviad.htm.
[321] Über den Besuch in der Garnison Wittstock, July 2, 1990, folder 977, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.
[322] List of Noise Complaints, September 13, 1990, folder 977, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.

Gilde's office resumed direct engagement with Soviet authorities, pressing commanders to address violations and redirect responsibility across the fragmented Soviet command structure when necessary. [323]

Overall, these exchanges reveal a transformation in how conflict was managed. Local communities increasingly combined established Eingaben practices with more direct forms of pressure, using both institutional and informal channels to influence Soviet behavior. While the results were limited, this hybrid approach nonetheless enabled communities to extract concessions that would have been virtually impossible before the collapse of the GDR. In this sense, the persistence of noise complaints in 1990 underscores broader continuity in sensory experience, even as the political framework governing those experiences shifted. The Soviet military remained a disruptive presence, but it was no longer beyond negotiation. This evolving dynamic would become even more apparent in the months following reunification, as conflicts extended beyond noise to encompass issues like munitions disposal and environmental cleanup.

"Earthquakes:" October 1990

From the perspective of Wittstock's sensory landscape—shaped for decades by Soviet military activity—German reunification on October 3, 1990, passed with little fanfare. The soundscape remained a defining feature of daily life, even as it became the focus of an increasingly assertive local population determined to reshape it. The Two Plus Four treaty and the subsequent agreement on the temporary stationing and phased withdrawal of Soviet forces, signed on October 12, formalized the timeline for a complete withdrawal by the end of 1994. Yet

[323] Gilde to Basov, September 13, 1990, folder 977, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.

this transition was far from immediate. Despite the obsolescence of the Western Group of Forces' broader mission, training and flight operations continued, which General Burlakov justified as necessary for maintaining morale. [324] Reunification did not usher in an immediate rupture in the sensory order, but the beginning of a liminal phase in which old practices persisted within the new political landscape. In certain cases, the intensity of sensory disruption even increased, as local units began disposing of excess munitions. The result was a paradoxical moment in which the impending disappearance of Soviet forces coincided with a heightened awareness of their continued presence.

From October 15 to 17, violent explosions rocked Wittstock and surrounding villages. The explosions occurred in the late morning and early afternoon. Windows shattered, and huge cracks formed on buildings. Gilde, who still resided in Dossow, recalled that they were not exactly "loud" in terms of raw volume, more resembling low rumbling earthquakes.[325] Locals immediately suspected the noise was caused by sonic booms by MiG 29s given the sudden nature of the blasts and the structural damages they caused. The mayor of Flecken Zechlin immediately wrote to the new branch of the Federal Defense Ministry in Strausberg[326] requesting an investigation and compensation for damages resulting from "probable" sonic booms.[327] Local officials a few days later figured that that they were not sonic booms but some other kind of ground-based explosion. The severity of the explosions prompted Gilde to draft a letter to

[324] Morre and Meißner, *The Withdrawal of Soviet Troops from Central Europe*, 140.
[325] Interview with Christian Gilde, 11/14/2023.
[326] Formerly the GDR Ministry of Defense
[327] Niquet to Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, October 19, 1990, folder 19, BW55, Bundesarchiv Freiburg.

Chancellor Helmut Kohl to intercede on their behalf with Wünsdorf on the matter, supposing that the Soviets were blowing up their own buildings in an apparent scorched earth measure.[328]

What had actually happened was a form of reckless munitions disposal. The signing of the final withdrawal treaty a few days earlier was already set into motion measures for the drawdown in forces. The 290th artillery brigade based at Schweinrich already had so many excess munitions that the officers in charge determined that it would be impossible to transport all of it back to the Soviet Union. Due to lax inventory keeping, the garrison never properly kept track of their munitions stores but continued to receive fresh ammunition shipments as if they had spent all of it. To reduce cost and for efficiency, the artillery brigade piled mountains of munitions in massive pits in the ground, covered them up, and detonated them, leaving massive craters.[329] Colonel Stolyar, the head of the brigade, who would eventually become a close contact to Gilde, bragged to local press that he was able to dispose of up to one hundred train cars worth of munitions in this manner, even if it directly violated treaty regulations.[330] The matter naturally caught the attention of Bonn and Wünsdorf who quickly clamped down on Stolyar's recklessness, halting the detonations, but the action was certainly expedited by the quick action of local officials.

This incident demonstrated that, despite unprecedented levels of communication between Wittstock and local Soviet garrisons, the artificial barriers that had divided them were still very much in place. The lack of direct telephone lines meant that local German officials could only guess as to what was happening and essentially followed GDR procedures for reporting it.

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[328] Gilde to Kohl, October 22, 1990, folder 964, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.
[329] Interview with Christian Gilde, 11/14/2023
[330] Gilde, *Das Bombodrom*, 43; Interview with Christian Gilde, 11/14/2023.

Coordinating directly with the Soviets, while now technically possible, remained encumbered by preexisting walls. Sonic booms and subterranean seismic events have similar physical qualities and effects and can be mistaken for one another.[331] Shallow underground explosions mimic events and produce attenuating seismic pressure waves that can extend for miles. Gilde's home in Dossow was 10.2 miles away from probable blasting sites and could feel the quake. Flecken-Zechlin and the village of Alt Lutterow were much closer at 3.5 and less than two miles respectively and thus within distance to sustain structural damage to homes.

Ultimately German reunification formalized the regulations and timelines governing the Soviet withdrawal, but it did not stabilize the sensory environment. If anything, the disposal of munitions introduced a new vector of disruption. The explosions initially mistaken for flight activity underscore the persistence of familiar interpretive frameworks, even as they obscured the changing nature of Soviet operations and briefly misdirected German authorities. What emerged was a pattern of continuity in both perception and disruption, coupled with a transformation in how they were handled politically. Soviet activities remained opaque, and local commanders—now operating in the territory of former enemy—were slow to adjust to new expectations of accountability. Despite efforts to regulate behavior, including the distribution of 200,000 German-produced Russian-language environmental manuals (Figure 13) to Soviet personnel, enforcement remained inconsistent and their impact was limited. [332] In this sense, the withdrawal period did not simply mark the gradual disappearance of Soviet power, but a volatile interim

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[331] "Sonic Boom > Air Force > Fact Sheet Display," accessed January 1, 2026, https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/104540/sonic-boom/.
[332] Morre and Meißner, *The Withdrawal of Soviet Troops from Central Europe*, 135. After Soviet sites were abandoned, the manuals could easily be found scattered as litter on the floor.



Figure 13: Russian-language booklet cover (left) “Let’s Keep the Earth Beautiful” authored by the German government distributed to the Western Group of Forces included a section on reducing noise (right), Kreisarchiv Barnim.

phase in which its sensory effects persisted and even intensified. Rather than resolving long-standing tensions, reunification and withdrawal reconfigured them, producing new forms of uncertainty within an ostensibly more regulated and transparent political order.

"The Road to Nowhere," Opening the Flecken-Zechlin Road: 1990-1993

Besides the evolving (and in some cases intensifying soundscape) around the training area, the withdrawal signaled an eventual collapse of the physical boundaries between closed-off militarized areas and the civilian world. The gradual expansion of the training area from the late 1940s through the 1980s transformed a previously known landscape into a virtual *terra incognita* to the surrounding communities. The training area also separated previously close-connected villages from each other and complicated travel for the entire region. The road at the town limits of Schweinrich going east was called "the road to nowhere" as it crossed into the restricted area of the artillery training area (Figure 14). In 1990, The prospect that the entire military area would be returned to communities after the Soviet withdrawal was an enthralling prospect, particularly the idea of turning vast swathes of the landscape into parks to encourage eco-tourism from the west, given the imminent collapse of socialist-era industry in the area. [333] The closed-off areas and their potential opening and acquisition sparked an imaginary of "inner colonization" and frontier to the local communities.[334]

Yet, as with the rest of the withdrawal after German Reunification, the collapse of these boundaries and opening of the lands from the Soviet (later CIS) military was a long, complex,

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[333] Pressemappe, Projektinitiativen zur Konversion TüP Wittstock/Neuruppin, August 6, 1992, folder 969, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.
[334] See Kristin Poling, *Germany's Urban Frontiers : Nature and History on the Edge of the Nineteenth-Century City* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020).



Figure 14: "The Street to Nowhere" Source: Uknown Author, photograph, *Märkische Allgemeine Zeitung*, April, 1991, Kreisarchiv Ostprignitz-Ruppin.

and gradual process as the example of the opening of the road between Schweinrich and Flecken-Zechlin shows. Until the final Soviet withdrawal from Schweinrich in 1993, the road itself became a liminal space—a place where GDR-era practices with the Soviets continued in the midst of vast economic regional transformation.

Over the summer of 1990, during the influx of *Eingaben* by local citizens regarding Soviet noise pollution, villagers and the communities around the training area made similar petitions to Gilde's administration to request that the Soviets reopen the road between Schweinrich and Flecken-Zechlin. The approximately three-mile road bisected the Soviet artillery training area and (previously) connected the close villages. During the GDR, traversal of the road by East German civilians was technically possible but required preauthorization and

obtainment a pass (*propusk*) from the Soviets and only during certain times.[335] Otherwise, locals would have to go around the entire 142 square kilometer training area to reach the same location, some of whom had to go that distance for work.[336]

Demands for opening the road extend at least back to February, 1990 by the "Save the Dranse Lake!" Citizens Initiative. [337] Opening the road was the fourth demand by the group alongside reducing Soviet noise and chemical pollution. The antipollution demands were motivated by health concerns and connected to increased late-GDR environmental consciousness, but opening accessways was tantamount to a reclamation of local sovereignty. This demand was the only one the Soviets did not address in the wake of the citizens' initiative; the restricted area was, after all, *their* domain. As reunification neared, and the Bonn discussions drew closer to conclusion, the Soviets steadily gave ground. In June, 1990, in preparation for visit of Wittstock's government to the Schweinrich training area, the Soviets granted members of the municipal council access to the road temporary authorization to traverse the "road to nowhere" to access the artillery garrison HQ.[338] In August, the mayor of Flecken-Zechlin along with the leaders of three other nearby villages on the eastern side of the training area sent a collective petition to the *Kreis* in Neuruppin and (presumably) Wittstock, demanding the opening of the road.[339] Mayor Niquet of Flecken Zechlin put the necessity of opening in the road in

[335] Interview with Christian Gilde, 11/13/2023.
[336] Anke Rademacher to Landratsmt, June 24, 1992, folder 966, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.
[337] Rettet den Dranser See! Meeting, February 11, 1990, folder 978, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.
[338] Aktenvermerk über die Abstimmung mit der Stadtkommandantur Wittstock, June 12, 1990, folder 977, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.
[339] Freigabe der Landstraße von Flecken Zechlin nach Wittstock, August 13, 1990, folder 978, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.

existential terms:

> The unrestricted opening of this connection would be very beneficial for commercial and industrial development and for tourism, and it is also urgently necessary for the towns of Flecken Zechlin, Dorf Zechlin, Kagar, and Wallitz, which are completely cut off… Such an improvement would also be promoted in every respect by a better connection…to Berlin or to the Berlin–Hamburg or Rostock routes.[340]

The mayors framed the opening of the road as granting a critical artery to reap the economic benefits of the united Germany and bringing a region together already heavily fragmented by the training grounds. Another local would later describe the massive economic shifts in conjunction with the villages' isolation as a Sword of Damocles.[341]

After a period of negotiation, in March 1991, the municipality and the staff of the garrison of Schweinrich and the army headquarters in Fürstenwalde agreed to open the road to civilian traffic on a limited basis. Except for weekends and holidays, motorists would need to obtain a pass (*propusk*) from the garrison to traverse the road with the primary caveat being that the garrison, including the *magazin* were off-limits.[342] The Soviets claimed the passes were necessary because increasing contact between the local communities and the garrison were leading to increased black-market activities and potential conflicts. Barely a week after the opening two people were arrested trying to access the Soviet *Magazin* at the garrison.[343]

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[340] Ibid.
[341] Ibid.
[342] Vereinbarung über die Benutzung der Verbindungsstrasse zwischen Schweinrich und Flecken-Zechlin für die Bürger der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 03/27/1991, folder 973, Landratsamt Wittstock.
[343]Sviridov to Gilde, 04/06/1991, Folder 972, Landratsamt Wittstock

In the weeks after opening, a string of violent and destructive acts were committed around the garrison at Wittstock. A group of German citizens attacked an armed patrolmen around the Biesen facility to the north, who according to the commander, "due to his great perseverance, did not discharge his weapon." [344] A few days later someone painted gallows on the wall of the command building in Wittstock with the words "*Russe*." Lieutenant Colonel Sviridov demanded compensation for the attacks. The worst incident to occur during the withdrawal happened on April 29 when an unknown assailant murdered a Soviet guardsman, stealing his weapon and ammunition in the process.[345] Although Colonel Stolyar eventually agreed to fully open the road without restrictions in 1991, traffic was limited once more following additional incidents. A few assailants vandalized a guardhouse, and some people used the road for drag racing. While several incidents committed by local German citizens did not take place on the road itself or facilitated by it, Gilde suspected that subsequent restrictions on its use were general measures of retaliation.[346]

These violent incidents, fortunately, did not become endemic. The Flecken Zechlin road for a time remained a liminal space where the new openness of the post-Wende environment clashed with pre-*Wende* practices. The Soviet area commanders' list of reasons for the restricting passes to the use to road in early 1991 was essentially a microcosm of longstanding practices (see Chapter 1 and Chapter 2) between German civilians and the Soviets; weapons sales between Soviet troops and German civilians; Germans attempting to use the road to make black market connections, Germans buying Soviet military gasoline (*Russensprit*); and Germans allowing

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[344]Svirdov to Gilde, 04/06/1991, Folder 972, Landratsamt Wittstock
[345]"Sowjetischer Wachposten Erschossen," *Märkische Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 29 1991.
[346] Interview with Christian Gilde, 11/13.2023.

Soviet officers to park their cars on their property to drive elsewhere in the Federal Republic. [347] Some Soviet guards also continued to demand bribes for passage across the road.[348] The breakdown of the physical barriers between the Soviet realm and newly united Germany, at least for a brief time, gave additional space to longstanding practices that had marked the German-Soviet coexistence going back decades.

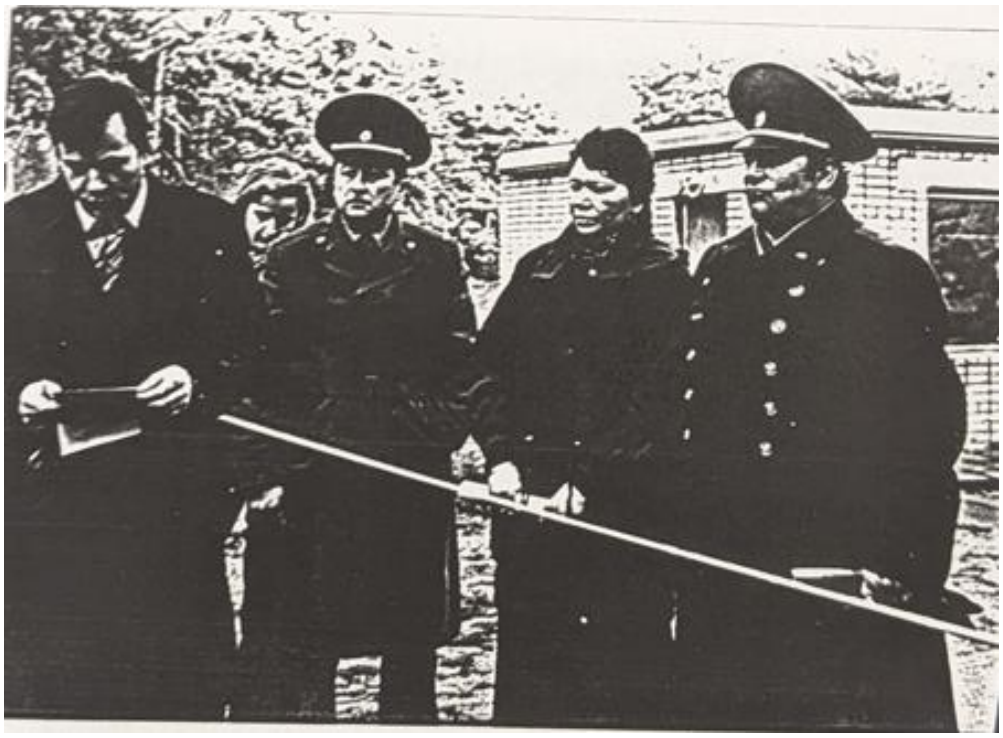

Figure 15: Christian Gilde with Russian officers and interpreter Liudmila at the Ribbon Cutting Ceremony on the opening of the Schweinrich-Flecken Zechlin Road, November 10, 1992. Folder 988, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.

[347] Sinngemäße Widergabe des Schreibens vom Platz Schweinrich, February 7, 1991, Landratsamt Wittstock.
[348] Gilde to Stolyar, June 22, 1992, folder 979, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.

In November 1992, the road was opened for good with great fanfare and a ribbon-cutting ceremony (See figure 15), coinciding with the drawdown in exercises on the training grounds in preparation for the abandonment of the garrison at Schweinrich in 1993.[349]

Particularly striking about this affair is that the negotiations between Wittstock, the garrison at Schweinrich, and other army commands occurred largely at the local level and did not involve the Federal German Property Administration, the government body responsible for the transference of Soviet assets to Germany. In early 1993, The Bundeswehr sent a rather biting communique to the (by then) Chief of Staff of the Russian command at Wünsdorf. The Bundeswehr colonel noted that the Russians' "unilateral" decision to grant civilian use to the road "raises a number of questions," constituted a treaty violation and—because of that action—they had forfeited any claims of responsibility of the German government to handle liability or damages that could occur on the road during the withdrawal.[350] With a hearty chuckle, Christian Gilde recalled that around the same time he received a much more harshly worded letter from the Bundeswehr that opening the road "violated international agreements" (*völkerrechtswidrig*).[351] Through essentially bypassing the Federal Republic's bureaucracy, Wittstock and the surrounding villages were forming their own relationships with local Soviet commanders, building on the decades of previous experience and coexistence. It would not certainly be the last time that Wittstock would go against the Bundeswehr.

The reopening of the Flecken Zechlin road underscores a key dynamic of the post-reunification period: the dismantling of physical barriers did not immediately resolve tensions, as

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[349] Gilde, *Bombodrom*, 46.
[350] Grote to Strelnikov, January 12, 1993, folder 254, BW55, Bundesarchiv Freiburg.
[351] Interview with Christian Gilde, 11/13/2023.

disputes over access have shown. At the same time, this period was not defined solely by conflict. The reopening process depended on ad hoc cooperation between the local communities and Soviet authorities, built upon years of proximity and interaction. Even amid occasional disorder and even violence, these negotiations suggest that relationships on the ground were far more complex than a one-dimensional opposition between occupier and occupied. Ultimately, the conflicts surrounding the road point to a broader shift in the object of local grievance. Increasingly, it was not the Soviet presence alone that was contested, but the military use of the landscape itself. As Soviet forces prepared to withdraw, this distinction became more pronounced—setting the stage for the reorientation of local protest toward the Bundeswehr in the Freie Heide movement in late 1992.

Freie Heide: 1992- 1994

While the effects of the withdrawal persisted throughout 1991 and beyond, it was becoming increasingly noticeable that the former Soviet forces (now Russian/CIS) were on their way out. Just as the Soviet presence began to wind down in earnest, the Bundeswehr set their sights on taking over the training grounds and continuing their military use. The outrage this caused sparked the grassroots Freie Heide movement—a campaign that would ultimately far outlive the Soviet presence but every bit shaped by its legacy. The movement was in practical terms an evolution of late GDR environmental movements, the sustained sensory legacy of Soviet military activity, and the associated momentum of post-wende activism and citizens' initiatives. In the end, the Freie Heide movement represented less a rupture with the Soviet period than a reorientation of long-term issues.

From mid-1991, smaller Soviet installations around Wittstock began to close, starting with a surface-to-air missile base in Wulfersdorf, followed by a radar station in Biesen. Following the withdrawal treaty, the Soviets handed these over to the Federal Government.[352] Before the possibility of transferring properties to the federal sates, federal ministries, including the ministry of defense, inspected sites for their potential for continued use by the German government.

Starting in early 1991, the Bundeswehr began surveying Soviet airbases in the former GDR, assessing their potential for continued use. The Bundeswehr inspectors deemed seven of them, including Wittstock's Alt Daber airbase, suitable for continued military use with a bias towards former Wehrmacht facilities due to their better infrastructural integration.[353] They also assessed the airfields (based on unknown criteria) on each local community's perceived acceptance of the continued military use of adjacent sites. For most of the airfields, inspectors noted infrastructure issues with plumbing, or in the case of Neuruppin, the potential of noise pollution due to its close proximity to the city. In the case of Wittstock, the Bundeswehr inspector gave Wittstock a unique an ominously vague classification— "problems in the local population."[354] This was likely due to the intense activism and *Eingaben* (which the Ministry of Defense would have at least partially been privy to) of the local villages around the Bombodrom and Wittstock itself.

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[352] In 1994, the German Federal government offered to transfer sites to the property of the federal states that were not needed by the Bundeswehr or other federal agencies. Of the "new" federal states, only Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia accepted the offer, Markus Hennen, "Conversion in Germany through the Example of the Federal State of Brandenburg," in *The Withdrawal of Soviet Troops from East Central Europe* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021), 185.
[353] Bestandsaufnahme an Flugplätzen der WGT, February 25, 1991, folder 16, BW55, Bundesarchiv Freiburg.
[354] Bestandsaufnahme sowjetischer Flugplätze in Deutschland, February 5, 1991, folder 16, BW55, Bundesarchiv Freiburg.

Despite these initial concerns, in June 1992, Defense Minister Volker Rühe unveiled the Bundeswehr's plans to take over the Bomdodrom and the airbase at Alt Daber. Soon after, the Defense Ministry sent a delegation of Luftwaffe officers to the area to mollify anxieties. They promised that future air exercises and bombing runs would not come close to the wild tempo of the Soviets, flying at much reduced times compared to before and would only use twelve-kilogram practice bombs. At the meeting in Schweinrich, the Luftwaffe officer even brought an example bomb to demonstrate its size and to allay fears.[355] These had the opposite effect.

In August 1992, Schweinrich erupted in a massive protest by 4,500 people against the Bundeswehr's plans.[356] Almost immediately after, a group of few dozen villagers including the protestant pastors Benedikt Schirge and Reinhard Lampe founded the citizens' initiative "Freie Heide," a movement designed not only to protest the Bundeswehr's plans but to engage in legal battle against them. According to Schirge, "when in the early summer of 1992 the Bundeswehr's plans became known, a far-reaching wave of disgust was unleashed. Many people wrote to the Federal Government in protest."[357] Numerous founding members of the movement had already campaigned in previous initiatives against negative Soviet noise and environmental effects, now using their experience gained during the Soviet withdrawal and late GDR and turning it against the Bundeswehr and the German government. Gilde's administration as well as other municipalities in northern Brandenburg fully aligned themselves with the initiative, including donating 600,000 DM[358] to the organization.[359] In a speech at a later Freie Heide event, Gilde

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[355] "Noch ist nicht endgültig entschieden," *Märkische Allgemeine*, August 8, 1992.
[356] "Bürgerinitiative," accessed January 8, 2026, https://www.freieheide.de/fh-chronik.htm.
[357] Hoch and Nehls, *Bürgerinitiative FREIe HEIDe*, 23.
[358] Approximately 515,690 EUR in 2026.
[359] Übergabeprotokoll, August 27, 1992, folder 965 Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.

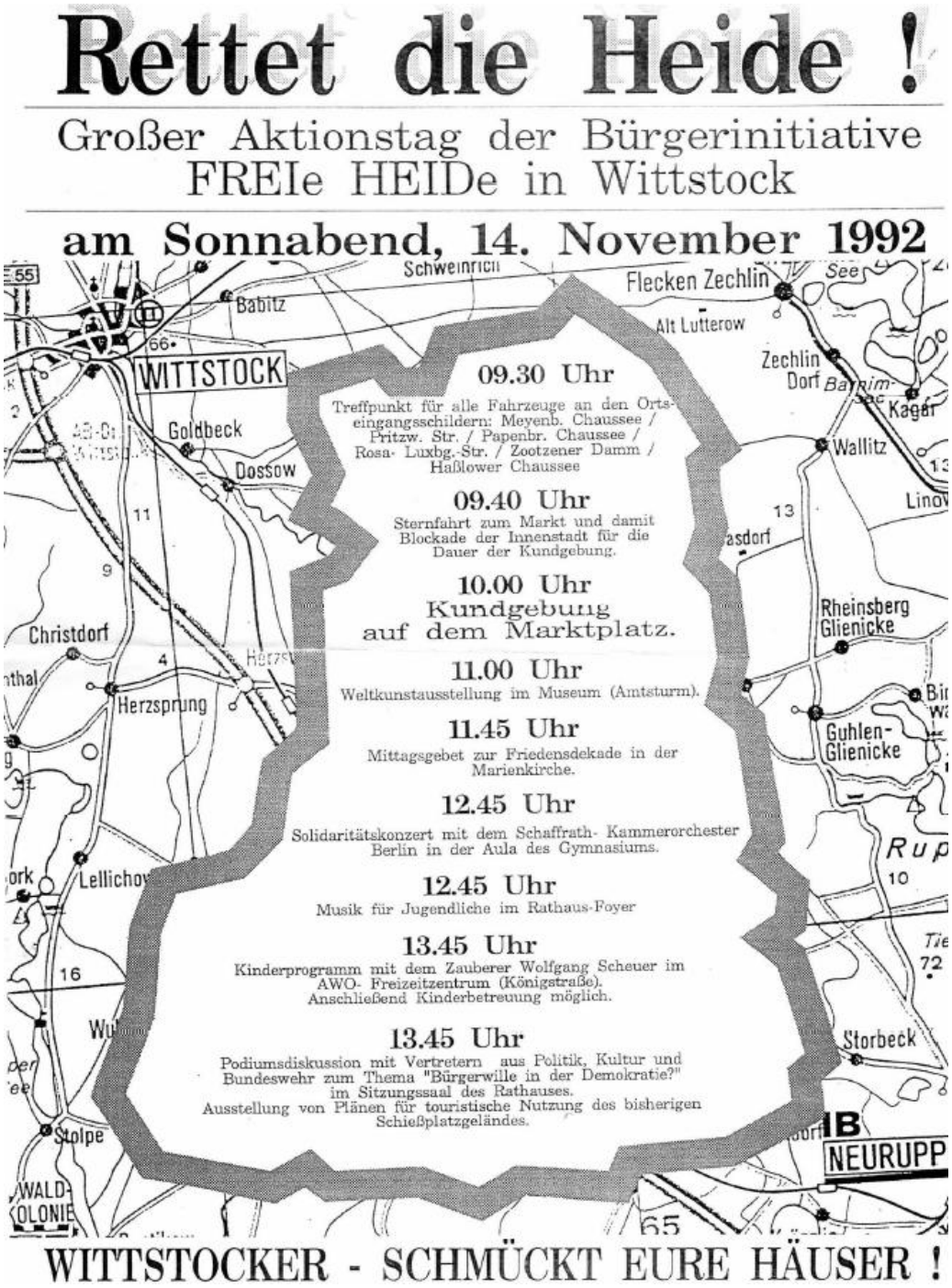

Figure 16: 1992 Protest March poster, 1992, folder 965, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv Ostprignitz-Ruppin.

mocked the Bundeswehr's promises by trying to make themselves look better than the Soviets by saying that they were merely swapping MiG-29s for Panavia Tornados, which were nearly as Gilde's government also sought the cooperation of Schweinrich garrison Colonel loud.[360] Stolyar to allow protesters to use the Flecken Zechlin road. In a way, the Russians could indirectly still fight their Cold War enemies.[361]

In September 1992, the initiative began a series of protest marches along the borders of the training area, holding banners alongside horse carriages, the manner of which solidified the degree to which the training grounds and the heathland had embedded itself to local collective consciousness. The posters for the marches centered on the shape and outline of the Soviet training area. At the center, a blank void evoked a sense of *terra incognita* that had nevertheless become something worth fighting for (Figure 16).

Further actions during the early protests of the movement closely echoed previous ones in earlier engagements with the Soviets. Mayor Niquet of Flecken Zechlin, who earlier had been a key member of the "Save the Dranse Lake" initiative and now a part of Freie Heide, along with other organizers sent a bold message to Defense Minister Rühe, demanding him to end his plans for the training area in the form of a tongue-in-cheek postcard (Figure 17). The boldness of message echoed the earlier petitions directed at the Soviet general staff but with decidedly less decorum and deference.

Leaflets from September 1992 claimed that Minster Rühe was no better than Stalin who had forcibly expropriated the original land of the training area back in the late 1940s: "For over

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[360] Gilde Rede, September 3, 1992, folder 965 folder 965 Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.
[361] Thierbach to General Kozlov, September 7, 1992, folder 966, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.

40 years people have lived here with fear and terror. Noise terror, dropped bombs, excesses by the military, injured people and deaths. After the *Wende* there was a big hope that the suffering was at an end. But then the Federal German Defense Minister lets the cat out of the bag: He



Figure 17: "Postcard" sent to Defense Minister Rühe, 1992, folder 965, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv Ostprignitz-Ruppin.

wants Stalin's spoils for his own Luftwaffe! Is that justice?"[362] The organizers were castigating the Luftwaffe essentially as another foreign military that was coming in to occupy them, casting the Bundeswehr in an uninterrupted continuity with the Soviets who at the time still occupied the heathland. They framed the potential Bundeswehr takeover in existential terms—the military would drive away much-needed tourism for the natural landscapes of the area in the face of collapse of the socialist economy. By saying that the Bundeswehr was inheriting *Stalin's* legacy

[362] Infoblatt, September 15, 1992, folder 964 Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.



Figure 18: Protest march poster, 1993, folder 965, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv Ostprignitz-Ruppin.



Figure 19: Protest march poster, 1994, folder 965, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv Ostprignitz-Ruppin.

and not the Russians or the Soviets too demonstrates a persisting tacit sympathy with the Soviets—the problem lay in the inhuman effects of military activity, not the soldiers themselves. Subsequent imagery that Freie Heide organizers produced evoked the inhumanness of sensory warfare but also the triumph of nature over the man. A poster for the protest march in October 1993 depicts two native species of badger swatting a toy soldier away (Figure 18). The bottom of the soldier states "Made in West Germany." In being a toy, the protesters are choosing to not humanize the Bundeswehr but rather the sensory output of the forces behind it. The fact that the soldier is from "West Germany" and not just "Germany" signifies an embedded anti-militarist disposition, likely a carryover from GDR propaganda against the "imperialist West." The adopted logo for the movement depicts the silhouette of a Tornado jet fighter with the "X" going through it, again condemning the machinery and its implied sensory output (Figures 18 and 19). Another poster from early 1994 depicts Tornado fighters with Luftwaffe insignia bristling with bombs flying over the market square of Wittstock as if to bomb innocent ice skaters below (Figure 19). Depicted clearly was a further statement not only evoking the negative impact of jet fighters but also a statement as to the perceived purposelessness of the Bundeswehr's presence. During the GDR, a significant factor of people's tolerance towards military activity was varying degrees of genuine belief that the Soviets, despite their disruption, had legitimate reasons for their actions. The Cold War was over. What use did the Bundeswehr have in expanding into former East Germany other than to terrorize local inhabitants?

A full discussion of the Freie Heide movement and the subsequent legal battle, which lasted until 2010, is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Yet the movement, especially in the early years while the Soviet withdrawal was still occurring, was the culmination of both the

decades of living within the Soviet soundscapes around Wittstock and long-term exposure to sensory warfare. [363] GDR citizens had become well-versed in using *Eingaben* to express complaint and then later honed through widespread citizen initiatives in the late 1980s.[364] The in-flux political landscape of the transitional *Wende* period post-1989 gave local citizens an arena to evolve those trends in the early 1990s as a legacy of the late GDR.

Overall, the Freie Heide movement demonstrates that German reunification for these local communities was not a rupture with the past, but rather a reorientation of long-term issues. The grievances against the Bundeswehr were inseparable from prior experiences with the Soviets and the uneven transformations during the withdrawal. The redirection of complaint and community action away from the withdrawing Soviet forces toward the Bundeswehr, communities vehemently challenged that the assumption that just because military activity had shaped daily life for decades, that it was destined to be that away in a united Germany.

Conclusion

This chapter has traced the period of Soviet withdrawal, set against the backdrop of German reunification. The transition was not a simple one, but one marked by liminality and instability. The Soviet military presence remained experientially persistent even without the obfuscating power of the GDR state and increased political power of local communities to mitigate negative sensory effects.

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[363] The ensuing legal battle prevented a takeover of the training grounds by the Bundeswehr and ultimately German courts decided in the initiative's favor in 2010. Since the training grounds were seized and expanded solely by the Soviet army (rather than expanding out of preexisting Wehrmacht infrastructure), the German Defense Ministry had no viable claim to the land itself. Much of the former training area remains a restricted area due to unexploded ordinance, the cleanup of which is ongoing. See Evelyn Gustedt and Markus Hennen, *Jahrhundertaufgaben: Blockade Oder Entwicklung von Räumen Durch Aufgelassene Konversionsflächen* (Verlag der ARL, 2024).
[364] See Julia Ault, *Saving Nature under Socialism*.

Persisting noise issues highlighted that local communities now had a greater sense of agency to engage with the Soviets directly while still maintaining official channels (such as through *Eingaben*) with local and national authorities to contain Soviet-derived problems, responsibilities were increasingly fragmented.

The opening of the Flecken Zechlin road and its transition from a "road to nowhere" to a "road to somewhere" demonstrated how the dismantling of decades-old barriers also collapsed longstanding physical boundaries between discrete German and Soviet spaces, making the military presence increasingly visible and further unavoidable. The explosions in October, 1990 highlighted that the new political situation had the power to increase Soviet-derived disruption rather than mitigate it. That incident also demonstrated a profound confusion and lack of knowledge by German authorities on how to deal with the issue even when the power dynamics of accountability shifted away from the Soviets. Sensory experiences highlight that the withdrawal and reunification altered the conditions of the German-Soviet experience without completely reshaping them. These experiences ultimately shaped and formed the impetus of the Freie Heide initiative as collective opposition against the continued militarization of the region.

Yet during the same period persisting habits of German-Soviet normalization fostered expressions of solidarity rather than tension and resistance. It is to these practices that the final chapter explores.

Chapter Five: The Afterlife of German-Soviet Friendship: Continuity and Shifting Boundaries, 1990-1994

Hannelore Rose recalls in her memoir a particularly "embarrassing" incident that happened to her in the early 1990s in the midst of the Soviet withdrawal:

> I was shopping at the Meyer supermarket. Standing in front of me at the checkout, to my great astonishment, was a Russian soldier. He was wearing that typical long ugly felt overcoat—unmistakable to me. He was very thin and made a genuinely sickly impression. He was buying a bottle of milk and was just about to pay. I told the cashier that I would be happy to pay for the milk as well. No problem. To my great astonishment, however, the "Russian soldier" turned out to be a Berlin [college] student, who immediately shouted at me angrily, asking why I wanted to pay for his milk. I apologized profusely but did not tell him the reason. I was, after all, completely perplexed.[365]

As she later recounted, it had, apparently, become "in" for West Berlin students to wear and acquire Soviet military regalia and equipment as the Soviets prepared to leave Germany.[366] Rose's embarrassing encounter reflected a deeply ingrained perception shared by many former East Germans who had been living near Soviet garrisons for decades: the image of Soviet troops as *arme Schweine* (see Chapter 1)—underpaid, overworked, malnourished, and deserving of sympathy. That reflex persisted after 1989 and the collapse of the GDR that had, until recently, provided the structure for German-Soviet relations.

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[365] Hannelore Rose, *Russisches Konfekt* (Renate Wullstein, 2018), 33.
[366] Ibid.

This chapter argues that the Soviet withdrawal did not shatter local German-Soviet relations or dynamics but rather revealed certain elements of the coexistence that had become embedded in everyday life. Patterns of cooperation, sympathy, and familiarity persisted and were reconfigured in the absence of the socialist frameworks of the GDR. The withdrawal itself serves as a useful analytical vantage point—revealing that many sensory and interpersonal foundations for coexistence outlived the political system that had generated them.

Whereas the preceding chapter examines how tensions and negative sensory effects persisted in the withdrawal period, this chapter returns to the theme of normalization. It shows how long-entrenched perceptions and routines adapted to the new political situation rather than just disappearing. By 1990, the Soviets had long been ingrained in local sensory worlds. They became associated with familiar sounds, smells of fuel and perfume, and routine sights of uniformed soldiers. The *Wende* could not erase these, it enabled them to operate beyond the political/ideological context of the GDR.

Utilizing local press articles, municipal government files, and files of the Bundeswehr Liaison Command to the Western Group of Forces, this chapter explores this pattern of durable continuities of normalization in three interrelated ways. First, Soviet troops continued to participate in municipal labor projects in a continuing pragmatic cooperation between local officials and withdrawing units until 1994. Second, expressions of communal sympathy, ranging from holiday gift drives to collective fundraising for medical treatment for Soviet children, demonstrate that sympathetic a disposition toward "common soldiers" continued without state coercion. Third, the success of Soviet-sponsored open house days (*Tage der offenen Tür*) that allowed locals to enter military sites to which they had long been forbidden access points to

enduring emotional attachment between communities and departing Soviet forces in the face of their imminent disappearance.

Method/Historiography

As discussed in Chapter 1, historiography concerning German-Soviet friendship campaigns and propaganda has mostly revolved around its supposed failure.[367] Jan Behrends and Christian Müller have argued that by and large, Sovietization and its mass organizations such as the Society for German-Soviet Friendship, were largely ineffectual at generating genuine ideological friendship feelings amongst the population toward the Soviets and instead devolved into performative rituals that had little meaning for their practitioners. Given the fact that many of these rituals dissolved immediately with the end of the GDR, the authors would appear to be correct. While friendship events did allow for a few organic unscripted interpersonal encounters, these were the exception rather than the norm.

Nevertheless, in many cases, these "gardening state" Soviet transnational friendship projects succeeded despite and even *because* they failed politically. [368] In her study of the analogous Soviet friendship project in Czechoslovakia, Rachel Applebaum argues that while the project failed in high politics, it succeeded in the scope of everyday life in that it still created an imagined community between Czechs and Soviets, even if it was based in organic personal

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[367] See Chapter 1, Jan C. Behrends, *Die Erfundene Freundschaft: Propaganda Für Die Sowjetunion in Polen Und in Der DDR*, (Böhlau, 2006); "O' Sowjetmensch!" Beziehungen von Sowjetischen Streitkräften Und DDR-Gesellschaft Zwischen Ritual Und Alltag," in *Ankunft – Alltag – Ausreise. Migration Und Interkulturelle Begegnung in Der DDR Gesellschaft*, with Christian Th. Müller (Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung Potsdam, 2005), 17-134; See also Karl Wilhelm Fricke, "Okkupanten Oder Waffenbrüder? Die Gruppe Der Sowjetischen Streitkräfte in Deutschland," *Deutschland-Archiv* 15, no. 3 (1982): 269–76.

[368] Regarding the "Gardening State" thesis, see Chapter 1 and Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, (Polity, 2007).

experience and contradicted state ideology or goals.[369] As she states, reasons included "…desire to continue transnational friendships…careerism, yearning for goods and culture unavailable at home, intellectual interest, and a desire to avoid censure."[370] As argued in Chapter 1, through the state's engagement of Soviet troops in friendship events and labor projects within towns, engendered familiarity and even sympathy among the East German population toward their former occupiers, allowing the latter to be viewed apart from a purely ideological standpoint. This aligns with Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk and Stefan Wolle's assessment that, "… the *muzhik* in a soldier's uniform was perceived more as the victim than as the protagonist of the system."[371] Pre-1945 perceptions of Russian people as less civilized than Germans, were complicated by Soviet friendship propaganda, which in turn clashed with the reality of seeing skinny, seemingly malnourished Soviet enlisted men in daily life.[372] In early 1990s, such images evolved into outward expressions of communal sympathy, amplified by Germans' perception of the Soviets' economic plight amid the historic collapse of their country.

This chapter demonstrates a clear pattern of sympathy between former East Germans and Soviet troops that began in the GDR and transcended its collapse and blossomed during the withdrawal. In doing so, I am building established frameworks of histories of emotion. Neuroscientists and cultural anthropologists have long established that human actions and decision-making are tightly linked to emotion, which in turn is informed by culture, personal,

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[369] Rachel Applebaum, *Empire of Friends: Soviet Power and Socialist Internationalism in Cold War Czechoslovakia* (Cornell University Press, 2019), 14. Rachel Applebaum, "The Friendship Project: Socialist Internationalism in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia in the 1950s and 1960s," *Slavic Review* 74, no. 3 (2015), 484-507.
[370] Ibid, 198.
[371] Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk and Stefan Wolle, *Roter Stern über Deutschland: sowjetische Truppen in der DDR* (Landeszentrale für politische Bildung in Sachsen, 2001), 8.
[372] Lutz Niethammer, "Juden und Russen im Gedächtnis der Deutschen," in *Der Historische Ort Des Nationalsozialismus Annäherungen* (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1990), 114-134.

and societal experience.[373] Knowing this, historians of emotion argue that emotions themselves can be grounded historically and traced across time.[374] In her comprehensive work on emotions in German history, Ute Frevert explores the power of collective experience and powerful imagery to engender empathy. Frevert argues that there was generalized increased readiness to help fellow human beings in the second half of the twentieth century influenced by an increased awareness of the concept of human rights after witnessing the severe violation thereof during the Nazi regime.[375] In addition, collective hardship endured by both Germanies in the postwar period further strengthened this. Between 1946 and 1960, American charities donated millions of care packages to West Germany. In 1960, West Germans sent millions of Christmas packages to the GDR. In the early 1980s, citizens from both the GDR and West Germany donated money, medicine, and clothing to martial law-ruled Poland.[376] In 1981, a single school in Bestensee south of Berlin donated 670 packages to Poland.[377] In more recent times, during the 2015 European refugee crisis, the image of Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old boy who perished crossing the Mediterranean with his family, became a "symbol of the refugee strategy" and spurred a wave of collective compassion and willingness to help across Germany and Europe.[378] As Frevert argues, "…empathy actually made history and put pressure on those in

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[373] Lisa Feldman Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain* (Mariner Books, 2017).
[374] Rob Boddice, "The History of Emotions: Past, Present, Future," *Revista de Estudios Sociales*, no. 62 (October 2017): 10–15, https://doi.org/10.7440/res62.2017.02; Ute Frevert, *Writing the History of Emotions: Concepts and Practices, Economies and Politics* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024); Ute Frevert, *Emotions in History: Lost and Found*, The Natalie Zemon Davis Annual Lecture Series at Central European University, Budapest 4 (Central European Univ. Press, 2011).
[375] Ute Frevert, *The Power of Emotions: A History of Germany from 1900 to the Present* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 115.
[376] Ibid, 100.
[377] Helft den Kinder der VR Polen! 1981, folder 24, A-4 Bestensee, Kreisarchiv Dahme-Spreewald.
[378] Frevert, *The Power of Emotions*, 102.

power to act."[379] In this chapter, I also demonstrate patterns of empathy not only through expressed sentiments of sympathy to Soviet troops but through multiple material efforts by German citizens to help Soviet troops during the withdrawal via Christmas/New Years donation drives and efforts to fund medical treatment for the children of Soviet officers.

This chapter also demonstrates patterns of emotional attachment to Soviet bases by local citizens during the process of their closure. Soviet bases and sensory/experiential landscape they generated, had by 1989 become so anchored in daily life and woven into the fabric day-to-day experience that they became inseparable from the communities they surrounded. Even without sustained personal relationships, there was still a sense of deep, at times, unconscious familiarity.

Situating these findings spatially brings them into conversation with German Cold War borderlands historiography. Communities adjacent to Soviet bases functioned as internal borderlands: spaces defined not by formal state boundaries, by the constant proximity of a foreign military presence. Subjected to ongoing form of sensory warfare (see Chapters 2 and 3), and positioned alongside what were effectively Soviet micro-states, these areas resembled what Astrid Eckert has termed "fields of heightened consciousness"—zones in which the juxtaposition of military and civilian space produced a persistent, both conscious and subconscious, awareness of geopolitical tension. [380]

Understanding these communities as sensory borderlands underscores a key point: while the collapse of socialism in 1989 began the process of dismantling of physical boundaries, it did

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[379] Ibid, 101.
[380] Astrid M. Eckert, *West Germany and the Iron Curtain: Environment, Economy, and Culture in the Borderlands* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 3; see also David Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2007); Yuliya Komska, *The Icon Curtain: The Cold War's Quiet Border* (the University of Chicago press, 2015).

not dissolve the lived, experiential geographies that had developed over decades. The sensory and emotional frameworks through which East Germans understood the Soviet presence remained intact, shaping how they interpreted the withdrawal.

Early Continuities in German-Soviet Friendship: 1990-1992

In May 1990, the Soviet garrison in Neuruppin underwent its annual Victory Day celebrations. Onlookers noticed a curious visual difference from years past: the Soviet flag flew side-by-side not with the GDR flag, but with that of West Germany.[381] The local press, somewhat sardonically, noted the speed to which the local Soviets were embracing the impending reunification. Or perhaps, they suggested, the flag was just easier to get?

Yet beneath visual realignments, patterns of cooperation persisted after state socialism had collapsed. Subbotnik practices of Soviet "volunteer" work in German communities continued, and they would soon be used in in environmental improvement projects vital to the region's future. The impending Soviet withdrawal did not abruptly end these connections. Rather, local officials adapted these preexisting patterns of cooperation to the new political context of reunification.

Subbotnik and collective labor projects continued well into 1990. The DTSB[382] organized over twenty landscaping projects that were already on its docket in Neuruppin from late 1989 to the following year. In early May, 1990 local Neuruppin athletes sweated together with Soviet troops from the local tank division doing landscaping work in the town's main city park.[383] To

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[381] "Zum 8. Mai festlich geflaggt, Sowjetischen neben der Deutschen Fahne," *Ruppiner Anzeiger*, May 27, 1990.
[382] Deutscher Turn-und-Sportbund
[383]"Im Stadtpark wird aufgeräumt," *Ruppiner Anzeiger*, May 20, 1990.

passerby this would have been a familiar sight, yet it was strikingly juxtaposed against wide changes in society. The local press interviewed the Soviet officer in charge of the troops, asking about his soldiers' main motivation for doing landscaping work, "They live here, he said They also want the city park and the lakeshore usable for sports and leisure for themselves and their families."[384] The Soviet garrison (at the very least its officers who had made the GDR their home for years) appeared to have a genuine sense of ownership and responsibility to the land surrounding areas. The press, newly liberated in the wake of the political changes of 1989 could such those voices and their sentiments of solidarity.

Soviets and Environmental Rejuvenation: 1990-1992

As Soviet forces prepared to leave, their role within local life transitioned from generators of environmental degradation to potential agents of its remediation. In this transitional moment, local officials reframed Soviet troops not as departing occupiers, but as necessary partners in reshaping militarized landscapes into viable areas for civilian use. This shift unfolded within a context of both opportunity and uncertainty. While the October 1990 withdrawal treaty set the timetable for Soviet departure by 1994, it also transferred control of former military sites to the German federal government, often placing local redevelopment visions at odds with decisions made by Bonn or the Ministry of Defense. [385]At the same time, newly elected municipal governments—no longer mere appendages of the SED—sought to assert meaningful

[384] Ibid.
[385] It would not be until early 1994 when the German government handed over all Soviet military sites not needed by the government or Bundeswehr to the state of Brandenburg or private owners who could prove a prewar claim to land seized by the Soviets. The Bombodrom and training area around Wittstock remained under nominal federal control as they were still claimed by the Bundeswehr pending the ongoing legal battle over sovereignty of the site.

influence over the future of their regions. [386] For officials such as Wittstock's *Landrat* Christian Gilde, this meant leveraging existing relationships with Soviet commanders, forged through earlier conflicts over noise and environmental damage, toward cooperative efforts at environmental cleanup and landscape restoration. Amid profound economic restructuring and the decline of socialist-era industries, local actors increasingly imagined a post-military future centered on ecological renewal and tourism. [387] Yet realizing this vision required engaging directly with the very forces that had produced the damage. In other words, environmental rejuvenation became a site where legacies of German-Soviet coexistence were actively repurposed.

Once the Soviets evacuated a site, it immediately became property of the German federal government, or more precisely, the Federal Ministry of Finance.[388] The federal government had the privilege to assess their potential for future military or government use. As shown in Chapter 4, the decision to take over the Bombodrom and training areas around Wittstock birthed the Freie Heide movement. A major secondary effect of Freie Heide was an outpouring of environmentalist sentiments from both locals and officials alike to restore the blasted and devastated moonscape of the Bombodrom to its "original state." Activists evoked Theodor Fontane's nineteenth-century Brandenburg travelogues, which described the region's natural beauty, as a way of imagining what the demilitarized region should become. In 1861, Fontane

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[386] Marion Donald Hancock and Henry Krisch, *Politics in Germany* (CQ Press, 2009), 120.
[387] Pressemappe Projektinitiativen zur Konversion Truppenübungsplatz Wittstock/ Neuruppin, June 8, 1992, folder Landratsamt Wittstock 969, Kreisarchiv OPR.
[388] Markus Hennen, "Conversion in Germany through the Example of the Federal State of Brandenburg," in *The Withdrawal of Soviet Troops from East Central Europe* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021), 184; also "Treaty on Conditions for the Temporary Stay in and Modalities for the Phased Withdrawal of Soviet Troops from the Territory of the Federal Republic of Germany (with Annexes)," Treaty, United Nations, October 12, 1990.

noted the supreme "richness" of the region, a "masterpiece before the gates of Berlin."[389] Activists would later lament, "There is no doubt. He [Fontane] would weep at the sight of the defiled heathland today."[390] Yet, the "defilers" themselves played a role during the withdrawal in revegetation[391] and environmental cleanup. Drawing upon both the vestiges of German-Soviet friendship and practical need, the *Kreis* eagerly recast Soviet troops not as defilers of the land who needed to be chased back to Moscow, but as vital partners in helping secure the region's future.

By 1991, the worst of the excessive flight noise and Soviet military activity began to subside as the Soviets reduced training operations as a result of the impending drawdown. An unintended yet fortuitous result of issues concerning Soviet noise pollution throughout 1990 was that it forced the newly elected local officials (who could not rely on preexisting relationships) to forge connections of contact and begin to build relationships with local Soviet commanders.[392] The regular meetings between local officials and Soviet leaders starting in the summer of 1990 brought ever closer contact. In many cases, no longer did local officials write impersonally, "to the Soviet commander" but could put faces to names (as far as the upper officer class was concerned, at least).

Other big changes ensued. Dormant travel arteries such as the Schweinrich-Flecken-Zechlin road (see Chapter 4) were restored. *Landrat* Christian Gilde of Wittstock and his

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[389] Theodore Fontane, *Wanderungen durch die Mark Brandenburg. Erster Teil. Die Grafschaft Ruppin* (Aufbau Verlag, 1998), 1.
[390] Susanne Hoch and Hermann Nehls, eds., *Bürgerinitiative FREIe HEIDe: Bombodrom, Nein Danke!* (Espresso, 2000), 8.
[391] Replanting native vegetation on barren or disturbed land.
[392] Daten und Aspekte zum Ablauf der Rekultivierungsarbeiten der Truppenübungsplätze Schweinrich/Flecken Zechlin und Gadow/Gühlen-Glienicke, October 2, 1991, folder 973, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.

administration and the Wittstock municipality pivoted in their dealings with the Soviet garrisons. They were now less concerned about citizen complaints than they were in fostering more cooperation with the Soviets in preparation for the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal. As it would happen, Soviet and local interests came into alignment when it concerned environmental cleanup and landscape rejuvenation.

Environmental protection and housing construction for returning Soviet troops dominated negotiations between the USSR and Germany during the first two years of the withdrawal. Per initial agreements, Germany would pay the USSR for the handover of Soviet (immovable) assets in Germany minus any German claims for compensation due to environmental damage or other issues of degradation on those military sites.[393] The leftover funds would be invested into new housing for returning troops in the USSR. As the Soviet withdrawal from Czechoslovakia began much earlier and concluded in 1991, Czechoslovak authorities "warned" their German counterparts of extensive environmental issues on returned military sites. Because of this, environmental damage was a major point of concern on the German side as it directly affected potential compensation from the Soviets for remediation. Fearing the loss of property values and therefore lower compensation, Soviet high command actively covered up and downplayed environmental damage on their bases and routinely denied German inspectors access to sites, in violation of the withdrawal treaty.[394] As a result, German authorities could only make rough

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[393] Germany and the USSR also could not agree on the asset value of military sites. The Soviet estimate of 10.5 billion DM was based on their total investments since the 1950s. The German side estimated a much lower value based solely on early 1990s property values, see Meissner, Christoph. "The Withdrawal of the Western Group of Forces from Germany." In *The Withdrawal of Soviet Troops from East Central Europe*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021, 133.
[394] Ibid,134.



Figure 20: Soviet *soldiers* at work. 1991, folder 988, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv Ostprignitz-Ruppin.



Figure 21: Distributing refreshments to Soviet troops. 1991. Folder 975, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv Ostprignitz-Ruppin.

estimates of environmental damage through aerial photography of Soviet sites.[395] Nevertheless, General Burlakov and the general staff decided to deploy WGF troops in environmental cleanup efforts during the withdrawal in a likely attempt to gain approval from German authorities and improve their position at the negotiating table. At the local garrisons around Wittstock, Soviet officers worked with local German officials to facilitate environmental cleanup efforts around the training grounds and Bombodrom in 1991 and 1992. A key concern for local communities was revegetation (*Rekultivierung*) of areas rendered barren from military activity. Because of this, Gilde's administration in Wittstock decided to intensively work with Soviet forces on helping achieve their long-term vision of a demilitarized and pristine natural landscape, regardless of whatever the Bundeswehr's intentions were in the area concerning future military use.

On October 13, 1991, almost exactly one year after the signing of the treaty between Germany and the USSR regarding the withdrawal of Soviet forces (see Chapter 4), Gilde's administration held a large joint German-Soviet public event under the theme, "Revegetation, the Future of the Firing Range, and Living Together with Soviet Soldiers."[396] The format of the event echoed other post-1989 citizens' initiatives demonstrations replete with a religious service and speeches. But instead of protesting the Bundeswehr or Soviet military activity, the event centered on German-Soviet solidarity. In terms of timing and symbolism, the occasion commemorated not German reunification (October 3) but the formal Soviet withdrawal treaty

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[395] Ibid.

[396] Gilde to Priebus, September 4, 1991, folder 973, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR; The Bundeswehr also provided resources for the event. The administration expected a large public presence, launching an advertising/poster campaign in Wittstock and across fifteen villages of the entire municipality, Übergabe Plakate zur Veranstaltung 13.10.1991 am Dranser See, 1991, folder 973, Landratsamt Wittstock. Kreisarchiv OPR.

(October 12). The event sought to highlight the evolving relationship between Soviet forces and the surrounding communities given the new political circumstances. The local administration invited several local Soviet officers as well as an air force general of the Sixteenth Air Army and the WGF commander, General Burlakov. In holding the demonstration at the Dranse Lake, Gilde's administration intentionally established a continuity with the "save the Dranse Lake" demonstration in early 1990 (see Chapter 4). Only, this time, instead of building a platform for complaint and local empowerment concerning negative Soviet sensory effects, the 1991 event focused exclusively on cooperation and strengthening bonds with the Soviets during the withdrawal. Local officials, Bundestag politicians, and Soviet officers gave speeches amid for a large crowd amid what must have been a strong aroma of sizzling bratwurst intermingled with Russian shashlik from Bundeswehr and WGF-supplied field kitchens.[397]

Officially, the meeting between the local German public and Soviet personnel focused on announcing Soviet revegetation and environmental cleanup: paving over trenches, foxholes, and shooting positions; cleaning up munitions and expended oil and fuel disposal; reopening and repairing defunct roads and transit ways on the training grounds; and cooperative planning concerning economic uses for former Soviet facilities. Beyond the symbolic significance of solidarity, there was practical need to build cooperation with the Soviets on these matters as, from the Germans' perspective, they had the greatest capability to clean up their own sites.

On September 6, 1991, Gilde, accompanied by a Bundeswehr officer and a television crew from the Baden-Württemberg-based broadcaster *Südwestfunk,* visited the Schweinrich garrison. Artillery brigade commander Colonel Stolyar, with the assistance of his interpreter

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[397] Altlasten, Rekultivierung, Neubeginn, October 13, 1991, folder 975, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.

Liudmila, led the group on a tour around the training area to showcase his troops on environmental cleanup efforts. Images captured by a documentary film crew (Figure 20) of toiling Soviet soldiers could easily have been shot in the 1970s as German-Soviet friendship propaganda (see Chapter 1). Shirtless men toiling away in the late-summer heat for the betterment of the region, refilling and paving over the scarred landscape made more difficult by the sandy Brandenburg soil. The crew also captured piles of junk and metal waste that Stolyar promised would be "carted away" eventually. On other tours of Soviet cleanup efforts, Gilde also adopted the informal tradition of rewarding the working soldiers with refreshments, candy, and cigarettes (Figure 21). While previous local administrations during the GDR made gifts to the Soviets of committee-approved items for officers and units-at-large, Gilde's administration was essentially adopting and symbolically performing what East German civilians had already been doing for years— expressing sympathy for the common soldiers. During his speech at the October 1991 demonstration, Gilde recalled the press tours of environmental cleanup to extoll the "diligent work of the soldiers in repairing damages incurred [to the landscape] over the course of the past forty years," and said that the withdrawal would initiate further momentum for friendship and cooperation.[398] Gilde's administration was actively retooling German-Soviet friendship for practical betterment of the landscape—press releases would show German-Soviet

[398] Altlasten, Rekultivierung, Neubeginn, October 13, 1991, folder 975, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR; Similar cleanup efforts with gift-giving to Soviet troops also occurred in the nearby municipality of Perleberg. R. Dyck, "Auf dem Schießplatz wird nun aufgeräumt," *Der Prignitzer*, June 26, 1991. R. Dyck, "Aus dem Übungsplatz soll wieder ein lauschiger Wald werden," *Der Prignitzer*, June 7, 1991. Press coverage of these revegetation efforts included similar imaging in the press reporting as in Wittstock, indicating a region-wide phenomenon of presentation.

cooperation and solidarity and gratitude to the common soldier not only to local communities but united Germany as a whole.

In spite of the great symbolism of friendship and cooperation outliving the GDR, the *Kreis* and local German officials had tangible expectations for Soviet/CIS cleanup efforts. In 1992, several generals of the Second Guards Tank Army promised Wittstock 200 soldiers and heavy equipment to pave over vehicle firing positions and side roads near the Schweinrich training area for a longer-term project. When only ten soldiers actually appeared for the job, Gilde sent a complaint to General Popkov's command post in Fürstenwalde to prod area commanders, namely colonels Stolyar and Nemirovksi to commit more troops to the project.[399] By this point, communication had evolved to the extent where Gilde's administration could attempt to pull at the WGF's chain of command to make requests of the (by then officially CIS) Soviet forces, something unthinkable only several years before. Nevertheless, Gilde must have felt remorse that his tone amounted to calling the local commanders incompetent, so his subordinate sent a handwritten note to the headquarters clarifying that he was not lodging complaints against them personally, but rather gently reminding them of what was previously promised.[400] And indeed, Gilde understood that the withdrawal was in full swing, making reconciling the actual physical withdrawal of troops with completing such projects difficult.[401]

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[399] Gilde to Major General Popkov, June 15, 1992, folder 966, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.
[400] Thierbach to Major Baida, June 1992, folder 966, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR.
[401] One of the generals who agreed to send the troops in the first place, General Vasyl Sobkov, had already left Germany for Ukraine, where he joined the Ukrainian Armed Forces' as chief of staff. "General-Leĭtenant Vasiliĭ Sobkov — 21-i Komanduiushchiĭ 2-i Gv. TA, Maĭ 1991 g. — Iiun′ 1992 g. — Vtoraia Gvardeĭskaia Tankovaia Armiia – Boevoĭ Put′!," February 18, 2015, https://web.archive.org/web/20150218123313/http://2gvta.ru/doc/SOLDIERS/20130212_0104/.

On the Soviet side, commanders were probably not acting purely from genuine feelings of solidarity. As mentioned previously, showcasing cleanup efforts was meant to demonstrate to the German government that they were leaving the land in a better state than they found it in order to inflate the real estate value of their assets.[402] The thousands of NATO-authored pamphlets aimed distributed to WGF troops (see Chapter 4) at instructing them on disposal and cleanup efforts were not well-received and even came across to Soviet troops tone-deaf on the German government's part, since less than three years before, NATO had been the Soviets' ideological enemy.[403]

The sudden collapse of the USSR complicated Germany's efforts to help secure housing for returning troops as most of the planned settlements were on the western border of the USSR. This eventually culminated in the so-called "zero" solution in December 1992, where the German and Russian governments agreed to renounce mutual claims. After this agreement, the Russians were effectively absolved from environmental accountability. After this, the WGF no longer had any incentive to cooperate on environmental cleanup because there was no longer the threat of having to pay compensation to Germany for damages. It was at this point that units turned to dismantling assets, recklessly disposing of waste, and sending anything that could be made transportable back into the former USSR, completely blindsiding Bonn.[404] Cooperation at the local level between local German officials and former Soviet area commanders concerning environmental cleanup largely ceased.

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[402] See Meissner, "The Withdrawal of the Western Group of Forces from Germany," 135.
[403] Ibid.
[404] Ibid, 136.

While the ambitious goals articulated at the October 1991 German-Soviet demonstration at Dranse Lake were only partially realized, the event nonetheless reveals how local officials understood departing Soviet forces. Rather than treating them as "defilers," Gilde's administration framed Soviet troops as necessary partners in the necessary process of physically transforming militarized landscapes into civilian ones. The recurring language of friendship, once embedded in socialist ideology was repurposed in this new political context, but stripped of socialist scaffolding. By 1991, there was no longer any obligation to make public displays of Soviet-German friendship. Yet local administrators chose to continue cultivating that decades-old cooperation, however historically tense it sometimes was, because the Soviets provided the most practical solution to regenerating the landscape. Soviet labor during the withdrawal was an adaptive continuation of coexistence.

Perceived Soviet Plight: 1990-1991

Deteriorating conditions on Soviet bases amplified another dimension that embedded coexistence—sympathy shaped through visual familiarity. With the explosion of free press and unlimited access to uncensored television and radio, material hardship among Soviet troops became increasingly visible. What people had normally only glimpsed in passing, now appeared against the backdrop of Soviet collapse.

As explored in Chapter 1, repeated visual encounters with enlisted men had contributed to the emergence of an *arme Schweine* trope in parts of East Germany: an image of underfed and overworked conscripts who nevertheless represented a superpower. In the GDR period, this perception coexisted uneasily with friendship propaganda. While pre-1945 stereotypes of Slavic and Asian peoples certainly persisted and informed German biases, a combination of visual

reality and longstanding socialist ideals created a complicated perception.[405] Especially for the postwar generation and onward, visual perceptions and first-hand experiences had undermined propagandistic images of Soviets as superior socialist civilization. In a case with parallels to the withdrawal from Czechoslovakia, the dissolution of the Society for German-Soviet Friendship in 1990, those propagandistic images fell away in favor of accumulated visual and lived experiences.[406]

These visual perceptions proliferated during the withdrawal period. German media widely reported declining morale, desertions, and material hardship, confirming and amplifying early impressions from 1990 onwards. Soviet hardship was no longer just a local observation but something that was more widely discussed. A free press and the withdrawal process thus made longstanding perceptions more visible than ever before.

Even during the GDR period, Soviet veterans' accounts complicated East Germans' perceptions of universal suffering in the GSFG (see Chapter 1). Regardless, in the early 1990s, decreasing morale driven by declining base conditions for enlisted men, coupled with free press guaranteeing increased visibility of those issues spread into the former West. Bonn's subsidization of not only of housing projects in the USSR for returning troops but also of WGF base upkeep during the withdrawal intensified the perception among German civilians generally of an increasingly destitute and diminished Soviet army.[407] Tales abounded of Soviet troops lacking so much of basic nutrition that they were resorting to dumpster-diving and selling their

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[405] See Satjukow, *Besatzer* 41; Niethammer, "Russen und Juden im Gedächtnis der Deutschen."; Norman Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945 - 1949* (Belknap Press, 1997), 134.
[406] Rachel Applebaum, *Empire of Friends*.
[407] Thomas-Durell Young, *Securing Eastern Germany and the Disposition of the Soviet Western Group of Forces* (Strategic Studies Institute U.S. Army War College, 1991), 8.

equipment to German civilians to be able to afford to buy fruit.[408] Personal experiences added to this perception. Christian Gilde later recalled having visited one of the garrisons and noticing the soldiers in the mess hall at Alt Daber eating nothing but a thin cabbage soup.[409]

The Bundeswehr liaison mission to the WGF was also concerned about perceived declining conditions, keeping close track of incidents and problems as the withdrawal progressed. Soviet media itself became source of commentary and information, particularly on declining morale and conditions in the WGF. In December 1991, *Izvestia* reported an official count of over 6,000 desertions from the Soviet army, particularly in motor rifle divisions and construction units where morale tended to be lowest.[410] Soviet press also deemed ethnic tensions to be an additional factor driving desertions, tensions which were amplified by growing regional conflicts in the disintegrating USSR. The issue of deserters also caused considerable headaches for the German government because the WGF could not legally pursue them beyond base confines, passing the responsibility for apprehending deserters to German police. This also placed additional strain on the system to handle the subsequent denials of asylum requests.[411]

New treaty regulations also forbid WGF troops from carrying weapons on patrols because they at times involved venturing outside base property. As a result, soldiers on patrol duty felt particularly exposed to violence by hoodlums. In at least one incident, several (presumably non-Soviet) assailants attacked and beat up an unarmed soldier on patrol.[412] In a

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[408] Satjukow, *Besatzer,* 22-23.
[409] Interview with Christian Gilde, 11/13/2023.
[410] V. Litovkin, "Dezertiry poverili v amnistiiu, no daleko ne vse.," *Izvestia*, December 5, 1991.
[411] Unerlaubtes Entfernen von der Truppe durch Soldaten der WGS, November 5, 1991, folder 415, BW55, Bundesarchiv Freiburg; During the GDR period, the GSFG generally also relied on the *Volkspolizei* to catch deserters, but the Stasi coordinated with the KGB, utilizing a robust manhunt internal security apparatus more sophisticated that in the FRG, Großfahndung, December 22, 1988, folder 438, BDVP Pdm, BLHA.
[412] Berichtwesen zur Wehrlage fremder Staaten, October 9, 1991, folder 415, BW55. Bundesarchiv Freiburg.

press interview, a Soviet military lawyer made public endemic issues of dereliction of duty, desertions, bullying, and ethnic violence among soldiers going unreported because commanding officers obfuscated poor conditions to save themselves from disciplinary action.[413] On the other hand, the Soviet withdrawal decreased the long term problem of Soviet-caused traffic accidents on German roadways: there simply fewer Soviet vehicles on the road.[414]

While the conditions of the withdrawal certainly amplified problems within the WFG, these problems were not necessarily new and, in some cases, had been endemic in the Soviet military for decades. Systemic hazing (*dedovshchina*) is one example.[415] Yet the absence of state-apparatuses on both the German and the Soviet side, which had been designed to hide problems, now allowed them to become public knowledge. This growing public knowledge among former East Germans led to civil mobilization as expressed through donations and financial support to departing Soviet troops.

Christmas and New Year's Donation Drives: 1990-1993

Beginning around December, 1990, local communities, businesses, and other organizations participated in Christmas and New Year's donation drives that sent thousands of care packages to Soviet military personnel and their families. While gift-giving for Soviet troops had long been a practice within ritualized German-Soviet friendship, these initiatives now unfolded in a different political landscape—participation was no longer mandated or framed in terms of socialist solidarity. The drives were voluntary, locally organized responses to a wide

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[413] Berichtwesen zur Wehrlage fremder Staaten, October 16, 1991, folder 415, BW55. Bundesarchiv Freiburg.
[414] Ibid.
[415] William E. Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (Yale University Press, 1998), 48.

perception of material hardship among the WGF. Rather than representing a persistence of socialist ideology, the donation drives were an adaptation of established practices on a much larger scale with sympathetic-humanitarian motivations.

Concurrent with the treaty that stipulated the conditions of the Soviet withdrawal on October, 12, 1990, the FRG and USSR also signed the Treaty of Good Neighborliness, Partnership, and Cooperation.[416] While most of the treaty concerned matters of national security and strengthening economic ties between the two countries, Article Fourteen stipulated a vague encouragement of political, social, and youth organizations to encourage "encounters" between the two peoples.[417] A formal friendship treaty it was not. Nevertheless, Wittstock's *Landrat* Christian Gilde cited the treaty as an opportunity to inaugurate the first annual Christmas/New Years gift drive for the Soviet garrisons in Wittstock, Schweinrich, and surrounding areas in December, 1990.[418] Under the slogan, "Friendship that comes from the heart," the campaign was more than a collective action in tacit recognition of Soviet plight, but a clear subversion of the GDR German-Soviet Friendship, saying, " The Treaty on Good-Neighborliness… is to serve as an occasion for families here to make contact with Soviet soldiers and to show what true friendship is. Friendship that is not forced, but that comes from the heart and from a genuine need."[419] In addition to petitioning for citizens to prepare care packages for soldiers as well as Soviet children on the garrisons, the campaign also arranged for Christmas events with Soviet

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[416] "Vertrag Ueber Gute Nachbarschaft, Partnerschaft Und Zusammenarbeit Zwischen Der Bundesrepublik Deutschland Und Der Union Der Sozialistischen Sowjetrepubliken," accessed February 11, 2026, https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/newsletter-und-abos/bulletin/vertrag-ueber-gute-nachbarschaft-partnerschaft-und-zusammenarbeit-zwischen-der-bundesrepublik-deutschland-und-der-union-der-sozialistischen-sowjetrepubliken-788564.
[417] Ibid, §14.
[418] Christian Gilde, "Freundschaft, die von Herzen kommt," *Märkische Allgemeine*, December 22, 1990.
[419] Ibid.

children as well as a program for Schweinrich villagers to host two Soviet soldiers each for an intimate Christmas gathering.[420] Another stated underlying goal was to show that "the Cold War is finally over and that the peaceful European home is beginning to be built."[421] In a press interview during the following Christmas season, Gilde stated:

> Many thousands of sons of [the Soviet Union]… are still stationed far from their homeland and their relatives in our new *Bundesländer*…. Here they are, among other things, engaged in gradually removing the traces of more than 40 years of Soviet military presence on German soil which is often marked by incredible difficulties. In doing so…they are also preparing their return to their homeland, which faces, and will probably face for years to come, seemingly insolvable problems… We citizens in the new *Bundesländer* can only imagine a limited picture of the problems facing these Soviet soldiers. One can only think of the dramatic events in the collapsing Soviet Union. Therefore, we would like to ask the citizens of our municipality, especially now in the Christmas season, if they might offer help.[422]

While the phrasing of the Christmas events signaled a clear break with the GDR, the form they took was not exactly new. Collective gift-giving to Soviet troops was a key facet of DSF in the GDR in celebrating the German-Soviet alliance— from preparing gifts for returning soldiers from Czechoslovakia in 1968 to rewarding troops soldiers for landscaping work (see Chapter 1). The local Wittstock government was now relying on strictly voluntary community support.

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[420] According to General Burlakov, over 700 soldiers came to German families to celebrate Christmas during the withdrawal. Matvey Burlakov, *Wir Verabschieden Uns Als Freunde* (InnoVatio Verlag, 1994), 49.
[421] Ibid.
[422] "Landrat Christian Gilde: Zum Fest der Liebe auch an sie denken," *Märkische Allgemeine*, December 1991.



Figure 22: Soviet children enjoying candy at Christmas event. 1991, Folder 988, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv Ostprignitz-Ruppin.

Annual gift drives were not isolated to specific communities such as Wittstock but occurred throughout the former GDR and some communities in the former West became involved as well. According to one figure, individuals donated at least 25,000 Christmas/New Years packages to Soviet troops and children.[423] The Wittstock municipal council put ads in local newspapers reminding citizens to participate in the gift drive and instructing them where to drop off their packages—there were no instructions as to suggested contents of the gifts other than that they should be, "lovingly packaged," and not to give alcohol, which was probably a Soviet directive.[424] The corresponding gift events, especially in December 1991, gained considerable press attention in Wittstock. The Bundeswehr Lieutenant-Colonel von Heinemann

[423] Satjukow, *Besatzer,* 22-23.
[424] "Päckchen schon fertig?," *Märkische Allgemeine*, December 19, 1991.

of the District Defense Command Pritzwalk, whose primary responsibility lay in monitoring the withdrawal in the region, dressed up as St. Nicholas, overseeing gift deliveries to over 500 Soviet children at the garrison in Wittstock in a large event at the officers' clubhouse.[425] As an event partially organized by the Bundeswehr, von Heinemann framed the festivities an opportunity to express (West) German-Soviet reconciliation as a concluding point in the Cold War and World War Two.[426] The press photo (Figure 22) evokes a more humanitarian tone: two Soviet children ravenously chowing down on candy with numerous donated gifts behind them. Meanwhile Gilde traveled to the Bombodrom headquarters at Gadow, personally handing presents to Soviet guards with instructions to share them with their comrades.[427]

The corresponding press article framed the spontaneous visit as bringing "visible joy" to the soldiers, one of whom "thanked [our] German friends and gave warm neighborly greetings" And "we are so glad that the German friends didn't forget us on this day and we hope to meet again."[428] Meanwhile, the *Kreis* administration held a gift event at the Wittstock administration building with Soviet Air Force officers and troops in attendance, again showcasing eager officers and soldiers opening presents.[429] The presents were donated by locals but also the SPD, PDS,[430] and a Hamburg-based company, conveying a sense that a truly united Germany was working together for the Soviets. A Protestant humanitarian foundation also hosted a gift event for Soviet troops with Wittstock garrison commander Lieutenant- Colonel Yuri Sviridov in attendance, an

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[425] "Nikolaus besuchte sowjetische Kinder," *Märkische Allgemeine*, December 7, 1991.
[426] Ibid.
[427] "Päckchenaktion brachte sichtliche Freude," *Märkische Allgemeine*, December 1991.
[428] Ibid.
[429] Hermann Lemcke, "Weihnachtliches im Landratsamt," *Märkische Allgemeine*, December 30, 1991
[430] The successor party to the SED.

event also sponsored by local businesses and organizations from Bremen and Lüneburg, again highlighting a sense of a united Germany for the Soviets.

The relatively large press coverage for the Soviet gift events in December, 1991 highlight that both the surrounding community and especially local officials had considerable investment in making friendly gestures toward the Soviets when it was no longer politically mandated. Of course, local Wittstock officials certainly had some political motivations to build friendly relationships with garrison commanders and officers, who at the same time were being prodded to assist with recultivation efforts as the withdrawal progressed. But the relatively large number of donations that locals gave to the Soviets suggests at least some level of personal sympathy and empathy, no doubt amplified by a growing sense and knowledge of their plight. At another gift-giving event for 250 enlisted men at the Wittstock garrison, the Bundeswehr representative at the event emphasized the plight of the enlisted men, "They are the ones who, amid the financial pressure of the crumbling Soviet Union, stand at the very bottom rung of the social ladder."[431] Again, here, particularly in reference to the "common soldiers," the *arme Schweine* trope appears. No longer did civilians have to covertly slip soldiers sandwiches on the roadside or drinks during maneuvers to help "the Russians," civilians could comfortably drop off care packages at the county administration office. During the withdrawal, a broader sense, the spirit of togetherness between the Soviets and German civilians that the DSF tried so desperately to impose from above, was now being fulfilled after reunification. While organizations in former West Germany also donated to these gift drives, the initial impulse to hold them in the first place came from local communities.

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[431] Konrad Utecht, "Prasdnik Zu Ehren von Santa Claus," *Märkische Allgemeine*, December 17, 1991.



Figure 23: Christian Gilde distributing gifts to troops. 1993, folder 980a, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv Ostprignitz-Ruppin.

The Case of Slava Kovalenko: 1993

By early 1993, the Soviet—now CIS—military presence in Germany was contracting at a rapid pace. Just over 102,000 Soviet troops remained in Germany along with 77,000 civilian workers, down from about 337,000 troops and 208,000 civilians in January, 1991.[432] In the Wittstock area, most of the smaller installations— missile sites, radar stations, staging areas—had been evacuated. Only the larger garrisons at Schweinrich, the Bombodrom headquarters, and the airbase at Alt Daber remained, the former two just months away from closure.[433] While his main focus of attention became advocating for the Freie Heide movement, Gilde still remained the face of the 1993 New Years Christmas drive, delivering what local press somberly noted would be the final gifts given to troops at the Schweinrich garrison (Figure 23).[434] However, instead of winding down as more troops departed Germany, communal support towards the (now former) Soviets intensified. In 1993, local communities mobilized to fund life-saving cancer treatment for the son of an officer stationed at Alt Daber. The case drew significant media attention and prompted contributions that far exceeded the generosity of annual gift drives. This campaign illustrates that communal support could escalate into sustained, highly visible mobilization that treated Soviet families as members of the local community.

Born near Dresden, Vladislav (Slava) Kovalenko grew up at the Wittstock garrison. His father, Vanya, was an air forces officer and mother, Liudmila, a cashier at the commissary. Both came from a town near Rostov-on-Don. Sometime in late 1992 or early 1993, the twelve-year-

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[432] "Die Etappen Des Abzugs | Truppenabzug 1991–1994 | Dekoder," December 24, 2023, https://specials.dekoder.org/abzug-vyvod/karte/.
[433] Nutzung der im Liegenschaftskatalog verzeichneten Gebiete durch Truppenteile der WGT/Stand der Übergabe, May 1993, folder 54, BW55, Bundesarchiv Freiburg.
[434] "Die letzten Päckchen," *Märkische Allgemeine*, January 2, 1993.

old boy suffered a bicycle accident and injured his leg. Instead of healing properly, a tumor developed in his femur. Garrison doctors recognized the potential of the tumor to be serious and recommended that Slava be examined by an oncologist, a service that the Russian military could not provide. A physician at the University of Leipzig Medical Center diagnosed the tumor as osteosarcoma, a highly malignant and rare bone cancer.[435] The cost of the proposed treatment plan and procedure was approximately 100,000 DM.[436] As his parents could not afford the high cost of the cancer treatment and necessary life-saving operations, the airbase garrison set up a donation pool among base personnel, but it soon became obvious that this would not come close to meeting the cost. It was around this time that Lieutenant-Colonel Komissarov, commander of the Wittstock garrison[437], decided to send out a plea for help to the German community. At the end of March 1993, Gilde's office received an urgent letter addressed not only to the municipal government but directly to the citizens of Wittstock. The plea detailed Slava's health emergency and the urgency to gather funds for his cancer treatment, "Help save our son!... We appeal to your compassion and mercy. You are people who at all times have valued life as the most important thing; help us restore hope to the mother and father who live in fear of losing their son. In the name of the Lord God, do not let the parents lose their only child. Save him with your all-feasible help!...[438] The German translation the garrison provided with the original letter replaced the words "people" with "Germans," and replaced "life" with "family" in a seeming attempt to

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[435] Vorläufige Epikrise, November 9, 1993, folder 985, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv OPR; A common treatment at the time was, at the very least, a full amputation of the affected leg but with only a ten percent cure-rate, See Piero Picci, "Osteosarcoma (Osteogenic Sarcoma)," *Orphanet Journal of Rare Diseases* 2, no. 1 (2007): 1-6, 1.
[436] Approximately 55,000 EUR in 2026.
[437] Replaced Yuri Sviridov sometime in 1992.
[438] Pomogite spasti syna! March 31, 1993, folder 985, Landratsamt Wittstock. Kreisarchiv OPR.

nationalize charitable qualities to gain the Germans' support.[439] This was very likely the first time in the entire Soviet presence in the Wittstock area since 1945 when the Soviets themselves asked the community for aid in such a direct and public way, much less invoked the power of God. Moreso, it was a clearest indicator as any that in just a few short years, power dynamics had shifted so decisively away from the former occupiers of Germany.

Local officials' and the community's response to the Soviet plea for help was fast. In the following weeks, Gilde's administration opened a public charity account with the regional Sparkasse to pool money for Slava, with the *Kreis* administration staff immediately donating 500 DM. [440] Gilde also sent a request to the Bonn-based NGO German Cancer Aid (*Deutsche Krebshilfe*) for assistance. German Cancer Aid ultimately refused to provide financial assistance towards medical bills due to apparent statutory reasons.[441] The German NGO Chernobyl Children's Aid, however, committed 20,000 DM through the university hospital in Leipzig where Slava at the time was still awaiting treatment.[442]

Shortly after receiving the initial plea for help from the garrison, Gilde's administration and the mayor of Wittstock, Lutz Scheidemann, inserted an article in the local newspaper to broadcast the Soviet's appeal for help and provide donation information.[443] Alongside a school picture of Slava provided with the initial Soviet letter, the article delivered a highly detailed account of Slava's medical and financial situation. It also incorporated considerable excerpts

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[439] Helfen Sie den Sohn retten! March 31, 1993, folder 985, Landratsamt Wittstock. Kreisarchiv OPR.
[440] Internal Memo, April 16, 1993, folder 985, Landratsamt Wittstock. OPR; Quittung Spendenkonto, folder 985, Landratsamt Wittstock. Kreisarchiv OPR.
[441] Haard to Gilde, May 10, 1993, folder 985, Landratsamt Wittstock. Kreisarchiv OPR.
[442]Quittung Spendenkonto, folder 985, Landratsamt Wittstock. Kreisarchiv OPR.
[443] "Slawa Braucht Dringend Hilfe," *Märkische Allgemeine*, April 10,1993.

from the garrison-provided German translation of their plea for help (albeit with corrected grammar), using the same nationalized language, "The inhabitants of the Wittstock garrison appeal to the 'compassion' of the Germans and plea for help, as stated in the [Russian plea for help]…"[444] The ad closed with, "Help save the child! He still has his [whole] life in front of him!"[445] In highlighting elements of the initial German translation, the administration (likely obliviously) transferred the Soviet-inserted nationalized elements to garner a heightened emotional response from the community.

The story of Slava's plight continued to gain wider attention. A month later, a television report by *Ostdeutscher Rundfunk Brandenburg* broadcasted the story to all of Brandenburg and to other federal states, again providing information on how to donate.[446] Meanwhile, the Bundeswehr District Defense Command 843 Pritzwalk and WGF high command at Wünsdorf committed an additional 15,000 DM.[447] Based on the amount of mentions of Slava in Bundeswehr files, the Bundeswehr was clearly also interested in monitoring the story due to his growing profile in regional mass media.[448] By the end of August, the charity account collected over 45,000 DM in individual donations.[449] The amount collected was sufficient to finance the initial procedures and chemotherapy. By that time, Slava had developed into a local media sensation.

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[444] Ibid.
[445] Ibid.
[446] Zuarbeit zum Interview mit dem ORB-Fernsehen am 28.05.1993, May 27, 1993, folder 985, Landratsamt Wittstock. Kreisarchiv Ostprignitz-Ruppin.
[447] Thierbach to Gilde, May 12, 1993, folder 985, Landratsamt Wittstock. Kreisarchiv Ostprignitz-Ruppin.
[448] Slawa wird für die Operation vorbereitet, June, 1993, folder 54, BW55, Bundesarchiv Freiburg.
[449] Gilde to Dr. Tisch, October 29, 1993, folder 985, Landratsamt Wittstock. Kreisarchiv Ostprignitz-Ruppin.



Figure 24: Slava's family with Christian Gilde, the mayor of Wittstock, and garrison officers, 1993, folder 985, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv Ostprignitz-Ruppin.



Figure 25: Press photo of Slava mimicking a singer on TV in the Leipzig hospital, 1993, folder 985, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv Ostprignitz-Ruppin.

Because of the TV and press coverage during the donation campaign, people naturally became interested in Slava's progress. A journalist with the *Märkische Allgemeine* traveled all the way to Leipzig to report on Slava's successful operation and recovery.[450] Photographs of Slava having a good time in his hospital room (Figure 25) accompanied uplifting descriptions of his well-being and how well he was getting along with the German staff and fellow patients. Multiple news articles emphasized his aptitude at the German language, "And he is also particularly intelligent: not only does he already understand German quite well and can communicate well with the other children, Slava has also already undergone his eighth-grade studies at his bedside."[451] In brief interview, Slava thanked the German community for the donations and emphasized after the cancer treatment his eagerness to "go home," by which the journalist clarified that he meant Russia, not Germany where he was born. The press on the one hand portrayed Slava as successfully integrating into German society while on the other acknowledging that his stay in Germany was ephemeral.

By November 1993, Slava's doctor deemed him well enough to return to Wittstock for a few months before undergoing further treatment and installation of a partial leg prosthesis in 1994.[452] The municipality arranged his vehicle transport back to the Alt Daber garrison to spare him a convoluted journey by train. His return to Wittstock was met with a celebratory meeting with Gilde, his parents, Lieutenant-Colonel Komissarov and other representatives from the airbase (Figure 24).[453] At the meeting, Slava's parents thanked the community for their support

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[450] Manfred Schulze, "Slawa wird wieder Radfahren können," *Märkische Allgemeine*, August 28, 1993.
[451] Ibid.
[452] Thierbach to Gilde, October 25, 1993, folder 985, Landratsamt Wittstock. Kreisarchiv Ostprignitz-Ruppin.
[453] Konrad Utecht, "Neue Lebenschancen für Slawa," *Märkische Allgemeine*, November 1993.

and for saving their son's life. The press paraphrased the his mother's statement that "the [community's] willingness to help instilled in her the hope that 'German and Russian mothers as well as German and Russian sons can live with one another.'"[454] Gilde's administration demonstrated their willingness to help facilitate Slava's further treatment but did not make further requests for donations from the community since enough costs had already been met. The municipality facilitated and provided financial assistance for his subsequent treatments in early 1994. Beyond these treatments, Slava's ultimate fate remains unclear as he most likely left Germany with his family to Russia with the evacuation of the airbase in June 1994.

Slava's case was not an isolated incident. In late 1991/early 1992, the municipality in Perleberg organized a similar donation drive for a sick baby of an officer stationed at one of the local bases. Locals donated 5,000 DM within one month.[455] Probably due to the severity of his illness, Slava's campaign was much larger. Not only did Wittstock respond to the Soviets' call for help and launch a regional media campaign on Slava's behalf to collect donations, but they practically facilitated his entire treatment plan for the duration of 1993 and 1994 until his departure from Germany. Likely thousands of people donated to Slava's treatment, in a time and place where the economic precariousness of post-*Wende* Brandenburg would have caused many to think twice before freely giving money. If Gilde's administration was merely seeking good political optics, their involvement likely would have stopped after initially broadcasting the initial plea for help. After all, everyone knew the "Russians" would be gone anyway within a

[454] Ibid.
[455] Rainer Dyck, "Alexandra ist gesund zu Hause," *Der Prignitzer*, January 1992; Rainer Dyck, "Alexandra Soll Bald Gesund Werden," *Der Prignitzer*, December 28, 1991.

year. As with annual Christmas and New Years drives, there was no institutionalized obligation to help Slava, at least not to the extent that local officials and the surrounding communities did.

The case of Slava Kovalenko distills decades of German-Soviet normalization and underlying sympathy towards Soviet troops. Whereas this localized sympathy had been expressed during the GDR era through small, tacit, and covert gestures, Slava's illness and the publicity that followed turned that preexisting inclination into a full region-wide mobilization. This event also completely and openly inverted hierarchies that had defined German-Soviet friendship for the past five decades. The Soviets now called upon the surrounding community for help, intentionally invoking and ascribing the Germans with compassion and family values while even calling upon God. The disproportionately large and wide scope of Wittstock's and other communities' response to Slava and his situation clearly demonstrates that these frameworks and underlying images that supported community familiarity and sympathy did not dissolve with the GDR nor was their preservation contingent on the GDR's structures to survive. As will be seen in the next section, continuities also extended to broader sensory experience, as seen with open house days on closing Soviet bases.

Sensory Closure—Open House Days, 1990-1994

For many communities, the Soviet withdrawal meant the gradual breakdown of the visual, olfactory, and acoustic landscapes that had structured daily life for four decades. The obvious reason for this breakdown was that the bases themselves—the mostly unseen generators of sensory encounters—were, slowly but surely, shutting down. On the one hand, the Soviet exit promised obvious positive changes to local communities—the end of negative sensory disturbances and possibilities for reclaimed spaces. But on the other hand, the gradual erasure of

these sensory generators fundamentally altered routine aspects of daily life that had long since become normalized. The distinct odor of *Russensprit* and heavy perfume had ingrained themselves in the subconscious fabric of the day-to-day in these communities and were now fading.

In perhaps one of most unexpected moves of the withdrawal, Soviet commanders offered their German neighbors a chance to venture into these spaces that had been the source of these sensory experiences. The surprising if uneven success and positive resonance of the so-called Open House days—*Tage der offenen Tür*— on Soviet bases, mainly during 1991 and 1992, shows that there was strong and willing public interest in experiencing those sensory encounters at least one more time. These were not merely driven by curiosity, but a desire to process the Soviet presence before its imminent physical disappearance.

Some of earliest mentions of open house days appeared during the summer of 1990. In Wittstock, during negotiations with local Soviet officials regarding flight noise, a political officer welcomed the possibility of holding an open house day at Alt Daber so the local communities could have "a better understanding of [Soviet] leadership, military equipment, and [garrison] families."[456] Even though the exact conditions of the Two-Plus-Four Treaty or the Soviet withdrawal had not yet been finalized, Soviet leadership must have recognized that the decades-old unspoken policy of general aloofness towards surrounding communities was no longer viable. Yet through these open house days in the early 1990s, the Soviets were not attempting to replicate US or NATO soft power projection in the sense of inviting German civilians onto their

[456] Aktenvermerk über den Besuch in der Garnison Wittstock, July 2, 1990, folder 977, Landratsamt Wittstock, Kreisarchiv Ostprignitz-Ruppin.



Figure 26: Visitors at the open house at the airbase in Finowfurt, Detlef Frommann, 1992.



Figure 27: Visitors inspect the wing of a MiG-29 at the open house at the airbase in Finowfurt, Detlef Frommann, 1992.

bases to instill ideological values.[457] Rather, and according the Soviet general staff, these goals were more geopolitical— open house days could demonstrate to the West decreased tensions, transparency, and to build trust.[458] The Soviets coordinated the open house days with the Bundeswehr and required their approval to take place, but the events' programs, organization, and to a certain extent, their marketing were organized by the Soviets. though they had to follow Bundeswehr regulations.[459] The Liaison Command closely monitored the events and kept track of visitor numbers. In addition to allowing German civilians access to restricted areas on military installations, the events included displays of Soviet military equipment, vehicles, and aircraft Demonstrations (Figures 26 and 27).[460]

After the official collapse of the USSR in 1991, the frequency of open houses increased dramatically. General Foertsch, head of the German Liaison Command, had a rather cynical explanation for the increase, " The WGF is currently in a state of extreme uncertainty…in an effort to mitigate corresponding impressions among the German public and to demonstrate an intact sense of self-worth, the leadership of the WGF is increasingly resorting to the means of targeted self-presentation through "Open House Days."[461] Regardless of Soviet motivations behind them, the open houses generated immense public interest.

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[457] Maria Höhn, *GIs and Fräuleins: The German-American Encounter in 1950s West Germany* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 65.
[458] Frank Gaudlitz and Thomas Michael Kumlehn, eds., *Die Russen gehen: der Abzug einer Armee* (BasisDruck Verlag, 1993), 66.
[459] Richtlinien für die Durchführung von „Tagen der offenen Tür"/Tagen der Information, 1992, " folder 17, BW55, Bundesarchiv Freiburg.
[460] Bundeswehr commanders on multiple occasions forced the Soviets to scale back air shows due to increased safety concerns in the wake of the 1988 Ramstein air show disaster. Tag der Offenen Tür in Eberswalde-Finow, August 14, 1991, folder 16, BW55, Bundesarchiv Freiburg.
[461] "Tag der offenen Tür" der Luftstreitkräfte der WGT am 23.02.1992 auf dem Flugplatz ALTENBURG, January 16, 1992, folder 17, BW55, Bundesarchiv Freiburg.

Open houses began on February 17, 1991 with events at twenty-three garrisons. Participation was reportedly high, with thousands of visitors including prominent local officials.[462] In August 1991, the airbase at Eberswalde-Finow held its first open house. Bundeswehr officers who came to observe the event reported that both the Soviet organizers and Eberswalde and *Kreis* authorities were completely overwhelmed by the public's interest in the event. At 10:00 AM "Traffic chaos" reigned on the streets, by 12:00 PM there was a three-kilometer-long traffic jam on the road leading towards the autobahn.[463] The officers' report concerned what they deemed major safety and organizational problems: poor positioning of informational signs next to aircraft caused people to climb over barriers to read them; the lack of Soviet personnel or cordons on the grounds allowed spectators to walk out onto the runway while aircraft were taxiing; a civilian sports plane landed on the runway approximately three meters above people's heads. Soviet pilots gave spectators paid helicopter rides outside the airfield perimeter. [464] If aspects of German-Soviet Friendship succeeded *through* its failure, then the open house at Finow succeeded *despite* the utter unpreparedness of the Soviets at managing such an event. Nevertheless, the public's interest was there and apparent. Major General Barsukov of the Sixteenth Air Army estimated 70,000 visitors. The Bundeswehr observer, who left the event after two hours due to increasing traffic, thought the figure to be closer to 20,000 to 30,000. Yet to the observers, one aspect was not up for debate: the visitors loved it.[465] To locals attending the event, the chaos would not have been surprising—they had been living with it for

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[462] Burlakov, *Wir Verabschieden uns als Freunde,* 49.
[463] Bericht über den Besuch beim „Tag der offenen Tür" am 18.08.1991 auf dem Flugplatz FINOW, August 1991, folder 17, BW55. Bundesarchiv Freiburg.
[464] Ibid.
[465] Ibid.

the past four decades and offered a certain catharsis. MiG-29s, the bane of goodnight's sleep since the early 1980s, now performed mock takeoffs[466] on the runway for entertainment.

Other open houses allowed visitors access to barracks facilities, tradition rooms, including allowing attendees to photograph and film inside the facilities.[467] Although the facilities according to local press were "sparkling clean," these presented an opportunity for visitors to attach visual and tactile experiences to abstract imaginings of what had previously been unseen. The subsequent open house at the Finow airbase in June, 1992 appeared less chaotic than before but had evolved into as much a militaria flea market as an aircraft spectacle. As local press reported, camo clothing, combat uniforms, gasmasks, and swimsuits were all for sale. A field kitchen for 130 people could be bought by large-scale purchasers as well as offers to lease entire buildings on the airbase for private use.[468] This of course did not include the rampant weapons sales that the open houses facilitated, all of which, according to one major, went towards funding the withdrawal. The imagery of this heavy-handed adoption of market capitalism on Soviet bases served as a further reminder that troops were in dire straits, confirming previously-held notions of Soviet plight.[469]

Particularly in terms of aircraft, the open houses offered direct tactile experiences that would have been impossible in the GDR, and in some cases, subverted previous negative sensory experiences. At an open house at the airbase in Mahlwinkel, Saxony-Anhalt, visitors (who in some cases had been waiting since 4:00 AM) waited in long lines so they could climb inside Mi-

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[466] Aborting the takeoff before engaging the afterburner to avoid deafening noise.
[467] Tag der offenen Tür bei WGT, November 18, 1991, folder 6b, BW55, Bundesarchiv Freiburg.
[468] Irene Richter, "Darf's denn eine Feldküche sein?," *Märkische Oderzeitung*, June 19, 1992.
[469] See also, Christoph Lorke, "Contested Spaces, Contested Memories: Images of Post-Soviet Military Bases in Reunified Germany," *Český Lid* 106, no. 4 (2019): 439–61.

6a and Mi-8 transport helicopters and could freely touch anything save for "the red buttons" as cheekily indicated by a hand-painted sign.[470] For a moderately expensive forty-five DM, visitors could ride in the helicopters in sight-seeing tours. A Mi-24 gunship performed acrobatic maneuvers for show. These helicopters, once compared by Wittstock villagers to violent hornets (see Chapter 3) now cultivated memories more akin to riding a theme park roller coaster.

Even in cases where local officials were resistant to open houses because of negative experiences in the GDR, the public's interest said otherwise. In early 1992, posters began appearing in Altenburg, Thuringia, advertising an "airshow" on February 23 at the Soviet airbase in Nobitz near Altenburg (figure 9). The squadron of the Sixteenth Air Army, which was based at that airbase, was due to withdraw from Germany later in the year. The event would serve a dual purpose, like an open house and a farewell to the local communities. The mayor of Nobitz, who had only learned about the event through the posters, and after connecting a recent increase in flight activity out the airbase to the event, wrote to the German Liaison Command with concerns. While he was generally in agreement with the spirit of the open house day, he requested that the Soviets not perform any flying activities, "in view of the terrible experiences with such events in the recent past, and in our common responsibility for the lives and health of the residents of the communities surrounding the airfield, we appeal to you to prohibit any flight demonstrations on this day."[471] A local group calling themselves the "Committee for the Withdrawal of the CIS," had more stern words about the airshow, "Cancel this airshow, concern yourselves with a speedy withdrawal from Germany! Leave the airfield and garrison in an

[470] "Bitte Die Roten Knöpfe Nicht Drücken," *Volkstimme*, August 1992.
[471] Rösler to German Liaison Command, February 7, 1992, folder 17, BW55, Bundesarchiv Freiburg.



Figure 28: Poster advertising the open house at the airfield near Altenburg. 1992, folder 17, BW55, Bundesarchiv Freiburg.

orderly condition…otherwise no aircraft will fly to Russia with aid supplies on Feb. 24, 1992! Give this instruction and order to the Russian troops in the area immediately![472] Clearly, neither the Soviets, nor their main sponsors (a regional tabloid newspaper and a construction company), had coordinated with local authorities about the airshow, a further testament to the chaotic, haphazard organization of the open houses.

Nevertheless, the event went on as planned although there were no flyovers of MiG-29s, so as to appeal to local officials. There were, however, helicopter flyovers and maneuvers including a mock paradrop by Soviet paratroopers and a simulated takeoff of a MiG-29. Despite protests by local officials and interest groups and bad weather, the event still drew around 6,000 visitors.[473] Considering that the bad weather would have most likely driven away many non-local spectators, the level of local public interest[474] in going to the airshow and open house was most likely a magnitude greater than the opposition's resistance to it.[475]

Despite numerous instances of poor advertising, bad weather, and poor organization that the Bundeswehr observed throughout 1991 and 1992 when the events were most frequent, it is telling that the events were as successful as they were. Aside from a few notable exceptions, visitor numbers routinely reached in the hundreds if not thousands, considering the relative

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[472] Müller, B-Komitee to German Liaison Command, February 15, 1992, folder 17, BW55, Bundesarchiv Freiburg.
[473] Tag der Offenen Tür der 16. LA am FP ALTENBURG am 23.02.1992, February 24, 1992, folder 17, BW55, Bundesarchiv Freiburg.
[474] The population of Altenburg was around 50,000 1990. "Altenburg (Altenburger Land, Thuringia, Germany) - Population Statistics, Charts, Map, Location, Weather and Web Information," accessed February 28, 2026, https://citypopulation.de/en/germany/thuringen/altenburger_land/16077001altenburg/.
[475] The protest against the open house day at Altenburg was the only documented instance of organized dissent concerning open house days I found in my archival research in Bundeswehr files. "Negative" press coverage centered mainly on reporting low attendance at individual events rather than expressing opposition to the events themselves. While it is possible there was similar resistance to other open house events as in Altenburg, it does not have a strong presence in the archival record.

remoteness of military installations and a general lack of good transport infrastructure to accommodate civilian onlookers.[476]

After their peak in frequency in 1992, open houses declined precipitously in 1993 and 1994. as bases shut down. While some contemporaries noted that the public's curiosity peaked around 1992, the real answer lay more in the fact that so many bases were shutting down; after all, many open houses were dual purpose farewell events.[477] A number of formal farewells held in towns oftentimes mirrored earlier DSF events. In Strausberg, for example, preschoolers gave departing officers flowers in a coordinated part of the ceremony.[478] In March 1994, months before the closure of the Alt Daber airbase, Wittstock held a "Festival of Friendship," a day-long event that took over both the heart of city itself as well as airshow at the airbase.[479] For one of the last times, MiG-29s flew over Wittstock and with it the end of one of the most prominent markers of German-Soviet daily life.

When Soviet commanders decided to open military installations to the public, they temporarily reconfigured the spatial and sensory and emotional boundaries that had structured everyday coexistence for decades. For many visitors, crossing onto airbases and other military installations enabled direct sensory encounters with what before had been experienced indirectly. While the roar of engines, sweet fuel smells, and the sight of armored vehicles and aircraft were not new phenomena, the experiential perspective was. For visitors, bases became tangible

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[476] Jörg Schurig, "Armee öffnete ihre Tür- doch kaum einer ging hin," *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, June 19, 1992. On November 2, 1991, nineteen bases held open houses. Six locations received less than 100 visitors. Tag der offenen Tür der WGT am 02.11.1991, November 3, 1991, folder 93, BW55, Bundesarchiv Freiburg.
[477] Gaudlitz et al, *Die Russen Gehen*, 66.
[478] "Soldaten der Westgruppe herzlich verabschiedet," *Märkische Oderzeitung*, May 3, 1994.
[479] Scheidemann to Thierbach, March 15, 1994, folder 989, Landratsamt Wittstock. Kreisarchiv OPR.

environments. Yet, in a parallel to DSF and *Waffenbrüderschaft* events of the preceding decades, these events were, too, staged, if in a chaotic and often disorganized manner. These events nevertheless provided a space for communities to negotiate these sensory encounters at the moment they were steadily dissolving. Their oftentimes disproportionate popularity despite their limitations highlights the degree to which they became embedded in local consciousness. The desire to enter these spaces to experience once more the sounds, smells, and sights that had structured daily life, be they benign, positive, or negative, suggests not a burgeoning *Ostalgie*, but a process of reckoning. For communities, open houses provided an opportunity for a controlled confrontation with these previously inaccessible anchors of daily life.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the Soviet withdrawal, rather than serving as a definitive point of rupture, was instead comprised of layered continuities from the GDR that persisted well into the early 1990s. First, preexisting socialist friendship practices of Subbotnik and Soviet-municipal cooperation survived into the withdrawal period. Local German officials actively cooperated with garrison commanders on environmental rejuvenation and involved the Soviets in shaping the region's economic future. Public demonstrations and press reports of these showed that they were repurposing DSF practices for the practical demands of German reunification. Rather than being merely symbolic, these were pragmatic solutions that relied on a preexisting relationship of coexistence. Second, local humanitarian initiatives like Christmas/New Year's gift drives and the mobilization for Slava Kovalenko's cancer treatments reveal a durable pattern of sympathy originating in the GDR that extended into the withdrawal period. Amplified by growing a growing perception and public knowledge of Soviet plight, the level and visibility of

communal support towards Soviet troops and their families points to a continuation of the long-standing collective imagery of the "poor guys" in Soviet uniforms. Third, the Open House days of 1991-1992 allowed communities to confront directly the material and sensory sources of what had structured daily life for decades. Their popularity highlights not only a newfound curiosity, but a lingering awareness of the significance that the Soviet military presence had as a seemingly indelible fixture on the landscape—as emerging sites of memory. Further, open houses subverted negative sensory experiences in a more positive context, imparting positive memories at the end of the Soviet-German coexistence. Considered together, these aspects support the notion that the withdrawal functioned not as an abrupt break, but a drawn-out and negotiated disentanglement, revealing the depth of coexistence that preceded it.

Conclusion

On June 18, 1994, British, French, and American troops marched down Unter den Linden in Berlin to celebrate the final departure of Allied troops from the city. Conspicuously absent was the fourth victorious power of World War Two. The German federal government initially barred Russian troops from participating alongside the Western Allies, instead suggesting that the Western Group of Forces hold their farewell parade in Weimar— a city captured by American troops in 1945. After Matvey Burlakov publicly and angrily protested, the decision was reversed. Russian troops were permitted to march in Berlin, but separately, in the eastern neighborhood of Karlshorst. A few days after the Allied parade, 1,500 Russian troops marched before an audience of about 30,000, to 40,000 fewer people than in the "Western" ceremony.[480]

While this highly publicized "snub" drew the most media attention, numerous smaller farewell ceremonies took place across the former East, eliciting a wide range of local reactions. In Dresden, "joy" reportedly prevailed as the Soviets departed.[481] In Stendal, hundreds of people gathered at the train station, waving goodbye as soldiers left amid laughter, tears, and exchanged gifts.[482] In May 1994, the mayor of Strausberg delivered an emotional address to the departing troops, thanking them not only for their military service but also for their longstanding cooperation with the local fire brigade. He concluded: "When we say goodbye today, it shall not be forever. You will be always welcome as guests in our city."[483] Christian Gilde recalled the

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[480] Mary Williams Walsh, "Russians leave Germany minus fond farewells," *Los Angeles Times*, June 26, 1994.
[481] Christoph Lorke, "Contested Spaces, Contested Memories: Images of Post-Soviet Military Bases in Reunified Germany," *Český Lid* 106, no. 4 (2019): 439–61, 451.
[482] Ibid.
[483] Strausberg mayor farewell speech, May 2, 1994, folder 1046, E, Stadtarchiv Strausberg.

final moments at the Alt Daber airbase, where an officer lowered the Russian flag, kissed it, and boarded a plane bound for Russia.[484]

I asked several residents of Eberswalde how they felt when the Soviets left. One man, who was sixteen at the time, recalled feeling relief that the Soviets were leaving, that they somehow made the atmosphere in the town "strange" and "unpleasant" while they were there.[485] A woman, who was in her late twenties at the time said, "[I felt] fear. A sense of security for me was gone. [We had] an uncertain future before us and now the Russians were gone. They were security for us. That wasn't good. Why did the Yanks (*Amis*) and the Brits get to stay here and only the Russians had to leave?"[486]

The wide range of reactions to the Soviet departure reflects the highly complex and at times contradictory place the Soviet military had come to occupy in East German society. For some, the withdrawal marked a long-awaited of a foreign military presence that had shaped their community for decades. For others, the departure represented the disappearance of a familiar element of daily life and the unsettling loss of something that had until very recently seemed so permanent. These responses point to a depth of lived experience that cannot be fully captured through conventional narratives of occupation or foreign domination.

This dissertation has demonstrated that the Soviet military was deeply embedded in the everyday environments of the communities that surrounded it. Through an evolving combination of environmental transformation, sensory encounters, and intermittent interpersonal contact, Soviet soldiers and their machines became part of the rhythms of daily life. Over time, these

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[484] Interview with Christian Gilde, 11/13/2023.
[485] Interview with O. 6/4/2024.
[486] Interview with H. 2/26/2024.

encounters rendered the Soviet presence familiar within local communities. The Soviet military shaped everyday life in the GDR not only through political authority or ideology, but through its persistent sensory and social presence within a shared transnational lifeworld.

The Soviet military generated a far-reaching sensory landscape of sight, smell, and sound that permeated the GDR. Smells—such as gasoline and perfume—regularly drifted, embedding themselves in daily life and persisting in memory. These odors merged with and became part of the GDR's broader sensory environment. At the same time, they revealed the inability of local authorities to contain Soviet-derived contamination events, as the 1965 Bernau disaster made clear.

Soviet soundscapes—produced by aircraft, armored vehicles, and artillery—ranged from familiar background noise to significant disruptions that degraded residents' quality of life. These disturbances generated political friction, as GDR officials proved largely powerless to compel Soviet compliance, thereby undermining public confidence and contributing to the rise of grassroots environmentalism. Visually, bases, *Russenviertel*, and training grounds reshaped local landscapes, while fleeting encounters with Soviet personnel became part of the everyday social milieu.

Sustained visual and interpersonal encounters with Soviet troops largely overrode German-Soviet friendship ideology while even events and efforts done in the framework of German- Soviet friendship enabled organic experiences that counteracted ideological aims. The normalization of the Soviet presence emerged through repetition rather than ideology. Yet German- Soviet friendship succeeded partly through its own failure—friendship labor projects helped engender collective sympathy for Soviet troops as *arme Schweine.*

Embedded sensory environments and patterns of normalization outlived the socialist structures that initially bore them. Shorn of ideological trappings, practices continued well past the collapse of socialism into the withdrawal period. Intrusive noise continued while visual and spatial boundaries collapsed and were remade. Durable patterns of sympathy most clearly manifested in the form of donation drives for Soviet troops and mobilizations for funding medical treatment for children of Soviet officers. The unexpected success of open house days on closing Soviet bases demonstrated a pattern of sensory bereavement, revealing communal and emotional connections to Soviet bases to connect with them one last time before they closed forever.

In demonstrating these connections, I have made several interventions in the existing historiography. I have expanded foundations laid by Silke Satjukow by moving beyond frameworks centered on physical separation and interpersonal contact.[487] Rather than a contained "foreign body," the Soviet military functioned as an integral presence whose boundaries were both physically and perceptually porous. Its influence extended beyond garrisons through sensory and environmental channels that shaped everyday perception—often without direct interaction.

This finding carries broader implications for the study of occupation and civil-military relations. Military presence must be understood not only through direct encounters between soldiers and civilians but also through the environmental and sensory conditions it produces. Similar dynamics were present in West Germany, where NATO forces generated comparable sensory effects, albeit under fundamentally different political conditions. Given the greater

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[487] Silke Satjukow, *Besatzer "Die Russen" in Deutschland 1945-1994* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH, 2008).

accessibility of Western military archives, future research is well-positioned to further develop this comparative framework. [488]

I have demonstrated that the Soviet military played a profound role in East German daily life after 1953. My findings both enrich and bring added nuance to established frameworks on the study of daily life in the GDR and in the function of its institutions. For example, the ubiquity and availability of Soviet gasoline helped encourage the GDR's automotive boom in the 1970s.[489] The function of *Eingaben* against Soviet noise pollution complicates the idea of participatory dictatorship because the Soviets were an extra-state entity that undermined the state's reliance on controlled public complaint.[490]

I also expand upon recent environmental histories of the GDR in detailing the impact of Soviet noise as an extra source of disruption that helped fuel environmentalist movements.[491] I trace environmentalist tendencies in the early 1990s in the scope of collective imaginings for de-militarized landscapes and ecotourism during the Soviet withdrawal while highlighting the integration of departing Soviet troops to rejuvenate the landscape before they left.

Cold War narratives are often cast in terms of confrontation, even in supposedly ideologically aligned countries such as in the Eastern Bloc. In my case, I have engaged with sensory histories to describe a durable coexistence. I have expanded on recent Cold War sensory

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[488] Rachel Applebaum, *Empire of Friends: Soviet Power and Socialist Internationalism in Cold War Czechoslovakia* (Cornell University Press, 2019).
[489] Eli Rubin, "The Trabant: Consumption, Eigen-Sinn, and Movement," *History Workshop Journal* 68, no. 1 (2009): 27–44.
[490] Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (Yale University Press, 2008).
[491] Julia E. Ault, *Saving Nature under Socialism: Transnational Environmentalism in East Germany, 1968-1990* (Cambridge University Press, 2021). Astrid M. Eckert, *West Germany and the Iron Curtain: Environment, Economy, and Culture in the Borderlands* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

literature to demonstrate how sensory environments shaped political perceptions in the GDR.[492] I have shown that sensory environments bred not only political disillusionment but also durable perceptions of sympathy towards servicemen of a foreign military power. To that end I have also brought sensory history into further conversation with histories of emotion, showing how sustained and repeated sensory encounters, not only images and direct state influence, can generate recurring patterns of emotion across different communities over time.[493]

The afterlives of Soviet bases are as wide-ranging as they are fascinating. Since 1994, airbases have become solar parks, venues for a communist-themed techno music festival and local *Ostalgie* fairs featuring vintage vehicles and aircraft, mirroring earlier open house days. [494] Garrisons have been remade into housing blocks, businesses, and used as movie sets.[495] Many others that have not been demolished are abandoned and decaying, but they nevertheless draw in Soviet veterans, graffiti artists, and urbex enthusiasts.[496] Some, including the former training area around Wittstock, remain restricted areas due to environmental hazards and unexploded ordinance. My study of these places as "living sites" naturally invites further inquiry to these places as sites of memory, as they were already developing into during the Soviet withdrawal.[497]

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[492] Bodo Mrozek, ed., *Sensory Warfare in the Global Cold War: Partition, Propaganda, Covert Operations* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2024).
[493] Ute Frevert, *The Power of Emotions: A History of Germany from 1900 to the Present* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).
[494] "ФУЗИОН," accessed March 17, 2026, https://fusion-festival.de/en; Markus Pettelkau, "DDR-Oldtimer in Finowfurt – Erschwerte Anfahrt," *Märkische Oderzeitung*, April 24, 2025.
[495] For example, the 2002 films "Resident Evil" and "The Pianist" were partially shot at former Soviet military sites in Potsdam and Beelitz, "Resident Evil (2002) - Filming & Production - IMDb," accessed March 28, 2026, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120804/locations/; "The Pianist (2002) - Filming & Production - IMDb," accessed March 28, 2026, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0253474/locations/.
[496] "Bernau Panzer Kaserne — Abandoned Berlin," accessed March 17, 2026, https://www.abandonedberlin.com/photos2/bernau-panzer-kaserne.
[497] The complex relationship that former Soviet military sites continue to have to this day in relation to their surrounding communities lends credence to the idea of these sites as "containers of memory" as Pierre Nohra has argued in *Conflicts and Divisions* (Columbia Univ. Press, 1996); See also Kristin Poling, *Germany's Urban*

Finally, the question remains to what extent the German-Soviet coexistence has shaped post-1994 political and cultural divides between former East and West Germany, particularly in attitudes toward Russia. While this lies beyond the scope of this dissertation, the analysis presented here lays the groundwork for future studies that examine the long-term afterlives of this relationship.

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