This thesis examines three aspects of humor in the German Democratic Republic (GDR): political jokes shared among the general population; three film comedies with varying political attitudes (Spur der Steine, 1966; Till Eulenspiegel, 1975; Hasenherz; 1987) from the DEFA studio; and the 1961, 1968 and 1987 volumes of the East German satire magazine Eulenspiegel. These examinations involve textual analysis of the primary sources and supplemental information from secondary scholarship.

These sources represent a cynicism that permeated the attitudes of many individuals involved in the GDR's political process and everyday life. Humor provided an outlet for stresses caused by the GDR's oppression and inefficiencies. The various forms through which humor was transmitted reflected a complex mixture of individual motivations. Because formal media was created and published by the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED), these individual motivations often collided and interacted with the goals of the party leadership. The SED even tried to wield humor as a tool to advance its goals, but the results were deeply conflicted.
For Sarah, who has vowed never to read this.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to my graduate committee, Dr. Beth Griech-Polelle, Dr. Ted Rippey, Dr. Doug Forsyth and Dr. Geoff Howes for their advice, constructive comments and suggestions. Thanks to Dr. Randall Bytwerk, who was kind enough to let me camp out in a conference room and photograph his old magazines. Thanks to Lisa Lamson for her advice and comments and to the Jerome Library staff for helping me track things down. Finally, thanks to my wife Sarah for putting up with this.

-BH
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CHAPTER ONE

The German Democratic Republic (GDR) occupied a strange space along the political and cultural fault-lines of twentieth-century Europe. The Soviet Union's leaders chose German socialists to erect a new state amidst the ruins of the Third Reich. This state, along with its western counterpart, struggled to place itself within a somewhat paradoxical cultural context. The Nazis had co-opted and politicized much of German history and culture as part of their nationalist narrative. The leaders of the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Socialist Unity Party, or SED) vocally rejected fascism and all of its traits, real or imagined. At the same time, though, the party took similar measures to the Nazis in attempting to control the output of individuals in its creative industries. It funded theater, film, literature and periodicals and held power over the means of publishing and distribution. It attempted to put East Germany in a cultural context of the international Marxist-Leninist movement while still connecting to a more distant German cultural heritage.

The SED recognized the importance of language in attempting to establish its legitimacy with and its control over the GDR's population. However, even in a totalitarian state, the language produced by state entities constitutes only a fraction of the words and ideas exchanged amongst the populace. There are a whole array of interactions that exist outside of the state's purview. These include private conversations with family and trusted friends and the sharing of jokes at the SED's expense. The Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (Stasi) tried to police unofficial speech with electronic surveillance and numerous informants among the GDR's citizens, but private communications still existed to some extent. In examining discourses within a society as a whole, it is important not to focus solely on interactions between state and individuals, but also to evaluate private language as much as is possible.
Private language, though, does not nearly encompass all sources of humor within a society as a whole, even within the GDR, a land run by the ultimate convergence of the stereotypically humorless: a totalitarian socialist party made up of Germans. In fact, there was much state-produced humor within the GDR. Individuals were paid by the state to produce comedy and satire in various media, but their products did not always reflect such a close relationship to party leadership. Cultural ministers and censors were heavily involved in the production of such humor, and so there were few products (especially few films, as they were a major investment of time and money) that ended up overtly critical of the SED. In comedy, however, there is much room for ambiguity and multiple meanings, and so the SED's official media had potential to subvert the party's goals.

In this thesis, I intend to evaluate the nature and social functions of humor from various sources within the GDR. These sources range in origin and intent from subversive jokes shared privately amongst individuals to propagandistic satire intended to reinforce the SED's political message. I will attempt to answer the following questions: What were the goals of the people who created these forms of humor? What forms did humor take when intended to subvert state language, to reinforce it, or neither? A more subjective and secondary goal is to answer these questions while, as much as possible, leaving the “soul” of the humor intact. Many analyses of humor and comedy, in the process of gaining understanding about the subject matter, kill the jokes entirely. Some academic editors of joke collections have decided cheekily to avoid commenting at all on the subject matter for this reason.¹

Official Language

Marxist-Leninist socialism, like many extremist or revolutionary movements, relied

¹ Galnoor, No Laughing Matter, xiii.
heavily on its ability to persuade individuals of its importance and correctness. With established power structures in place, party leadership was able to put immense effort into controlling public discourse and curtailing free speech that could introduce subversive ideas. The state controlled newspapers and broadcasts, textbooks and public education, and, to some extent, entertainment and cultural works. The “private sphere,” delineated by Jürgen Habermas as interactions with family, friends and home, was limited further by the intrusions of the Stasi (and even the threat of such) into private life. The limitation of speech made government propaganda more effective, but there was no way to totally eliminate individual critical thinking and gut feelings that could find holes in logic and argue the points made in speeches and newspapers.

The East German state based its official language on that of the Soviet Union, which was in turn based heavily on the quotations and ideas of its intellectual forefathers, Marx and Lenin. A famous critique of Marxist-Leninist language, as well as the cynical language of capitalist-leaning governments, emerged in popular culture with George Orwell's 1948 novel *1984*. The government in the novel, to help maintain control, creates “Newspeak,” a language whose intention is to eliminate nuance and ambiguity. Orwell, writing in the shadow of World War II and all of its propagandistic maneuvering, imagines a world where similar rival states wage war merely to maintain control over their own populations. John Young compares Orwell's Newspeak to the official language of totalitarian governments throughout the twentieth century. More importantly, he outlines the goals of those who shaped this official language and what effect real-

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2 Gregor Benton writes that “dictatorship is a necessary condition for a flourishing political humour, but not all dictatorships produce one ... Most military regimes depend on brute force to achieve their political ends, and have no concern to 'reshape society's spirit' or 'create a new man'. However barbarous in other ways they are seldom able to subject people to the spiritual meddling that characterises more subtle repressive systems.” “The Origins of the Political Joke,” in *Humour in Society: Resistance and Control*, edited by Chris Powell and George Paton, (New York: St. Martin's, 1988).

3 See Habermas, Jürgen, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989.) His concept of the “public sphere,” however, does not hold up as well within totalitarian societies.
life forms of organized Newspeak can have.

Young identifies a strain of similarity among the languages of communist dictatorships throughout the world. He argues,

The language of ‘orthodox’ communism ... has three related functions. First, it is supposed to fan mass enthusiasm for Communist parties and their policies. Second, it is supposed to distort reality—or, which is all the same, to impose on the popular mind what the Soviets call a Marxist-Leninist *mirovozzreniye* or world outlook. Finally, the language of orthodox communism is intended to foster in those who speak it and are exposed to it incessantly an uncritical intellect, a reduced mental condition in which they can do little more than assent to their complete domination by the state.  

These governments did not necessarily succeed in all of these goals, but the structure of language certainly has an effect on how individuals are able to express themselves. An important part of determining whether the goals of totalitarian language are successful is to examine the interrelationship between language and thought. It is very hard to argue that language determines thought—or the reverse—absolutely. Language can shape our communicative abilities, certainly, and that can be its own form of control. The “language of orthodox communism” was far from a perfect tool, however. Lenin and Stalin had not forged an entirely new language of socialism, but based their official platitudes and falsehoods on the already-existing Russian language. Even if the schools taught a modified version of Russian or German or any other language, the Newspeak was merely superimposed on the existing structure of a language that still existed in its own right. It would take many generations of concentrated effort (Orwell describes Newspeak as a continuous project) to fully alter the language to fit the goals of a totalitarian state.

The SED did certainly put great effort into shaping language to its purposes. Newspapers, speeches and schools all worked in concert to put forward the SED's version of reality.

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4 John Young, *Totalitarian Language*, 126.
5 Ibid., 13.
“Orthodox communist German,” however, was bombarded from the West by broadcasts from the Federal Republic of Germany. It was impossible to entirely shape this language to the SED’s purposes, because there was a larger population next door that spoke the same language without as much state intervention.

The language forms that resulted from totalitarian meddling often severed words from their traditional meanings or from the concrete reality that they described. The party masked the meaning of words through euphemisms, numerous acronyms and slogans. It elided complexity in favor of black vs. white simplifications. “For the committed Communist it is not plurality but duality that governs the globe.”6 Politically significant words were often simplified in definition. Young writes, for example, that “peace” only had one narrow definition in Soviet dictionaries, “The absence of war or armed conflict between people of States.”7 I will examine many instances of this oversimplification in my Chapter 4 analysis of Eulenspiegel magazine. Oversimplification is common in almost any political party, as complex messages have to be packed into simple utterances for mass consumption. However, totalitarian governments differ in their unified commitment to the charade. Despite all the effort put into developing a language that coincided with the SED’s version of reality, it was very difficult to stamp out citizens' abilities to determine obvious falsehoods, and this was a large portion of the failure of orthodox socialist language. Young argues: “The great weakness of totalitarian language, it turns out, is that it too often ignores or misinterprets the 'solid world' where 'stones are hard, water is wet, objects unsupported fall toward the earth's center.’”8 This fundamental deception made such language especially ripe for parody, as I explain further in Chapter 2. Even for those who were able to reject the falsehoods of official language, however, this linguistic training could have insidious

6 Ibid., 137.
7 Ibid., 189.
8 Ibid., 231.
effects.

The socialist language that Young analyzes was especially prevalent in training young citizens of the GDR. John Rodden, in his book *Textbook Reds*, describes pedagogical methods that reinforced the language of newspapers and politicians. For example, a GDR textbook's section on quadratic equations begins with: “The socialist camp is equipped with the best defensive weapons. These modern fighter bombers of the NVA can fly with the speed of supersonic planes.” The image of socialist superiority and militarism in these textbooks is both exhaustive and exhausting. More importantly, though, GDR citizens emerged from school feeling as if they had not been given the tools to think on their own. Rodden interviews many East Germans about their educational experience. One teacher shared her frustrations in a 1994 conversation:

I had no open debate in my studies, only [Marxism-Leninism.] We were fed teachers' opinions and the verdicts of authorities. I learned to cite authorities—a Party document, a state official, a Marxist touchstone— as proof and defense of all positions ... Even after Prague, I never met a critical thinker. I never learned how to do that, I never encountered anybody who was doing it.

Even after German reunification, she sees troubles stemming from this indoctrination: “And [teachers] still feel self-constrained and are biased against critical thinking, which really starts with what the Party called 'self-criticism.' But 'self-criticism' for us was really an apologia to the Party for individualistic excesses.” Not all the interviews reflect such a strong feeling of having been handicapped; in fact one student recalls the teachers at her school ignored the state prescriptions whenever they could. Even so, the ubiquity of state speech meant that thoughts could even be shaped in cases where individuals disagreed with the state. Young cites interviews...

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10 Ibid., 200-201.
11 Ibid., 245.
with refugees from socialist countries in the 1950s and 1960s, which “revealed that although these expatriates were generally and in some cases vehemently opposed to the government of their homeland, many of them tended to think and express themselves, often unaware that they were doing so, in the categories and in the terminology of Marxism-Leninism or Maoism.” These and numerous other examples make it clear that orthodox socialist language could at least hobble the abilities of detractors to refute the state's claims.

Any critical or analytical thought that ran counter to the official version of reality had to come from the GDR's diminished private sphere: from risky interactions with family and friends or from within an individual's own mind. Few who grew up in the GDR or under the Nazis, however, had been taught the skills to identify fallacies or valid evidence. Lacking these skills, however, did not preclude the ability to identify blatant falsehood. Humor could act as a way to criticize the official language that joke-tellers of all educational levels widely rejected in private, without the need for the disciplined critique that comes from critical thinking. A person who is not able to adequately articulate the reasons why a speech sounds wrong can still make, laugh at, or tell a joke that highlights the speech's unreality.

It must be noted, of course, that there was no monolithic “state” that pitted itself solely against its own people. To believe that would be to fall into the line of thinking that may as well come from a socialist dictionary (or from the GDR's Cold War rivals; binary thinking is a trap that catches many). Mary Fulbrook's social history, *The People's State*, fills in many of the complex contours of the relationship between the SED and the everyday life of people in the GDR. She argues for complexity and nuance, noting that the SED was made up of real humans:

The exercise of power was in many areas both far more multifaceted and complex, and also less sinister and repressive, than totalitarian theorists would have us believe. The

“state” or the “regime” was not a unitary actor, which simply did (mostly nasty) things to the ill-defined, undifferentiated mass of “the people.” There were clearly hugely repressive and utterly reprehensible aspects of the SED regime; but there were also areas in which thousands of citizens cooperated and felt they were able to pursue common goals and ideals ... A very small ruling elite, with a linked apparatus of repression and injustice, was supported and sustained by a very much larger number of people who played key roles in trying, under exceedingly difficult circumstances, to build a better society, or at least to make the best of the present ...

The primary sources I draw from in this thesis reflect that the GDR was made up of individuals who had their own ideas, goals and ways of expressing themselves, albeit in restricted circumstances. Private jokes and films especially were shaped by the creative impulses of individuals, and could serve as outlets for subversive thought. Even many of those whose work served the controlling wishes of the state could hold, and sometimes express, ideas that countered the leadership's wishes. A state whose bureaucracy worked toward totalitarian control still had room for dissenting voices and thoughts, even from many who worked as part of the state's apparatus.

Undermining the official language was not a habit that was without risk, however. The Stasi had a wide network of informants and electronic surveillance that formed a wall against the spread of free and subversive speech. The shapers of official language began the restriction by attempting to change definitions and to narrow meanings, and this was reinforced by fear. A certain amount of criticism was allowed, but only in certain well-defined circumstances. For example, private citizens sent their complaints, called *Eingaben*, up the political ladder, expecting change (I discuss this in Chapter 2). In addition, the state-run satire magazine *Eulenspiegel* was allowed to criticize certain difficulties of life in the GDR, but these jabs had to be localized and very specific. Overall condemnations of the socialist system could be met with jail time, no matter the circumstance.

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Theories of Humor and Cynicism

Many disciplines have analyzed humor through their own specific lenses, and each has its characteristic assumptions about what is important in humor. Jerry Palmer describes various lenses through which scholars can look at humor:

Those disciplines based on textual commentary—literary criticism or film studies, for example—tend to proceed on the basis that there is some feature of texts which is responsible for humour. Psychologists look for mental processes involved in the production or reception of humour, sociologists and anthropologists look at the social processes within which it occurs.  

An essential part of humor lies in incongruity. This much, at least, most scholars agree on. In simple joke form, the setup implies one reality, but the punchline introduces another that goes counter to expectations. A visual illustration of comedy's incongruity, seen in countless cartoon chase scenes, features a many-doored hallway and two characters engaged in a chase. The first character (let us call him Bugs) tries to evade the second character (let us call him Elmer) by running into one of the doors. The rational expectation would be for Bugs to come out of the same door, but he leaves a door on the opposite side of the hallway. Often this becomes the new “expected,” which is also broken up by the unexpected. Bugs could suddenly be chasing Elmer. A third party could join the chase without explanation. This is a simple illustration of how humor introduces concepts of alternate realities. Such a proliferation of alternative possibilities can be dangerous to any state with totalitarian goals. The state's view of reality is meant to be the only reality possible, but at the same time is known by many to be as cartoonishly false and inconsistent as Bugs and Elmer's chase.

A good deal of humor's impact is contextual. There are certain circumstances in which humor is seen as more acceptable, or in which situations are more easily seen as humorous.

Going to see a comedian, for example, can shape expectations and make a person more apt to laugh. Palmer attributes much of what makes something funny to the context: “We have seen in many clowning ceremonies and reciprocal joking relationships activities are performed which under other circumstances would be grossly offensive; here there can be little doubt that ... the occasion acts as a cue.”\(^{15}\) The context of humor can depend on personal relationships, moods, or events. The Medieval carnival provided an alternate space for merriment outside of the everyday, with a different set of rules. Similarly, a present-day comedy club can be a separate space in which the expectations of the audience and the context of the performance space blur lines that would, in other contexts, more clearly separate humor from rudeness, paranoia, sarcasm or madness.

Because the element of the unexpected is crucial to humor, jokes and other forms of comedy can lose their impact quickly when repeated. Even when the surprise is gone, however, humorous language can still be appreciated and can still fulfill many social purposes. People who have heard a joke or seen a movie before may still appreciate the craft put into the joke's construction or delivery. When jokes are also loaded with a taboo element, as they were in East Germany and other socialist countries, individuals can also take pleasure in joke-telling as the repeated transgression of rules or as an enjoyable way to spend an evening. Alexei Yurchak writes of Soviet joke-tellers, “People took part in the reeling out [joke-telling sessions] not only to hear new jokes, or any particular type of jokes, but to participate in this enjoyable collective ritual itself ...” He goes on to cite a joke that exaggerates a joke-telling ritual:

> To be able to 'reel out' more *anekdoty* per evening, a group of friends had them numbered. When in the evening members of the group got together, one started with 'number 15,' and everyone laughed. Another person added 'number 74' and everyone laughed again. But when the third one said 'number 108' there was a long silent pause, and then one man

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 51.
said in embarrassment: 'How could you tell that one in front of the ladies?'

Jokes as a medium of humor in the GDR were fairly unique in their repeatability. Films were limited to cinemas and television, and periodicals were replaced by the next week's or month's issue, but jokes could be repeated over and over.

Much of the humor that was used to subvert state speech could be labeled as cynical. Cynicism is an important part of humor, but it does not necessarily need to be humorous. It is an attitude or a worldview that shapes many human behaviors, but which can often be expressed truthfully through humor. Peter Sloterdijk offers an important theoretical conception of cynicism in his *Critique of Cynical Reason*. He contrasts a modern cynicism, which he defines as “enlightened false consciousness,” with a more ancient form, for which he uses a Greek formulation, “kynicism.”

Although cynicism is usually thought of as an individual attitude, Sloterdijk describes it as the prevailing attitude of *states* run by cynical individuals in the twentieth century. His views of modern cynicism are explicitly shaped by the major political upheavals of the twentieth century: “There can be no healthy relation of modern-day enlightenment to its own history without sarcasm.” That is to say, the knowledgeable people of the “enlightened” countries responsible for mustard gas, Auschwitz, Dresden, Nanking, Hiroshima, gulags and the Iron Curtain cannot maintain a public stance of moral superiority without inward contradictions about moral discourse. The acts that twentieth-century states perpetrated often violated the core principles their leaders and founders had professed, and the conscientious individuals within those states had to deal with these contradictions in some way.

Cynicism could be imagined, then, as a sort of scar tissue on the injuries the World Wars and the

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16 Yurchak, *Everything was Forever...*, 275. Another version of this joke has a somewhat less sexist explanation for the awkward silence: “Puzzled, he asks his neighbour [sic] what he did wrong. 'Nothing,' he says. 'It's just the way you tell them.'” Galnoor, *No Laughing Matter*, 7-8.
17 Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 5.
18 Ibid., 6.
atomic bomb had opened in these countries' conceptions of enlightened morality.

Mary Fulbrook, in different terms, applies modern contradictory cynicism directly to the workings of the GDR:

It was possible both to have participated in the structures of power, and yet simultaneously to have been openly critical of the regime—even well before 1989. It was possible both to have participated in the structures of power, and still not have been part of the ruling elite. It was possible, in other words, to have occupied a position that was simultaneously located in 'state' and 'society: in the extended 'societal state,' a system sustained through myriad micro-relationships of extended power and authority, the dichotomy between 'state' and 'society' simply does not hold up; the battle lines are more complex and difficult to delineate.19

What Fulbrook describes, especially with the contradictory first example, coincides with Sloterdijk's philosophy of cynicism. Orwell also described this contradictory phenomenon with his concept of “doublethink.” In the world he describes, moralism is paradoxically a negative force, and amoralism, “although it acts so foolishly or sinisterly, elevates morale considerably … We have gone so far that happiness seems politically indecent to us.”20 How can a bureaucrat, in the GDR or anywhere, function officially in a way that is contrary to his or her personal beliefs and yet be satisfied with that situation?

To demonstrate an opposing force to modern cynicism, Sloterdijk reaches back to the kynical attitude of Diogenes of Sinope, whom he subtitles: “Human Dog, Philosopher, Good-for Nothing.”21 This hardly sounds like the description of a moral compass. But according to Sloterdijk, the modern moral compass has no true north. Diogenes represents a different moral vector. He knows what is false and does what he can to undermine it, never asking for agreement or imitation. “He is only impressed by characters whose presence of mind, quick wit, alertness, and independent feeling toward life are a match for his.”22 Diogenes had disdain for pretense and

19 Mary Fulbrook, The People's State, 236.
20 Peter Sloterdijk, Critique of Cynical Reason, 126.
21 Ibid., 156.
22 Ibid., 157.
dismissed it with humor and spontaneity. He famously lived in a large jar or tub, free of wants. Kynics, following Diogenes' example, use “a subversive variant of low theory that pantomimically and grotesquely carries practical embodiment to an extreme.” A kynic's only response to the cynicism seen in public life is to mock it in the most cutting way possible. They defy and mock normal standards of behavior to highlight the moral failings of these standards, as I will further highlight in my Chapter 3 examination of the film *Till Eulenspiegel*. Sloterdijk has no illusions of good old days before modern cynicism, but points out with the examples of many popular Medieval rascals that “only in the last few centuries has the word 'cheeky' (*frech*) gained a negative connotation.”

Sloterdijk sees kynicism as a way out of cynicism, but certainly no cure-all. It involves an abandonment of all morality and all pretense of morality, for moralism has become the territory of cynicism. He quotes Walter Benjamin's definition of happiness: “‘To be happy means to be able to look into oneself without being frightened.' Where does our readiness to be frightened come from? Fright, is, I think, the shadow of moralism and of denial, which together cripple the capacity for happiness.” Kynicism rejects the pretense of moralist systems and their enforcers, but it is a destructive force. For him, happiness requires a great sacrifice. Kynicism offers no alternative except freedom from self-doubt.

Mikhail Bakhtin examined a similar way around everyday ennui and morality: the Medieval carnival. As I mentioned above, the carnival was a period of time where normal rules did not apply, or were turned inside out. Bakhtin writes:

In carnival everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act. Carnival is not contemplated, and strictly speaking, not performed; its participants live in it ... All distance is suspended, and a special carnival category goes into effect: *free and familiar contact among*
people ... People who in life are separated by impenetrable hierarchical barriers enter into free familiar contact on the carnival square.\textsuperscript{26}

Sloterdijk’s kynicism resembles Bakhtin’s conception of carnival, but kynicism extends beyond the celebration into the everyday. The cathartic rewards are very similar. Inhibition and self-doubt disappear and behavior patterns change. Carnival, however, has its own rules and rituals, a code of behavior that counters and replaces the everyday, where kynicism offers none. Carnival exists within a society just as much as it exists outside of it. In addition, Carolyn Shields writes, “Bakhtin suggests that ritual acts remind us that both individuals and structures are relative and transitory.” Making a comparison to crowning and decrowning ceremonies, she continues: “In the inauguration ceremony for a new American president, one is always aware that a new election will occur in four years ... Bakhtin, though, goes further. He argues that carnival and its ritual acts are reminders that structures themselves are also relative and transitory.”\textsuperscript{27} Mocking and laughter were parts of these rituals. The laughter of the carnival, she paraphrases, “excludes all one-sidedness and dogmatism. It is not an 'individual reaction to some isolated comic event' but rather a 'festive laughter.'”\textsuperscript{28} This laughter, like humor as a general concept, is very complex in its shades of meaning and ambiguity. In a reflection of this ambiguity, the carnival and kynicism require both detachment from and connection to existing social and political structures.

Kynical humor, with its good-natured destruction of pretense, was sometimes present in the satirical twists of political jokes, but the act of joking itself fits more on the cynical side of Sloterdijk's terminology. Jokes shared in private pointed out contradictions and suggested alternate possibilities, but were the opposite of Diogenes' open-air mockery. It was politically impossible for most to follow Diogenes' example and live outside of and thumb their noses at the

\textsuperscript{26} Carolyn Shields, \textit{Bakhtin Primer}, (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 99.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 119.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 121
state, economy and society. The GDR's citizens were both dependent on the often-incompetent economic support of the state and fearful of the consequences of rejecting its ideology. The one-sided, utopian communist language and the state's enforcement precluded public, carnival-esque events. Kynical subversion tackles problems head-on and with little regard for consequences, as the famed wise fool Eulenspiegel does when tricking princes and emperors. This sort of behavior was, of course, dangerous. At first glance, it seems all that most dissenting GDR citizens could safely dare was to relieve stress by quietly subverting official language in private. In my examination of diverse modes of humor within the GDR, I will attempt to evaluate by what means its individuals were able to relieve stress and negotiate their attitudes toward the contradictions that surrounded them.

Conclusion: Goals and Limitations

Due to limitations of this project, I do not analyze in depth other media through which humor and political satire could be conveyed. Music is one medium that was very important to the cultural landscape of the GDR, especially in the blacklisting and eventual forced exile of socialist folk-singer Wolf Biermann. Live public performances of music and stage productions were full of opportunities to introduce humorous asides or ambiguities. For cabaret and burlesque shows, scripts also had to be approved, but performers sometimes deviated from the party line, especially in small venues where the audience was limited. They could not be subject to the same controls as film or print media because the final product was not an artifact that could be rejected or altered. The final product of live performance is ephemeral and not subject to total approval by state censors.

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29 In the demonstrations of Fall 1989 this subversive humor bubbled to the surface in the form of slogans and banners. This only happened, though, after cracks had begun to show in the authoritative power of the GDR. See Kerry Riley, *Everyday Subversion: From Joking to Revolting in the German Democratic Republic*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2008), 203-282 for examples of this more revolutionary language. 30 Bytwerk, *Bending Spines*, 118-119.
Another medium that I will not be able to address is the inside joke. As I argue throughout this thesis, context is an essential part of understanding humor. In fact, sometimes context is the entire basis of the humor. These jokes arise in what Elliott Oring calls “dyadic traditions:” close friendships or romantic relationships in which the two members share many experiences. These jokes are very informal and unpredictable, and often refer back to a shared experience. In a way most of the political jokes featured here are inside jokes; they were shared among people who had the common experience of life within a socialist state. Intimate jokes that referenced smaller shared experiences, however, are harder to find and even harder to contextualize. It is certain that such jokes existed in the GDR, and that some of them expressed attitudes toward the state, but the collection of such intimate inside jokes would involve probing oral history interviews, and even those would be problematic. Oring mentions that these joking relationships “can spring into existence and disappear in relatively short periods of time,” and often can be seemingly forgotten until the situation is appropriate for a specific joke. Although inside jokes are a fascinating social phenomenon that occurs when two individuals are most comfortable with each other, it is impractical to work with them as a historian.

In the following chapters, my aim is to use a framework informed by Young, Fulbrook and Sloterdijk, among others, to compare diverse sources of humorous expression in the German Democratic Republic. I will examine the motivations of individual actors to create and spread humor that made points for and against the state, as well as toward improvement of the state. I will be mindful of totalitarian forces and their balance with individual mindsets and decisions. In addition, I will attempt to determine how instances of humor compare to Sloterdijk's concepts of cynicism and kynicism.

32 Ibid., 139-140.
In Chapter 2, I examine private political jokes that individuals shared within their diminished private spheres. These jokes had many targets, including material shortages, the GDR's status as a satellite nation, political leaders, the police, and the state's bureaucracy and language. In Chapter 3, I analyze three comic films from the GDR's film studio, which was commonly known as DEFA. These are: Spur der Steine (A Trace of Stones), a 1965 film that was banned for criticisms of the state; Till Eulenspiegel, a filthy 1975 homage to one of Germany's most famous folk heroes; and Hasenherz (Rabbit-heart), a 1987 children's coming-of-age comedy. In Chapter 4, I examine the GDR's only publication devoted to satire, a weekly magazine called Eulenspiegel—also named after the Medieval mischief-maker. This publication was full of interesting contrasts and contradictions in tone and style. With the sources arranged in such a way, the chapters will progress from individual subversive humor toward forms that it was easier for the state to influence and guide. Finally, my conclusion reviews the humor content of the previous chapters with more emphasis on its interaction with the ideas outlined above.
CHAPTER TWO

POLITICAL JOKES: HUMOR DIRECTED AGAINST THE STATE

In totalitarian regimes throughout the twentieth century, the exercise of political humor could be punished severely and therefore had the immense attraction of forbidden fruit. The GDR's brand of political humor, like its repressive tactics, had roots in the first half of the twentieth century. The Soviet Union and the Third Reich had consolidated their power as Stalin and Hitler cracked down on dissidents and opposition. Through the wars and purges, however, citizens had cracked jokes in secret. In these cases, it is difficult to know exactly how widespread political joking was. The hobby was often necessarily a secret one. Humor was a weapon that could be used by individuals against the steamroller wit of the state, a weapon that could not be easily reappropriated by governments that led with inflexible, repetitive, soulless language.

Charles Schutz explains a key incompatibility of humor with extremist thought as well as a key reason that private jokes mattered on the political spectrum:

> The creative impulse of humor constantly generates alternative logics of political rule and ceaselessly challenges the conventional wisdom of even the sovereign people, and its psychology allows it the amused toleration of the court jester in the court of ever-arbitrary sovereignty. Thus, the critical realism of political humor balances the political regime toward the mean and away from the excesses of right or left.¹

It is understandable that leaders who wanted to defend a monopoly on political ideas would see the complexity and subtlety of humor to be a threat. In the Third Reich, the Soviet Union, and the Ostblock countries, intelligence and police forces indeed handled subversive humor seriously.

Comparative analysis of political jokes throughout the eastern bloc can be very valuable because jokes traveled quickly, like other black market items. The Soviet hegemony over the territories it had captured from Nazi Germany established a cultural and economic exchange that

¹ Schutz, Political Humor, 299.
served incidentally as a good way to transfer political jokes across allied borders. As the postwar
governments that had been installed by the Soviet Union mimicked its forms and spoke the
language of socialism, many of the jokes that mocked the Soviet Union could be easily modified
to fit in the GDR, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and others. Many of the jokes examined below had
localized counterparts adapted to different countries. As Kerry Riley puts it, they “did not belong
to one particular country, but to Eastern Europe as a whole.” Some jokes needed no localization,
however; the Soviet Union and the socialist system had been ingrained enough into common
knowledge to be a secondary target of political jokes throughout the eastern bloc. It was not
uncommon for jokes about the USSR, Stalin, and Khruschev to circulate in East Germany
alongside jokes that hit closer to home. “Radio Erevan” jokes, named after the capital of
Armenia, fit into this international category. They were popular jokes told in question and answer
form, with the answer purportedly coming from a radio station that almost unwittingly revealed
truths about socialist life. Only very specialized personal jokes or quips that depended on
wordplay in a certain language had a hard time traveling across borders.

Although the SED tried its hardest to deny continuity, the GDR inherited some traits from
its Nazi past. Many “whispered jokes” had circulated in private in the Third Reich, and many of
the less specific jokes were later adapted to the GDR’s circumstances. Both regimes restricted
free speech and punished political jokers, although the Nazis meted out more severe
punishments. They sent many jokers to concentration camps and even executed some offenders.
The SED was known to send offenders to jail as “enemies of the state,” but did not resort to such

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2 C. Banc and Alan Dundes offer an encyclopedic guide to comparing versions of political jokes from different
3 Kerry Riley, *Everyday Subversion: from joking to Revolting in the GDR*, (East Lansing: Michigan State
University Press, 2007), 58.
4 Rudolph Herzog, *Dead Funny*, 164.
It is difficult to discern or pin down exactly the diverse circumstances in which political jokes were told. The least risky way to share jokes was definitely in private and in person, where one could minimize the possibility of Stasi eavesdropping. Alexei Yurchak describes various expressions of humor and irony in the Soviet Union, ranging from bizarre performance art to satirical answers on official forms. More topicsly, he mentions a ritual that emerged between the 1960s and 1980s of sharing anekdoty in long, alcohol-fueled sessions. These sessions were called “reeling out jokes,” as if they were stored on a spool, with one joke pulling the next one along with it. Jokes became very numerous in this time period, and there was a seemingly permissive culture surrounding the ritual during late socialism: “Although it was inappropriate to engage in it during various formal interactions, professional or party meetings, outside of those contexts anekdoty were told relatively openly.” Kurt Hirche observes a similar rise in East German political jokes around 1960, citing the death of Stalin as a catalyst. He also writes that certain, relatively harmless jokes in East Germany could be told in public with little fear even then, though the attitude grew slightly more permissive with time.

Chapter 4's examination of Eulenspiegel magazine will illustrate better what types of jokes were considered less harmful, as the state-run publication, in specific, limited circumstances, entered some of the critical territory covered below. Political joke-telling in the GDR, as it was throughout the zone dominated by the USSR, was generally considered a risky pastime. The Stasi had many informants, and the threat of imprisonment added an element of extreme measures.

6 Alexei Yurchak, *Everything was Forever, Until it was no More*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 273.
7 Ibid., 274.
8 Kurt Hirche, *Der braune und der rote Witz* (Dusseldorf: Econ Verlag, 1964), 279.
9 Ibid., 281.
danger to these small exercises in free speech. As in other states that have been labeled “totalitarian,” political jokes in the GDR took on heightened social functions for their tellers and those they trusted enough to hear the jokes. The decision to tell a certain joke to a certain person has many factors, even in a country whose laws protect free speech. The teller might consider whether the audience would enjoy the joke, whether the social situation is right for its subject matter, whether the teller can do the joke justice. Telling any joke entails vulnerability, yet requires confidence. The teller must stake a bit of social capital in betting that he knows the audience well enough, or the joke is funny enough, that the audience will respond with laughter or enjoyment. In a state that punishes subversive acts, to forge a joking relationship heightens both the vulnerability of joke-telling and the confidence—in one's own perceptions and in the audience's trustworthiness—that is required. The teller not only wagers that the audience will laugh, but also that the audience will not inform on the teller, and the stakes are much higher than a momentary embarrassment. Successful joking relationships, in which the audience appreciated the jokes, created structures of trust that existed perpendicular to the state's attempts at control.

The state's pressures on free speech altered the situations in which jokes could be told prudently, and likewise the telling of political jokes resulted in a different set of social functions and benefits. A common term for a joke that could not be spoken to general audiences, a term that dated back at least to the Nazi regime, was “Flüsterwitz,” or “whispered joke.” Of course, not all literal Flüsterwitze were of a political nature: “Altogether there are far more jokes that are whispered and only told in the smallest of circles, which have nothing to do with politics but rather feature mostly erotic or scatological content.”\(^{10}\) Political jokes carried much more risk, of

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 19.
course, as purely dirty jokes did not convey subversive thought against the state. As I will demonstrate below, many of the Flüstertwitze made direct reference to the dangers of telling such jokes.

An important function of humor in almost any situation is the release of tension. There were few opportunities to reconcile tensions an individual might have in his or her relationship to the overbearing state, but there were some routes that the government encouraged. Mary Fulbrook examines a specific method of “letting off steam,” in which complaint letters directed to local or general party leadership, or Eingaben, voiced frustrations about many aspects of life in the GDR. These were established in the GDR's constitution for various reasons. Fulbrook sees the state's motivation as “the characteristic interplay of paternalistic concern with the well-being of citizens and the achievement of real social improvements on the one hand, and the preservation and propagation of the leading role of the party on the other.”¹¹ Like more humorous expressions of frustration, these Eingaben served a variety of social functions. Unlike political jokes, they were an established part of the GDR's governance and sometimes an optimistic attempt to get things done. As the state-run satire magazine Eulenspiegel, which will be discussed in Chapter 4, illustrated, specific complaints about housing conditions and consumables were acceptable ways to complain to the state, as they demonstrated hope—implicit or explicit—for conditions to improve within the current system. Eingaben were not all harmless, especially if the complainant crossed ideological boundaries in the letter, but most displayed, at least at face value, some sort of optimism. Fulbrook states it this way: “Improve or rectify this situation for me, and you will have improved the GDR as a whole.”¹²

Jokes were a more dangerous way to let off steam about political and material conditions.

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¹² Ibid., 287.
They performed this function perhaps more effectively than sending a letter of complaint, but did not carry the active expectation that conditions would improve. The act of making political jokes was by nature more cynical than optimistic. It can serve as an emotional substitute for seemingly-impossible improvement of a situation, however. Gallows humor has been well-documented, even among Jews in Nazi concentration camps. One joke goes, “Two Jews are waiting to face a firing squad, when the news arrives that they are to be hanged instead. One turns to the other and says: “You see—they've run out of ammunition!”’ Similarly, GDR joke-tellers touched heavily on areas where their human rights were compromised, specifically the restriction of freedom of movement and the restriction of free speech. While the general population in the GDR did not face a firing squad, very few political jokes expressed any sort of optimism about living conditions. The closest these jokes got to optimism was a leering cynicism, the attitude that shows the joke-teller understands a reality that exists outside the party line. It was an optimism only for the joke-teller's continued existence as an individual who was not hoodwinked by the newspapers and speeches.

There was an element of defiant danger in the context of political joke-telling that could heighten the experience. The risky nature of such a pastime ironically could create stress in the commission of an act that was meant to relieve stress or to function as a coping mechanism. Fear and laughter often have a paradoxically close relationship, and certain jokes reflected an acute awareness of this by mentioning within their text the consequences that could follow. The emotions of those who shared a joke could be assimilated or acknowledged within the joke to pull a greater sense of catharsis from the moment. The teller and his confidant were not merely laughing at a witty turn of phrase but laughing also at the socialist system, the state, and the

absence of their own human rights within that often-nonsensical system. Many of the jokes that referenced the GDR's police presence, discussed below, could create this conspiratorial tone.

The presentation of GDR jokes outside of their original context is problematic because so much of their significance lay in the context of these jokes within the lives of the tellers and their audience. This context also included the delivery of these jokes, comprised of wording, tone, timing and a number of other subtle factors. Any attempt to provide context to these jokes is necessarily a gross oversimplification because the circumstances of comedic moments are almost always different. Likewise, the impact of the jokes' delivery as a performance is lost here, not only because the delivery lives and dies in the moment, but also because of this medium's limitations.

Like all humor, political jokes take on a panoply of forms, which can be only loosely categorized by subject matter. Often the best jokes defy categorization by including and implying multiple layers of meaning, but for the sake of this project I have organized political jokes into the following nonexclusive groups: 1) material life and shortages; 2) state propaganda and bureaucratese; 3) public figures; 4) the police state; and 5) the GDR's status as a satellite nation. Many jokes show up in multiple forms throughout multiple sources; I have included the East German version when possible. This is by no means a comprehensive list, and a great many jokes fit into multiple categories, but a representative sample will serve to illustrate some of the varied structures and functions of political jokes shared in the GDR.

Material Life and Shortages

The planned economy of the GDR was notoriously inefficient in its effort to reliably produce and distribute goods. Given that this was the function of the state that most affected the day-to-day existence of its citizens, it is unsurprising that a very large portion of political jokes
from the GDR have to do with material life: food, clothing, housing, cars and the experience of shopping. The SED did invest a large amount of effort into improving the standard of living, especially in the modernization of housing. As the government was directly responsible for providing this standard of living, “keeping up with the Joneses” became an important part of the ideological battles of the Cold War. Mary Fulbrook addresses this reason, among others, for providing adequate housing:

Belief [on the part of operators within the SED] in the ideals of a decent life, in a basic minimum fulfillment of everyday needs, was genuine ... rooted in a real desire to better the lot of ordinary people ... When citizens are acutely aware—as they were in the GDR —of the fact that material conditions could be very much better under a different system, they will not continue to swallow promises of a better future if an alternative present becomes more readily available.\textsuperscript{14}

This aspect of the Cold War is often typified by the famous 1959 “Kitchen Debate” between then-Vice President Nixon and Khruschev in Moscow. The two discussed their countries' respective priorities in providing for the populace as they wandered through a model home outfitted with modern appliances.\textsuperscript{15} In an East Germany that was still recovering from the destruction of World War II, priorities lay less on washing machines and dishwashers and more on building housing that had indoor toilets and hot running water. The SED had put its population in a position of dependence for housing construction, and the state did not prove to be up to the task. Even by 1980, many were living in homes that did not have the most basic amenities or furnishings. Young couples were lucky to have their own housing at all.\textsuperscript{16}

The jokes that involved socialist housing referenced the shortage of living space in general and the overall shabbiness of the apartments almost everyone lived in. For example, one joke aimed eastward asked, “[Q] What nationality were Adam and Eve? [A] They were Russians,

\textsuperscript{14} Fulbrook, \textit{People's State}, 49-50.
\textsuperscript{16} Fulbrook, \textit{People's State}, 53.
naturally: they had nothing to wear. They had no house. And they believed themselves to be in Paradise.” 17 Despite the SED's attempts to reduce the influence of Christianity, many jokes had religious overtones. Even to nonbelievers, Adam and Eve—or St. Peter as the gatekeeper to heaven—were recognized as tropes that could be easily humorized.18 In this case, the Garden of Eden is shown in a different light. They wear nothing and live in the garden not because of God-given innocence, but because nothing is available to them. The joke twists the trope back around, however, by acknowledging the mythos of Adam and Eve's naivete. It draws another common thread to the socialist revolutionary movement: belief. The nominal goal of existing socialism was to reach a true communism, and the basis of this Marxist goal was a historical progression toward an end. Marxism/Leninism was a belief system. In some cases the SED attempted to supplant religion's role, including the composition of “Ten Commandments of Socialist Morality.”19 The joke lampoons socialism for its failure to provide, but what cuts deeper is the rejection of the idea, the faith, that it was progressing toward something better. For an informed non-believer in both Christianity and Marxism, the connections would have been especially clear.

Many other jokes made light of the inconstant supply of food and other consumables. Bananas were an especially rare item, and this joke puts shortages in a unique perspective: “Did you know they've installed banana machines in Alexanderplatz now? When you put in a banana at the top, two marks come out at the bottom.”20 The initial surprise is that there would be a

18 Religious tropes were also facile tools for state propaganda in Eulenspiegel magazine. Its cartoonists often added demonic horns to characterize their Western counterparts.
20 “Weißt du, das jetzt am Alex Bananenautomaten aufgestellt werden? Wenn de oben 'ne Banane reinsteckt, kommen unten zwei Mark raus.” Ibid., 135.
banana machine at all in East Berlin—all impracticality of banana dispensing aside. Bananas and other tropical products were famously scarce within the GDR. This strange situation is quickly reconciled with the reality of the GDR's economy by the insulting proposition of giving up a banana for a measly two marks. Another joke makes a logical jump by normalizing short supplies of foodstuffs.

A customer comes into a large food store and asks at a counter, 'Have you got any caviar?'
'Sorry,' says the assistant, 'we are the department where there is no meat. Over there is the department where they haven't got any caviar.'

The store seemingly contains nothing a shopper would want, served with a side of nonsensical bureaucracy. The assistant makes it seem like empty shelves are the normal state of being for a store, but ducks any responsibility here by making it clear that his department is not responsible for not having caviar. This can also imply a wider rejection of the state's empty promises.

Another joke displays a common thread that runs through much political humor: a witty, sarcastic everyman who is willing to ask hard questions and openly defy authority.

Party meeting. The speaker outlines the prospects: "In five years at the latest," he says, "we will have assured the sustenance of the population." Suddenly a loud voice comes from the back of the hall: "And when will there be toilet paper?"
"In ten years," continues the speaker, "there will be an auto in every household."
The voice from the back: "And what about the toilet paper?"
"In twenty years," continues the speaker, "all of us will have houses."
"And the toilet paper?"
"Listen here, you in the back!," says the speaker, "You can kiss my ass!"
"But comrade," comes the reply, "that is only a temporary solution."

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22 Parteiversammlung. Der Referent erläutert die Perspektive: "In spätestens fünf Jahren", sagt er, "wird die Versorgung der Bevölkerung sichergestellt sein."
Plötzlich eine laute Stimme, von ganz hinten aus dem Saal: "Und wann gibt es Klopapier?"
"In zehn Jahren", fährt der Referent fort, "wird es in jedem Haushalt ein Auto geben."
Stimme von hinten: "und was ist mit dem Klopapier?"
"In zwanzig Jahren", fährt der Referent fort, "wird jeder von uns ein Haus haben."
"Und das Klopapier?!"
"Also pass mal auf, Du da hinten!", sagt der Referent, "du kannst mich mal am Arsch lecken!"
The “everyman” character who gets all the good punchlines in public places lets a repressed population live vicariously through their jokes. Such wit represented what people perhaps wished to say in public, but saved for their most private conversations. Speaking of privacy, toilet paper was a popular subject for joke-tellers, as it combined the scatological with the mundane—its existence as a consumable product that one had to track down. Many referenced a resourceful tactic people used, killing two birds with one stone, when faced with a shortage of toilet paper and an abundantly available, untrustworthy newspaper.

The famously terrible Trabant auto was the butt of many jokes in the GDR. The barriers to ownership were almost insurmountable, it was tiny, flimsy and weak, and it was the only vehicle available to the general populace. Since the reunification of Germany, the “Trabi” has become a totem of Ostalgie, a persistent, kitschy nostalgia for East German material culture. One joke contrasts the Trabi with the American auto industry, which, when the Trabant was released in 1957, was producing comparatively massive machines. “A somewhat eccentric American orders a Trabi from the GDR. One day it arrives. On the next day he sends the GDR's Foreign Trade Ministry the following telegram: "Thanks a lot for the model. I can't wait for the car."23 Trabi jokes abound (and so do jokes about the other eastern bloc car companies), but those seeking any mechanical parts were liable to run into similar difficulties:

The People's Bicycle Factory in Dresden is celebrating its twentieth anniversary. The Director gives a speech. He congratulates the workforce, which has trebled in size since the factory opened. He welcomes representatives of the Party, the Government and the Volksarmee. Finally, with considerable emotion, he brings on to the stage the factory's very first customer—an old man who, twenty years ago, brought a bicycle chain

"Aber Genosse", kommt die Antwort, "das ist doch auch nur eine Zwischenlösung." de Wroblewsky, Wo wir sind, 10. For another version see Drozdzynski, Alexander, Der politische Witz im Ostblock, (Dusseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1974), 182.

in for repair. Ushered to the microphone, the old man expresses his heartfelt thanks for the honour done to him. Concluding his little speech, he turns to the director: 'There's just one more thing, Comrade. Could you tell me when my bicycle chain will be ready for collection?'

This joke features a different kind of everyman, one more representative of most people's reality than the party meeting joker. Depending on interpretation, either the old man is a loyalist of quixotic proportion or he feigns gratefulness, plays along with the elaborate celebration, and complains politely, gently. In doing so, he minimizes the chance of an adverse reaction to his probably futile complaint. A bicycle chain, after all, is not worth imprisonment.

Jokes about material culture were very popular, as the audience needed only the slightest understanding of SED politics to laugh at the shortages that affected everyone. Many were a condemnation of the GDR's way of doing business—see the overblown celebration at the bicycle factory—but a large number stemmed mostly from sheer frustration at the unavailability of goods. The banana machine implies backwardness, but there is an element of resignation to this and many other complaints about material life.

State Bureaucracy and "Newspeak"

A second major type of political joke mocked the profusion of bureaucracy and inefficiency in the GDR, and the abstract, almost meaningless language that described its history and workings. This theme showed up to some extent in a wide range of jokes that can be seen among the other categories, but it was also the sole basis for many. The language structures of the SED were, understandably, closely modeled on the Marxist-Leninist language of the Soviet Union. What Young terms the “language of 'orthodox communism'—the communism exemplified by Lenin and Stalin's Russia, Mao's China, Castro's Cuba, Honecker's Germany,”

25 John Young, Totalitarian Language, 126.
was intended to shape citizens into pliable, unquestioning tools of the state. The goals of this language, however, were undermined by the wide and obvious gap between its intentions and reality. The SED's “Newspeak” was transparently false in many cases. For example, the party labeled the Berlin Wall, whose purpose was eminently clear, the “Anti-Fascist Protective Wall.”

One purpose of jokes that parroted this language was an implicit rejection of its duplicity. The joke-teller could separate himself symbolically from the language seen in newspapers and heard in speeches by pointing out its faults and idiosyncrasies.

The rejection of pervasive communist language was a proof that many minds could not be so simply won. However, the secretive act of joking reinforced the fact that a free mind did not approximate free speech. The restrictions of allowed public language were obviously a strain on a profession that thinks for a living:

The Six Commandments of a writer in a communist country:
1. Don't think.
2. If you do think, don't talk.
3. If you do talk, don't write it down.
4. If you do write it, don't publish it.
5. If you do publish it, don't sign it.
6. If you do sign it, write a denial.

The act of writing, in the premise of this joke, is separate from the act of thinking. To be an accepted and successful writer in the GDR, one had to self-censor to some extent. Christa Wolf “spoke of the 'mechanism of self-censorship' as more dangerous than the official censor, 'for it internalizes constraints which can hinder the birth of literature' and 'entangles the author in mutually exclusive demands.'” These guidelines exaggerate the restrictions that writers felt held

28 Almost all authors' work reflects some consideration of audience and publishing, but GDR authors faced and often internalized more stringent requirements and faced more dire consequences if they did not meet these.
them back, calling into question what exactly they were expected to do for a living.

In order to actually shape the minds and outlooks of its citizens, the GDR's orthodox language had to be ubiquitous. It was present at work, on the radio, on television, in newspapers, in schools; it was truly a part of everyday life.

Fritz sends his wife to an evening course in cookery. She attends for three whole months. She must have improved by this time, thinks Fritz to himself. He therefore orders roast pork, roast potatoes and salad for his Sunday dinner. The salad cream is sour. the potatoes are undercooked. the pork is burnt to a cinder. 'What the hell is this!' cries Fritz. 'I thought you were on a cookery course!'

'How can I help it!' screams back his wife. 'We've only got as far as the Great Socialist October Revolution!'30

Political indoctrination invades the private lives of Fritz and his wife; the “Great Socialist October Revolution” is a frightening example of totalitarian language. The adjective “great” is readily supplied as part of the event's name, implying that no further analysis is necessary. Further, this indoctrination takes the place of otherwise valuable knowledge. One goal of the SED and other socialist governments was to remove the possibility of counter-narratives. Unanimity, or the appearance of such, was important to this illusion. The Socialist Unity Party made this clear within its own name. The party leadership voted in concord almost uniformly, and sham public elections resulted in a 99% majority. People joked—a hand-me-down from Nazi Germany's similarly ridiculous election results—that they somehow kept running into the other one or two percent31. Lower echelons of authority were under great pressure to follow the Politburo's example.32 In the case of Fritz's wife, the SED's narrative crowded out the learning of valuable skills. Critical thinking was already in jeopardy, but cooking may well have been next.

30 Loomes, Big Red Joke Book, 122. This joke illustrates a male-dominated conception of home life that the SED had officially rejected, Women were supposed to be equal citizens within the GDR, but often ended up working an official first shift and an unofficial second shift running the household See Mary Fulbrook, The People's State, 142.

31 Banc and Dundes, You Call This Living?, 80. For a Nazi version, see Lukes and Galnoor, No Laughing Matter; 84 or Benton and Loomes, Big Red Joke Book, 65.

32 Bytwerk, Bending Spines, 133.
Joke-tellers pushed back against the many sources of intellectually monochromatic media. Newspapers were an easy target; I have already referred to their alternate use as toilet paper, but there were many other riffs on their falsehood and pernicious influence.

A Frenchman, an American, a Russian and a GDR citizen are discussing super-weapons of certain eras. “If Hitler,” says the American, “had had the atom bomb, he would have won the war.”
“If we had had the atom bomb,” says the Russian, “Hitler would never have gotten near Moscow.”
“If Napoleon,” says the Frenchman, “had had the repeating rifle, he would never have lost at Waterloo.”
“If Napoleon had had das Neue Deutschland,” says the GDR citizen, “Then nobody would ever have found out about his defeat.”

This joke implies the recognition that the newspaper is doing the opposite of what a newspaper should. An important battle should be featured heavily, but a lost battle would compromise the paper's one-dimensional rhetoric. Thus the paper ignores, twists, or distracts from items that would call into question the strength of the state or of the party.

The repetitive and narrow rhetoric of party leaders may have succeeded in crowding out other modes of public speech, but it was notoriously boring:

In a meeting of the Supreme Soviet Council, Andropov gets a note: 'Somebody plans to kill you.' Andropov continues his speech undisturbed. Then he receives a second note: 'The assassin is one of our leaders.' Andropov doesn't react. A KGB agent comes over and whispers: 'The assassin is in this room!' Andropov lifts his eyes and says: 'Third row, second man from the left.' The KGB agent jumps on the man and finds him armed with a pistol. 'How did you know?' they all ask Andropov. 'Simple, Comrades. As Lenin said: 'Enemies of the revolution never sleep.'

33 Ein Franzose, ein Amerikaner, ein Russe und ein DDR-Bürger unterhalten sich über Wunderwaffen jeweiliger Epochen.
'Hätte Hitler', sagt der Amerikaner, 'die Atombombe gehabt, hätte er den Krieg gewonnen.'
'Hätten wir die Atombombe gehabt', sagt der Russe, 'wäre Hitler erst gar nicht bis vor Moskau gekommen.'
'Hätte Napoleon', sagt der Franzose, 'das Repetiergewehr gehabt, hätte er bei Waterloo nie verloren.'
'Hätte Napoleon bei Waterloo das Neue Deutschland gehabt', sagt der DDR-Bürger, 'dann hätte erst gar keiner von seiner Niederlage erfahren.' de Wroblewsky, Wo wir sind ist vorn, 119. For a version featuring the Soviet paper Pravda from which this version was likely adapted, see Loomes, Big Red Joke Book, 118.
34 Galnoor and Lukes, No Laughing Matter, 88.
Andropov, who had a short-lived tenure as head of the late Soviet era gerontocracy, does not seem to care that he has put his audience to sleep, and uses the misapplied logic of a dusty socialist platitude to accuse a traitor. The motto he quotes is so abstract and paranoid as to be almost meaningless, yet Andropov applies it without hesitation. The easily-remembered political motto, of course, is almost universal in popular politics. According to Charles Schutz, “Stale metaphors, cliches, and pretentious language are the speech of the public stage. They are not informational but attitudinal.”\(^{35}\) That is to say, much political speech is almost devoid of content and meant to evoke an emotional response. Andropov's Lenin quote is meant to instill paranoia, but the aim of such speech becomes problematic with repetition. Humans can become inured to almost any emotional reaction. The same goes for political speech, especially that which is tiresome to begin with. Andropov certainly has no emotional connection to the phrase; he is simply used to saying it. As a further reinforcement of the banality this joke mocks, Andropov does not even recognize or care that Lenin was speaking figuratively about sleep.

A certain type of joke was especially flexible for mocking the state-speak and the bureaucracy of many socialist countries. The wide-ranging “Radio Erevan” jokes mentioned above offered a perfect format to mimic the mottos and maxims of socialist language. The radio station took questions and answered them with blunt truthfulness. The responses often begin with “In principle yes, but ...” and continue on to reach what is really a “no” answer. Being a media source, this fictional radio station has to reinforce the party line and answer certain questions affirmatively, but the truth leaks through in little twists of the familiar orthodox language.

Questions for Radio Erevan:
"Is it true that under communism there will be no more money?"
"Quite the opposite: only money will remain."\(^{36}\)

\(^{35}\) Schutz, *Political Humor*, 315.

\(^{36}\) “An den Sender Jerewan: 'Stimmt es, dass es im Kommunismus kein Geld mehr geben wird?'
'Im Gegenteil: nur noch Geld.'” de Wroblewsky, *Wo wir sind ist vorn*, 120.
“Is it true that communism appears now clearly at the horizon?”
“In principle, yes. According to definition, the horizon is an imaginary line which recedes in the distance as we try to approach it.”

“What is the difference between capitalism and communism?”
“Capitalism is the exploitation of man by man. Communism is the other way around.”

The ubiquity of Radio Erevan illustrates the difficulty of establishing a true consensus through the repetition of orthodox language. Official discourse could control interactions in public, but the goal of shaping minds through language was very difficult when the language was so easy to mock in private.

Young cites the main failure of “totalitarian language” as its unreality. From this disconnect between language and reality, he writes, come two important consequences: “The first is an attitude of skepticism and cynicism among many of their subjects,” and the second is “the creation of what may be called counterlanguages.” The counterlanguages were private communications—humorous ones included—that existed outside of the official language, the better to observe and describe the world truthfully. For this reason, jokes that used the SED's language as a weapon against it were among the most subversive.

Public Figures: “Walterchen” and “Honny”

Jokes that poke fun at public figures have been ever-present throughout history, of course, but were present as part of the pantheon of eastern bloc jokes as well. This category, having much to do with personal foibles, generally do not feature as threatening a tone to the overall fabric of the socialist establishment. The indictment of single leaders in the GDR may have been personally insulting, but Ulbricht and Honecker did not nearly reach the heights of megalomania.

37 Banc and Dundes, You Call This Living?, 169.
38 Loomes, Big Red Joke Book, 141.
39 Young, Totalitarian Language, 224.
40 Ibid., 225-226.
nor the cult of personality that Hitler had had as the driving force of the National Socialist movement. The East German leaders had no claim as founders of the socialist movement, nor of the SED's way of doing things. Those had been inherited from Germany's conqueror to the East. A main function of jokes that featured political leaders was democratic leveling, pointing out that the differences that set their leaders apart were not so pronounced.41 Everyone shares certain aspects and weaknesses of humanity, even those who project far more power than Ulbricht and Honecker. Some of the most effective levelers were of the obscene variety, having to do with body functions. For example, this joke compares Ulbricht's anatomy allegorically to Germany's fate. “Walter Ulbricht is a symbol of today's Germany. When you see the naked Ulbricht from behind, you see that Germany is divided. And when you look at him from the front, you see that Germany can never rise again.” The leveling aspect of bodily functions and urges is partially responsible for the eternal popularity of politicians' sex scandals. Due to prudishness, the racier jokes are not very well-documented in joke collections; more commonly relayed joke fantasies feature the stupidity and death—the greatest leveler of all—of their leaders.

Personal jokes targeted foibles and weaknesses of the leadership, and many of these jokes are reapplied generation after generation. Rudolph Herzog, citing a joke that East Germans repurposed from Hermann Göring to Ulbricht, states, “Some patterns of human behavior are so obvious, they can survive any change of system or regime. At heart, such jokes are apolitical, even when they are aimed at a well-known political figures.”43 Indeed, many of these quips have little to do with the policies of these men and more to do with good, old-fashioned *ad hominem*

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43 Herzog, *Dead Funny*, 21.
attacks. Some do not even include a reason for dislike of the public figure, but rather infer that the audience can fill in their own reasons. The following joke is similarly vague, and thus has been applied to a great number of individuals.

Ulbricht is dead. A man calls in at Party headquarters and says to an official:
"I would like permission to speak to Comrade Ulbricht."
"Comrade Ulbricht is dead," replies the official.
He goes away, but very shortly reappears with the same question.
"He's dead," says the official, "I've already told you that once."
After a while the man appears a third time and asks if he can speak to Comrade Ulbricht.
"That's the third time you've asked the same question!
Can't you get it into your head? He's Dead! D-E-A-D, dead!"
"Yes, I know. But I can't hear it too often."44

Another joke was just as widely applicable. This one uses another technique to bring the leaders down to the level of the general population, a “pet name” for Erich Honecker. “1. 'Honecker's personal advisor comes to Honnie in his office, and, what can I tell you: Honecker lies dead, collapsed over the table on his folder!' 2. 'Yes, go on!' 1. 'Well, I don't know any more! But the beginning is already a great one.'”45 These very simple jokes assumed that the audience would have reasons to feel glad at the death of their leader, and therefore are implicitly political.

Other personally-targeted jokes may take place in a political setting, but portray the leadership as incompetents. These were less politically loaded: as Herzog writes of similar jokes about the vanity of Hermann Göring, “Indeed, there is no detectable hatred for party bigwigs in jokes like this ... despite what many editors who compiled such 'whispered jokes' after the end of Nazism tried to suggest.”46 Herzog describes, however, only a very narrow range of political jokes. The venom is clear in jokes that wish death on the SED leaders, but there are a few that

44 Loomes, Big Red Joke Book, 106. For another version, almost identical but with “Ulbricht” replaced with a different name, see de Wroblewsky, Wo wir sind ist vorn, 28.
45 “'Kommt der persönliche Referent von Honecker zu Honnie ins Arbeitszimmer, was soll ich dir sagen: liegt Honecker zusammengebrochen und tot überm Tisch auf der Unterschriftenmappe!' 'Ja, und weiter!' 'Na, weiter weiss ich auch nicht! Aber der Anfang ist doch schon ganz gut.'” de Wroblewsky, Wo wir sind ist vorn, 31.
46 Herzog, Dead Funny, 20.
portray “Honnie” or “Walterchen” (little Walter) less as a clear and present danger and more along the lines of a bumbling sitcom dad.

Honecker is on a trip to Bonn. "Tell me, Chancellor, asks Honecker, "you have a whole line-up of outstanding ministers. Tell me, how do you manage it?"
"That's very simple," answers Kohl. "I test their intelligence ... Count Lambsdorff, come here for a moment. I have a question: it's not your brother, it's not your sister, but it's still your parents' child! Who is that?"
Lambsdorff ponders a moment. Then he says: "That's me."
"Right," says Kohl.
Back at home, Honecker is received at the airport by the Politburo. "Comrade Mielke," he says, "come here for a moment. I have a question: it's not your brother, it's not your sister, but it's still your parents' child! Who is that?"
"Comrade Honecker!" answers Mielke, "give me twenty-four hours and I will have the person!"
Mielke [goes on an epic search]. On the next day Mielke goes to Honecker. "Comrade Honecker," he says, "We have done everything ... We couldn't find the person you described!"
"But comrade Mielke," says Honecker, "The solution is so simple: It's Count Otto Lambsdorff."47

This joke clearly portrays a pair of characters who should not be running a country, but gives them a somewhat affectionate treatment nonetheless. The negative sentiment is still present, but the tone is not nearly as bleak as many of the jokes listed above. This category of joke is among

47 Honecker ist zu Besuch in Bonn.
'Sagen Sie mal, Herr Bundeskanzler,' fragt Honecker, 'Sie haben da eine ganze Reihe hervorragender Minister. Sagen Sie mir, wie machen Sie das blos?'
'Das ist ganz einfach,' antwortet Kohl. 'Ich mache einen Intelligenz-test. Sehen Sie, da kommt gerade Graf Lambsdorff. Graf Lambsdorff, kommen Sie doch bitte einmal her. Ich habe eine Frage: Es ist nicht Ihr Bruder, es ist nicht Ihre Schwester, und doch ist es Ihrer Eltern Kind! Wer ist das?'
Lambsdorff überlegt eine Weile. Dann sagt er: "Das bin ich."
'Richtig', sagt Kohl.
Zu Hause angekommen, wird Honecker am Flughafen vom Politbüro empfangen.
'Genosse Mielke', sagt Honecker, 'kommen einmal her. Ich habe eine Frage: es ist nicht dein Bruder, es ist nicht deine Schwester, und doch ist es deiner Eltern Kind! Wer ist das?'
'Genosse Honecker!' antwortet Mielke, 'gibt mir vierundzwanzig Stunden, und dann habe ich die Person!'
Mielke geht ins Ministerium und ruft seine Leute zusammen.
'Es ist nicht mein Bruder, es ist nicht meine Schwester, und doch ist es meiner Eltern Kind! Wer ist das? In vierundzwanzig Stunden will ich den Kerl vor mir sehen!'
Eine fürchterliche Suche beginnt, die ganze DDR wird umgekrempelt, keiner wird gefunden. Am nächsten Tag geht Mielke zu Honecker.
'Genosse Honecker', sagt Mielke, 'wir haben alles getan. Wir haben die ganze Republik umgekrempelt. Wir haben die beschriebene Person nicht finden können!'
the mildest, or least subversive, for this and another reason: the condemnation of an individual
did not equal the explicit condemnation of the entire socialist system that was present in many
other jokes. Whatever the intent behind the joke, however, the teller would know consequences
could follow if someone was listening in. For this reason, the act of telling of almost any political
joke at all was more of a transgression, more subversive, and of more personal importance than
the content of the *Flüsterwitz*.

**Satellite Nation**

The Soviet Union's Warsaw Pact allies had much in common and shared many jokes as
well. The GDR could collectively commiserate with Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and
others about their subordinate status, but some jokes referred specifically to a certain country's
circumstances. In East Germany, “satellite nation” jokes often featured the GDR playing the part
of the annoying, exploited little brother to the bullying Cold War superpowers, the United States
and Soviet Union. These jokes sometimes toed a line that Germans have historically been
hesitant to cross: mention of the Nazis and World War II. These references, however, came
mostly as resentment over the victors' treatment of the defeated German Reich. Even with minds
turned toward the present, the trade partnerships with the Soviet Union were portrayed as
exploitative.

A classic format for jokes of this kind included Kennedy, Khruschev and Ulbricht, or
whatever heads of state were currently in power. The GDR, of course, would not have
realistically been the next country in line for an invitation to such meetings, but the premise is
plausible enough given the inflated self-importance of the SED leadership. In these jokes, the
two powerful rivals invariably trick or exploit the GDR leader into doing something that is
against his best interest, or, like in the long Honecker story above, the GDR leader makes a fool
of himself. In this example, lives are at stake. One can guess whose is the least important.

Reagan, Brezhnev and Honecker are flying in an airplane. Suddenly the plane malfunctions. No emergency landing possible, the only escape is to jump, but there are only two parachutes on board.

“No matter, says Brezhnev to Honecker, “You are the youngest. Here, take it, jump first.” Said—done. Honecker opens the door and jumps. He's hardly left the plane and Brezhnev and Reagan each take a parachute and jump as well.

As the two float to the ground, Reagan asks: “Tell me, General Secretary: I thought we only had two parachutes on board?”

“That's right, says Brezhnev, “Honecker jumped out with my camping gear.”

These jokes often treated international relations in microcosm, with leaders' behavior representative of complex relationships of trade, military alignment, and politics. This example is an indictment of both the USSR and the SED: Brezhnev for manipulating Honecker like a puppet, and Honecker for kowtowing and being so easily manipulated. He takes the Soviet Premier's advice without questioning it, and falls to his death. As we have seen, even the most horrific deeds could be couched and hidden in benign or even positive totalitarian language. The camping gear was a poisoned gift along the lines of the “Anti-Fascist Protective Wall.” This category of joke often portrayed Moscow as happy to accept materials in unfair trade, yet unwilling to accept input from SED leadership. Another joke that suggests a one-way dialogue between Moscow and Berlin features Ulbricht hosting a comrade in his offices. The comrade asks about a curious phone with no mouthpiece. Ulbricht explains, “That's our hotline to Moscow.”

Another angle on East Germany's status as a satellite nation was the fact that the socialist


49 John Young shows an especially horrifying example of sanitized language with a whole appendix of Nazi terms that used the prefix “Sonder-” as a code word for death. See Totalitarian Language, 245.

50 Loomes, Big Red Joke Book, 105.
system had been mostly imposed from outside. The next joke reflects this by representing the
GDR as a nation that was generally skeptical of its politics:

Walter Ulbricht and Mao Tse-tung are having a conversation about domestic politics.
“And how many political enemies,” asks Ulbricht, “do you have in the People's
Republic?”
“It's about 17 million,” answers Mao.
“Yeah, it's about the same here!”

The exaggerated perception in this joke was that China had a relatively small sliver of political
dissent, while the entire population of the GDR did not agree with the system that the Soviets
had forced them into. One could also interpret Ulbricht's statement as referring to the SED's
suspicions of its citizens. Ulbricht may, in his paranoia, see everyone as an enemy, or they all
may be enemies of socialism or even enemies of Ulbricht personally. The interpretation is left up
to the audience.

A lot of bitterness is present in the few jokes that refer to Germany's defeat. The punitive
measures taken by the conquering powers were seen as exploitative, and indeed many of them
were. The Space Race of the 1960s indirectly featured Germany, as the USA and Soviet Union
had recruited many of the scientists who had worked on the Nazi V-1 and V-2 rockets. East
Germans demonstrated their awareness of the fact with this joke: “On the other side of the moon,
the Russian and American astronauts meet. 'At last!' they say in German, 'We can speak our own
mother-tongue.'”

The Soviets had also, as conquerors, moved entire factories from Germany and Austria to bolster
their own manufacturing capacity and weaken that of the Germans and Austrians. The next
anecdote references this, as well as the exploitative relationship in general.

Khruschev is visiting Nehru, whom he is trying to entice into drinking a glass of vodka.

51 de Wroblewsky, *Wo wir sind ist vorn*, 61. For another GDR version see Drozdzynski, *Der Politische Witz*, 178.
For a Romanian version see Banc and Dundes, *You call this Living?*, 90.
Nehru adamantly refuses, so Khruschev offers him a cement factory. Nehru still refuses, so he offers two. He refuses again, but finally and reluctantly agrees at the offer of three. Khruschev smiles broadly, so Nehru protests, “Isn't it enough that you have humiliated me? Do you have to laugh at my humiliation?” To which Khruschev replies: “I was smiling at the thought of Ulbricht's face when he hears about the three cement factories.”

Here, Khruschev gleefully uses German property as a bargaining chip abroad, but that blow is softened somewhat by the implication that the USSR is bullying states all over Eurasia.

These jokes make it clear that some saw the GDR as a victim of bullying by its more powerful ally. Although they often feature well-known personalities, they are distinct from the previous category because the international relationships are the punchline and personal characteristics are secondary.

Secret Police

Some of the most popular jokes throughout the eastern bloc were meta-jokes—those that referenced the danger of joke-telling while simultaneously laughing in the face of that danger. The general population at once feared and mocked the secret police. The Stasi had many ears, and it was generally assumed that they did, but, according to a good many leveling jokes, having a pair of ears did not necessarily mean that there was a lot of brain power in between them. Policemen in general were a favored target for jokes about low intelligence. Again, many of these jokes could apply to absolutely any target, but policemen were the chosen group. In areas where the state pushed on ordinary citizens the hardest, jokes tended to push back accordingly. Like material shortages, paranoia about being overheard and arrested permeated the everyday life of jokesters. Thankfully, this paranoia tended to give them good material.

Police jokes tended to fall into two categories: the first referenced the mistrust and paranoia that the police state fostered. These were usually quick and simple jabs; sometimes the

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53 Ibid., 49.
meta-reference to the joke's possible consequences is enough to carry the joke.

Question for Radio Erevan: "Should we abolish the entire informer system?"
Answer: "In principle, yes, but how would we deal with all the millions of unemployed?"\textsuperscript{54}

A pin and a sewing needle walk down Stalinallee. "Psst!" says the pin, "there's a safety pin walking behind us!"\textsuperscript{55}

Relatively few of the jokes that have been featured in collections of political jokes relied on such wordplay as "safety (alternatively, security) pin," because language was a barrier to their spread. For this reason, it is likely that language-specific puns have been underrepresented in the literature documenting Ostblock jokes, especially those that feature English translations.

Other jokes referenced the assumption that mail was being screened. The following, among many others, is in the form of a letter to a grandmother in West Germany:

Dear Grandma,
Thanks a lot for your package with all the books. It arrived all right. I got it all and buried it in the garden right away, along with the ammunition.
Two weeks later:
Dear Grandma,
The whole garden is dug up. You can send me the flower bulbs now.\textsuperscript{56}

This letter reflects a matter-of-fact attitude toward the constant presence of surveillance and censorship. The writer decides that he or she may as well make use of the "services" provided by the SED.

The second main category of police jokes cast its targets as brutish, useless and stupid.

Many of these were general jokes applied to policemen, but others added nuance by including

\textsuperscript{54} Banc and Dundes, \textit{You Call this Living?}, 32.
\textsuperscript{55} "Eine Stecknadel und eine Nähnadel laufen die Stalinallee entlang. 'Psst!', saget die Stecknadel, 'hinter uns läuft eine Sicherheitsnadel!'" de Wroblewsky, \textit{Wo wir sind ist vorn}, 52.
\textsuperscript{56} Liebe Oma!
Vielen Dank für dein Paket mit den vielen Büchsen. Es ist gut angekommen. Habe alles gefunden und sofort im Garten vergraben, auch die Munition...
Zwei Wochen später:
So, liebe Oma!
Der ganze Garten ist umgegraben, jetzt kannst du mir die Blumenzwiebeln schicken. Ibid., 70.
and mocking a smattering of state-speak. A very common joke that has been applied to numerous situations is short and simple: “[Q] What are the four hardest years of a policeman's life? [A] The first grade.” 57 Other anecdotes combine police stupidity with other elements to great effect. One of these is especially well known, poking fun at inefficient bureaucracy, the policeman's intellect, and the paranoia of socialist leaders toward the intelligentsia. “[Q] Why do policemen always go around in groups of three? [A] One of them can read, another one can write, and the third one keeps a close watch on the two dangerous intellectuals.” 58 This hard-hitter is one of the best examples of its kind, an efficient, comprehensive rejection of the police's legitimacy. Portrayed here, they are not investigators or protectors of public good, merely idiot enforcers doing the SED's pointless dirty work.

The police and spying were easy targets for jokes, as their presence made joke-tellers uncomfortable. Recall that the consequences of joke-telling loaded the act with increased stress alongside the punchline's momentary stress relief. By explicitly including the police, a known threat and stressor for any political joke-teller in the GDR, within the structure of a joke, the punchline was perhaps better equipped to momentarily release those who shared the joke from worry. Anyone who has told or heard a joke knows that the delivery is a very important factor in how funny a joke is perceived to be. The circumstance of explicitly ignoring a taboo similarly could have heightened the experience, for those in the moment, of a simplistic insult to policemen that was not objectively very funny.

Conclusion

Western observers documented the phenomenon of political jokes in the eastern bloc with

57 “[Q] Was sind die vier schwersten Jahre im Leben eines Polizisten? [A] Die erste Klasse.” Ibid., 107. de Wroblewsky includes a whole section of jokes insulting the intelligence of policemen, most of them along these lines.

58 Banc and Dundes, You call this Living?, 99. Also Loomes, Big Red Joke Book, 136.
great interest. This fascination was understandable, as the wit of the eastern bloc mostly underlined the messages that the United States and Western Europe transmitted as part of the Cold War. Ostblock humor was seen as a victory in the “hearts and minds” category, and therefore some western joke compilations editorialized humor as a small victory against international communism. The authors/collectors of pure joke books tended not to leave much of their own political fingerprints, choosing either to adopt a satirical editorial tone or to let the material do the talking. Many collections of jokes emerged from about the 1960s on in the forms of scholarly studies and also joke books. These collections were released in a fairly steady stream, with little discernible change to the tone of their content over time. Although new jokes were added, little truly changed besides the names of politicians. However, the jubilant optimism of 1989 and 1990 was a boon for collectors of jokes as well as for writers of German history. The tone in many books from the time around 1990, both humorous and academic, was triumphant. For example, Visa Frei bis Hawaii is an especially cloying joke book with cacaphonous changes in font size and format throughout. It contains jokes about the fall of the GDR after the fact, as well as slogans that had been chanted and waved around in the protests that had brought about the East German state's demise.\(^{59}\)

Although the psychological benefit of jokes is well-known, there is little indication that these political jokes led toward revolution or change within repressed societies. The imagery of “letting off steam,” mentioned earlier in reference to both joking and Eingaben, in a way implies that humor is more of a conservative force. Letting off steam relieves pressure that may otherwise lead to more radical activity—a steam explosion, if we are to follow the analogy. Scholars still argue about what role jokes play politically. Political jokes undeniably undermine

\(^{59}\) For more on the wit of 1989 protestors, see Riley, *Everyday Subversion*, 203-282.
the goals of orthodox communist language and make the establishment of a true totalitarian state, by Young's definition, very difficult. There are many steps between rhetorical subversion and revolt, but it is undeniable that these jokes were a pervasive part of everyday life in East Germany and served as an outlet of free speech where few such outlets were available.

After the tumult and fanfare of 1989 to 1991, Eastern Bloc political jokes and the unique social patterns surrounding them disappeared quickly. The social and legal pressures that had made them so crucial were gone by then. Yurchak cites a 1995 Soviet article that bemoaned the decline of anekdoty: “When in the past [anekdoty] were spread by word of mouth, they were cherished and savored during conversations like dessert. Today, multiplied in lousy booklets and fat tomes, they have totally disappeared from everyday life.” Likewise, jokes about the bygone Honecker regime soon lost their punch. The jokes of the socialist era had been like salt on the potatoes of GDR life, but in the years following 1989 political jokes became less relevant; few feel the need to put salt on a McDonald's hamburger.

60 Yurchak, *Everything was Forever...*, 276.
CHAPTER THREE
DEFA COMEDIES

While private jokes provided an outlet for individuals to voice their concerns, the SED provided the GDR's population with more permissible ways to relieve tension. It controlled all official means of publishing and public performance, and could therefore, to a varying extent, oversee the content of literature, films and theater productions. Although the GDR was known as a land of readers, the state-run film studio, known as DEFA (which rolls off the tongue a bit better than *Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft*), was also quite popular. The GDR's citizens averaged ten to fifteen visits to the cinema per year, peaking in 1958.¹ DEFA's productions ranged on a spectrum from optimistic socialist propaganda (more common in the 1950s) to pure entertainment, which predominated in the 1980s. Although state control of DEFA and final approval of productions sometimes went all the way up to the Politburo, films are complex undertakings that involve the input of hundreds of people. A great many of the people involved had a real interest in producing legitimately good art and good entertainment. These motives sometimes clashed with the goals of the state: some actors, directors and writers attempted to voice criticisms or satirize the SED, often through subtle performances and double meanings. Overall, though, it was rare for a finished film to be withheld from the public because of the scrutiny involved in every step of the production process. In the GDR's forty-year history, only thirty (a small fraction of the studio's output) met this fate.²

This chapter's focus is the nature of film comedy in the GDR. Scholars have neglected this topic overall in their studies of DEFA and its productions. Many studies feature comedies and films with many comedic elements, but examine them in different contexts. *Spur der Steine* ¹ Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State*, 74.
(Trace of Stones), for example, has been an especially popular subject of study, but mainly because of its production quality, star power, political stance and banned status. I will examine DEFA comedies with emphasis on the comedic elements and the filmmakers' treatment of such. I will examine three films in detail: Spur der Steine (Frank Beyer, 1965), Till Eulenspiegel (Rainer Simon, 1975), and Hasenherz (Gunter Friedrich, 1987). Spur der Steine is an earnest drama that softens its political messages with the wit and playfulness of its characters. Till Eulenspiegel concerns a legendary madcap folk hero for whom the term “lowbrow” is an understatement. Eulenspiegel ingratiates himself with, and simultaneously mocks, the authority figures of the Middle Ages, both church and state. This, like many DEFA films, mines German folklore for material and uses the past and folk legends as ways to separate itself from its contemporary environment. Hasenherz is a comedic children's film with a meta-narrative that nods toward the fourth wall. The young protagonist is a girl who finds her place in the world by pretending to be someone else: she plays a prince in a DEFA production of a fairy tale, and this alternate reality begins to affect her everyday life. The three films examined below demonstrate a general evolution of GDR comedic cinema over time, and also represent many types of humor, from subtle satire to a literal pie in the face.

GDR film production had a tenuous relationship with comedy. In the 1950s and 1960s, children's films were mostly intended to be pedagogical tools for raising socialist adults. The productions of the GDR's early years tended to show and reinforce optimism for the future under the new regime. Eventually DEFA shifted more toward entertainment, often producing light fare that was wholly apolitical. Escapism and comedy in film, like political jokes or Eingaben, could serve as a release of pressures felt by the GDR's citizens. Therefore the employment of humor's

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cathartic functions had potential to be a valuable asset for the SED, but it also could be
counterproductive because of humor's potential for subversion through subtlety and complexity.
Seeing Till Eulenspiegel expose himself from the gallows to the Kaiser and all his men, one
viewer may see the Kaiser as a representative of the exploitative regimes that preceded Marx and
Lenin, but another may see him as representative of more recent authorities. Because of the
ambiguity that is at the heart of so much comedy, the “message” is often limited only by the
viewpoint and imagination of the viewer. For these reasons, comedies were a double-edged
sword for the continuity and stability of the SED's authority.

*Spur der Steine*: The GDR as Unfinished Construction

*Spur der Steine* is the only one of the three films I analyze here that was banned for its
political stance. Shortly after its release at a workers' film festival, the East German government
shut it down and buried it. Since German reunification the film has garnered respect with new
audiences for the quality of its acting, its technical sophistication, and the curiosity of its former
banned status. The plot of this film has much to do with the high political ideals of a socialist
state. These ideals clash often with the realities of the lives of Werner Horrath (the party
supervisor, played by Eberhard Esche), Kati Klee (the engineer, played by Krystyna
Stypułkowska), and Hannes Balla (the charismatic work foreman, played by Manfred Krug),
whose actions point out often comical contradictions within the GDR’s modes of operation.
Krug's performance as Balla was key in the film's quick withdrawal.4 Beyer included much more
than interactions between the characters and the state. These interactions, however, drive the plot
through a flashback structure. The film is shot in black and white, which works well because the
color palette of an excavated construction site—where most of the film takes place—is not

4 Stefan Soldovieri, “Negotiating Censorship: GDR Film at the Juncture of 1965/66,” PhD diss., University of
exactly appealing. The opening scene happens at the end of the story timeline; Horrath stands before a hearing of SED party officials, who interrogate him and others to judge his work conduct. As they recount the narrative of Horrath’s history on the central work site, flashback scenes span a time-period of over a year, showing how the three main characters got to this point.

The character development of Balla, the playfully and defiantly competent work foreman, is one of the central plot lines of Beyer’s film. In the beginning of the story timeline, he is a hard-drinking, mischievous force on the work site and otherwise, and supervisors tolerate his behavior because his crew does fine work. Balla and his men are the source of much of the broad humor in this film. This ranges from physical comedy to wisecracks at the expense of Horrath, the state, his workers and even himself. Initially, everything about Balla’s portrayal displays his disdain for and mockery of almost everything in his life.

Balla’s character development is accentuated by the mise-en-scene in his appearances: the costumes, the arrangement of the characters, and Balla’s posture. The physical appearance of the actor, Manfred Krug, fits the character very well. He is tall and muscular, with a hint of the gut that comes from heavy drinking. Krug had been well-known outside of film, making him already at casting a public personality with a reputation. Stefan Soldovieri writes: “Casting an actor like Manfred Krug, who by 1965 had a reputation for nonconformity and outspokenness, could raise expectations about the film roles in which he was scheduled to perform.”5 He wears a large gaudy earring for much of the film, which draws attention to the man and outwardly shows his devil-may-care attitude. On the work site, he and his workers dress in a way that contrasts sharply with the other workers. Rather than dull, shabby, practical attire, they wear traditional carpenters’ clothing that recalls a time before the GDR: bold, cowboy-like hats, with matching

5 Ibid., 173.
black pants and vests adorned with large metal buttons and a glamorous chain. Barton Byg makes a comparison between Balla’s seven-man crew in their opening scene and *The Magnificent Seven*. The arrangement and choreography in their opening scene mimics and mocks the marching band that is heading in the other direction, towards a workers’ rally. Drinking from a comically oversized boot glass after their shift, they decide to take a swim in a nearby duck pond. The naked construction workers are arranged and filmed as if they were a group of clumsy synchronized swimmers, and Balla shows his contempt for the state and its rules by pulling a policeman in with them.

Even through Balla’s work methods, he thumbs his nose at the nature of the massive, centrally planned project. In order to practice his craft, for example, he needs to hijack a truck of gravel that has been directed (likely inefficiently) to go elsewhere on the work site. He treats this task with the zeal of a Wild West bandit in the spaghetti westerns produced by some of Beyer’s contemporaries, mock-kidnapping the engineer Kati on her first day on site. The humor in these situations comes from incongruities: Balla treats his work very seriously, yet holds nothing back in his disdain for the ones in charge of the project and for the party in general. Through the influences of the other main characters, he later begins to realize that his previous rebellions were purposeless, and that he might be better suited to efforts to actually improve the way work is done in the GDR.

Balla’s eventual, uneasy cooperation with the state planners comes about mostly through his interactions with Horrath and Kati. His relationship with Kati has a softening influence on him, as can be seen by the changes in his demeanor. By the time of Horrath’s hearing, the earring has disappeared and his wardrobe has changed. He still dresses as an outsider, in a leather jacket.

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with a white T-shirt underneath, but an understated one in comparison to his usual dress. Though he has become more mature and has tamed himself somewhat, he is still not comfortable with the formalities of the hearing; he gives his testimony, but speaks haltingly and leans against a column in the room, setting himself apart from the rest of the party officials seated around the table. He has taken on a role within the state's workings, but remains conflicted about his participation.

Balla’s continued unease with party culture is shown often in connection to a certain object. As he waits outside before his testimony, he drapes himself over the chairs in any posture but the intended one. In fact, many of Balla’s interactions with the SED feature chairs in more than their usual role as passive objects. In this and other scenes, Balla chooses not to use the chair normally. In the ballroom scene where Horrath snubs Balla’s crew for an award, one of his men breaks a chair and it becomes a menacing weapon. The “carpenter’s dance” scene, which will be later analyzed in detail, features chairs as a battleground; Balla establishes his dominance over Horrath by knocking him off his chair. Sitting in a chair is one of the most basic acts of civilization. By subverting and twisting the uses of chairs, Balla shows that he is, and remains, uncomfortable with even the most basic aspects of GDR society.

The mise-en-scene surrounding Kati Klee also signifies her attitudes toward and interactions with the state and with the two other main characters. She enters the construction site as the daughter of an important SED figure, and she is immediately told that, as a woman, she will not be able to stand the hostile, crude and masculine work environment for long. Partly as a result of that, her attire on the work site seems to be an attempt to avoid markers of traditional femininity. Her main prerogative is to fit in seamlessly on the work site: her hair is held back and hidden by a bandanna, and she wears a checked shirt, buttoned to the top, and a leather jacket.
Even then, her first encounter with Balla is not a positive, professional experience. He hijacks her, despite her protests, along with the truckload of gravel that the planners have misallocated.

Later in the film, as a love triangle develops between the three main characters, Kati is portrayed less in her professional, asexual attire and more in flattering dresses and make-up at formal events, or in her laid-back clothing at home. Again, this change in dress reflects her character arc. Her professional behavior (signified by the baggy work clothing and bandanna) is undone by her interactions with Horrath and Balla. She uses her sex appeal to defuse the ballroom confrontation, by giving Balla a seductive look and asking him to dance. Once the tension between the two men is broken, she rejects Balla’s rough advances. Instead, a relationship with Horrath results in an unexpected pregnancy that forces both characters, in some ways, to abandon the path of party-line professionalism. Kati’s initial resolve to blend in and ignore the gendered tensions of the construction site ends in an embarrassing way; she, Horrath, and eventually Balla are forced to conceal their knowledge of the baby’s father. This deception, along with the actions that led to it, undercut the attempts of all three to have positive interactions with the party and its planners. Furthermore, this central plot point makes it clear that the three main characters all have their motivations for working with and improving the SED, but that none of them fits the state's ideal of a socialist worker or official.

One sequence in particular encapsulates the themes, film techniques and comedic strategies of *Spur der Steine*, as well as featuring all three of the main characters in defining moments. This is the first time that Horrath meets Balla on the work site, and as the new supervisor of the project he wishes to be a force of positive change within the party, a mediator between the workers and the party, and an overall paragon of optimistic socialist management. This sequence shows a few of the many obstacles in the way of an ideal work site. Foremost
among these, to begin with, is Balla. The weather hints that all will likely not go according to plan; the pouring rain soaks the workers, flowing off their hats and down their backs. The scene is framed by the skeleton structure the Balla crew is building.

Horrath tries to connect with Balla and his men by joking about the earlier duck pond incident. The party had pushed that under the rug because the crew worked so well, but Horrath references it for multiple reasons. He addresses Balla with: “I looked for you in the cabin, but you seem to prefer the great wet outdoors. Or so I heard.” This has the purpose of showing the men on the front lines of socialism that he has a sense of humor. This comment also shows Balla that Horrath knows of past transgressions, while hinting threateningly that future issues might not have the same result. The majority of this scene is shown through two long, relatively wide shots that feature the two main characters in the center, while still capturing some of the bustling activity of the workmen. Balla responds to Horrath with a sarcastic shot across the bow, warning Horrath to be careful about safety as he lets a large wooden beam fall toward the party official’s head. He snaps at one of his workers for even striking up a conversation with Horrath, as all his impressions of the SED have thus far been negative. At the same time, though, Horrath works toward earning Balla’s respect. In the same weather the workmen complain about, Horrath takes part in moving heavy pallets, surprising the foreman.

Although Horrath strives to win over the men on site, Balla is still hostile toward him, trying to keep his workers from discussing politics on the job. After the shift, they all sit together on benches inside, and the workers offer Horrath a drink. Balla has an idea to put Horrath in his place and keep his workers loyal to their foreman. The “carpenter’s dance” is a simple secret handshake that soon turns into a more violent game, pitting the new rivals against each other.

7 “Ich hab’ euch in der Baubude gesucht, aber ihr habt ja eine hohe Liebe für das nasse Element. Hab’ ich gehört.”
Though they initially just slap hands together, Balla’s slaps become powerful blows and Horrath has to follow suit to avoid backing down. The workers keep the beat with their hammers and hands on the tables. The camera focuses closely on the impacts, both of the hammers and of the hands. Close-ups of the two participants show the exertion they are putting into the handshake. Balla’s jowls and earring shake with each impact. Both have streams of rainwater and sweat running down their faces. And then, when the physical antagonism between the two is reaching a climax, foreshadowing of a different rivalry to come enters the room: Kati Klee the engineer. Balla, his face bathed in shadow, strikes the final blow, knocking Horrath from his stool and showing off for his new audience. Though Kati wears her drab, baggy work clothes to hide her femininity, her demeanor hints of her coming role as a love interest. Though she hides her hair and curves, her face is still lit appealingly. After the workmen go back out into the rain, she jokes with the shaken Horrath before they start to talk about changes to the work schedule.

These two scenes establish the characters’ initial attitudes well while also using various types of comedy—Balla dropping the wooden beam is a choreographed moment of physical comedy a la the Marx Brothers or Three Stooges. The banter among the three characters is of a different stripe, showing that they are witty and likable and setting the tone for their interactions throughout the film. All three share a certain charisma that sets them apart from the minor characters. Horrath especially gives lie to the expectations that he will be just another stodgy party member.

Whatever qualities the film had as a piece of art, its content was such that the SED ordered it to be banned after only a few performances. Many aspects of Spur der Steine leveled clear criticisms at the organization of the GDR’s labor force and its central planning structure, though it did offer an overall hopeful view for the future. The perpetually unfinished work site,
in which progress is literally dynamited by the constant revision of faulty work plans, is an omnipresent form of this criticism. Horrath’s trial is another negative portrayal of the party. Although Horrath had acted in hopes of improving the methods used on the work site, his only successes are in disturbing some of his peers and superiors. In fact, the verdict of this hearing is decided even before any of the testimony. Nearly the entire panel agrees that he must be reprimanded even before he is given due process, with only one man dissenting from the agreement. Only the formulation of their statement remains to be determined.

The party officials at the trial cannot even comprehend some of the problems Horrath faces. He cancels the flawed, wasteful power station project, and is reprimanded by another party man. This man later recounts that he agreed with Horrath and at the same time told him that he should not be doing this. This contradiction surprises some at the hearing, but not those who are experienced with dealings on site. Another man pipes in with practiced cynicism: “That’s easy to comprehend. Horrath was punished because he made a mistake. But the mistake was approved, because it really was no mistake.”

He twirls his index fingers around in circles to underline his point. This is a depiction of the contradictory behaviors Mary Fulbrook describes: "It was possible both to have participated in the structures of power, and yet simultaneously to have been openly critical of the regime—even well before 1989 ... It was possible, in other words, to have occupied a position that was simultaneously located in 'state' and 'society.'"

The real problem, in the party man's estimation, was with Horrath’s thinking that he could do something to change the faulty plans. In an ironic twist, Horrath’s ambitious assistant who upbraids him for admitting his affair at the end of the film is named “Bleibtreu,” or “Stay faithful.” It seems that Bleibtreu resembles Horrath as he was in the early days of the GDR:

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8 "Das ist ja ganz leicht zu verstehen. Der Horrath wurde bestraft, weil er einer Fehler gemacht hatte. Aber der Fehler selbst ja wurde gut geheißen, weil es nämlich gar kein Fehler war."

young, idealistic and quick to condemn others who have made mistakes. He replaces Horrath and makes moves of questionable value to the project, but of great value to Bleibtreu’s career. It raises the question: who is staying true? Horrath, who wants to improve the GDR for the future, or Bleibtreu, who sides with the complacent party establishment?

The flashback structure of the film allows for dramatic and sometimes comic transitions between scenes. The character development over the course of the timeline shows stark contrast, as, for example, the more mature Balla on the day of the hearing is shown right before his past drunken tomfoolery in the duck pond. This technique is also used to accentuate the irony of some characters’ testimony. For example, when Balla finds out that Kati is pregnant, he goes on an emotional three-day bender just after he has started to cooperate with Horrath professionally. When asked to recount the reasons for going missing at such a bad time, though, he tries to cover up his real motivations casually, embracing the support pole near his chair. “I hadn’t planned three days [of drinking]. First it was just one day. The second day followed the first ...”

The flashbacks add texture to the narrative and point out the paradoxes and inconsistencies of various testimonies, proving to be a remarkably flexible storytelling tool.

The comedic elements of Spur der Steine are interspersed throughout the film, and sometimes skewer the SED and its bureaucratic inertia. The criticisms often take on ironic or even parodic elements in their own right. For example, the hearing explores in detail the seeming paradox of a party official agreeing with Horrath and simultaneously reprimanding him for making a smart move. Even though this action makes very little sense pragmatically, it is sensible to some of the men who are familiar with the vagaries of over-planned, politicized construction sites. Much of the comedy, however, comes from Balla’s treatment of the state in

10 Also drei Tage sollte es nicht werden. Erst war’s einer. Dann kam allerdings der zweite Tag nach ...
the beginning, and Balla’s early attitude ranges from casual apoliticism to acrid antipoliticism. This attitude is perfectly shown when Balla pulls the police officer, always a representative and symbol of the state, into the duck pond. This shows both a disregard for the officer’s authority and a disregard for the power of his superiors to punish this transgression. In another example, he tries to convince Kati to go on a date with him: “I’d like to invite you to the movies. With you I’d even see a DEFA film.” In the same conversation, he refers with disdain to his apartment and Kati’s, calling them “mouse holes.” Krug's delivery of these jokes is quick, almost mumbled, and they are quite superficial complaints. Soldovieri mentions that Krug's reputation gave extra meaning to each of his quick jabs: “Seldom openly critical of GDR society, Krug nevertheless cultivated a compact with his audience based on reading between the lines, filling in ellipses, and irony. Fans who went to Krug's concerts, for instance, learned to expect beyond respectable jazz and blues interpretations the one-liners and veiled commentary on GDR affairs with which he peppered his show.” The fact that the early Balla is a character with somewhat of a juvenile attitude, however, did little to make a case for the film’s continued screening.

In the areas of the film where comedy and SED critique overlap, comedy does soften the blow slightly, but the film’s message was not a joking one. The filmmakers evidently hoped for real change, but that change required an admission by the SED that something was wrong in the first place. This, combined with timing and Krug's performance and reputation, was enough of an attack on the establishment to warrant a ban.

*Till Eulenspiegel*: Medieval Mischief

While *Spur der Steine* offers witty banter and an earnest bid for the future of the GDR, *Till Eulenspiegel* separates itself markedly from reality, and the title character separates himself

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11 “Ich wollt' Sie nämlich ins Kino einladen. Mit Ihnen würde ich sogar ein DEFA-Film angucken.”
from the reality of his Medieval setting. From its opening moments, in which a boy makes rude faces and displays the film's title on his buttocks, it is clear that rude, cynical silliness will be a prominent part of the film's comedic repertoire. Till Eulenspiegel is a charismatic, willing outsider and a danger to the Medieval status quo. In a time when religion is king (and so are the kings), he fears “neither God nor the Devil.”

He takes part in the customs and rituals of Medieval Germany, but pokes subversive fun all the while. The film's episodic structure mimics that of the far older book upon which it is based. Eulenspiegel rides his donkey through a series of events that are only loosely connected. He “serves” four powerful patrons in various respects, moving successively up the social ladder: a robber baron who lives in a broken-down castle; a corrupt priest; a wealthy prince, patron of the arts; and the Kaiser himself.

The story of Till Eulenspiegel is an old one. His stories date back to around 1400, with the first known collection written by Herman Bote in 1510 or 1511. The character's existence as a real person is doubted but not ruled out. In the original stories, Eulenspiegel the fool used pranks to point out folly and corruption not only in the nobility and clergy, but also among tradespeople. The DEFA adaptation points its ire solely at the upper crust of Medieval society, as many of the studios' adaptations did. Marc Silberman writes that this is typical of folklore and fairy tale adaptations throughout the Ostblock: “Familiar folktales by the Grimm Brothers, but also the more realistic tales of Hauff and Andersen, were adapted to demonstrate how the simple folk used intelligence and courage to make kings, princesses, and haughty bourgeoisie look foolish, or to show how a hero of the people saved a benevolent king ... from the treacherous courtiers who surrounded him.”

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13 “Weder vor Gott noch vor dem Teufel.”
nature of the feudal system. As *Till Eulenspiegel* illustrates, such portrayals could be instructive, entertaining or both.

Satire pointed at the upper crust of bygone societies, however, could potentially be turned against the contemporary state. Fantasy tales often permitted audiences multiple interpretations through subtlety of storytelling. Qinna Shen, for example, interprets a 1977 Grimm adaptation, *Wer reißt denn gleich vor 'm Teufel aus*, as suggesting that hell is preferable to life in a grim, dull world. In this interpretation, the king stands in for the GDR's leaders rather than the exploitative tyrants that socialists attempted to make obsolete. She also argues that the nature of folk tale films garnered comparatively little attention from censors. Even though the themes and imagery of DEFA's *Till Eulenspiegel* are not overtly critical of the SED regime, the tone is one that implores the audience to question and outwit authority.

The Medieval Eulenspiegel is one of the most prominent examples of Sloterdijk's kynicism, discussed in Chapter 1. The meaning of the character's name, “Owl-mirror” (commonly translated as Owlglass) signifies a wise observer who holds up a mirror to the corruption and rot of humanity. Eulenspiegel is, in fact, the very first literary example that Sloterdijk mentions in his overview of kynicism. The character obviously had a large influence on Sloterdijk's framing of the concept, as even the first sentence that describes a kynic defines such a person as “a lone owl and a provocative, stubborn moralist [emphasis mine].”

The director, Rainer Simon, captures many great moments of physical comedy. Winfried Glatzeder, who was recognizable from his leading role in the very successful 1973 film *Die*  

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17 Ibid., 86.
18 Some have interpreted his name to have a second, fittingly rude meaning. See Michaels-Jena, “Eulenspiegel and Münchhausen,” 103.
19 Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 3. The first mention of Eulenspiegel specifically is on the next page.
Legende von Paul und Paula, plays the title character skillfully. His tall and gangly build reflects Eulenspiegel's personality by setting his physical appearance apart from all others in the film. The screenplay, adapted by the director, was written by Christa and Gerhard Wolf.

The film has many comedic strengths, but a few technical and structural weaknesses. The slapstick performances and the timing of the dialogue are quite good, and skillful framing and editing (with a few exceptions) accentuate much of the physical comedy. For example, a long and sweeping crane shot of three men on horseback chasing Eulenspiegel ends with one of them falling off his horse as it comes to an abrupt stop. The fall in itself is not especially funny, but the immediate cut away to a later stage of the chase creates a logical gap that subverts expectations. Many filmmakers would cut to a reaction shot to play up the pain and consequences of such a jarring fall, but the three men run along, cartoonishly unharmed, in the next shot a half-second later. The editing and storytelling sometimes imitate the episodic nature of Eulenspiegel's story with abrupt transitions. Just after the incident of the hapless horseman, the next film segment comes with no warning. Eulenspiegel walks off a bridge, leaving his pursuers floundering in a river, then immediately stands pontificating in a massive church. Although this is a similar gap in storytelling logic, the audience is less able to fill in the blank.

Eulenspiegel knows that the feudal lords have the advantage in physical might, so he must survive by his wits if he is to score points against them. He strategically tells lords and clergy what they think they want to hear, but then twists the words and wins by revealing the true meaning of what he has said. He often wins by interpreting unclear language literally.\textsuperscript{20} For example, when his first patron, a brute named “Der wilde Kunz,” enters an inn and demands the innkeeper to “put something on the table for me,” Eulenspiegel steps in, happy to oblige, and

\textsuperscript{20} Michaels-Jena points out that Eulenspiegel was one of a great many stories of similar feats, and that fifteenth-century Germans especially enjoyed them. “Eulenspiegel and Münchausen,” 102.
serves “something:” a cow pie.  

The hero places himself at Kunz's side, winning his respect by drinking him under the table. Among other adventures, Kunz menacingly invites three of his female subjects to his fortress, planning to rape them. To remove any doubts about his intentions, the next scene opens with a shot focused on Kunz's ridiculously large armored codpiece. Eulenspiegel the enlightened fool recognizes the injustice of the situation and, though he does not stop Kunz, does what he can to foil the chase. He only manages to save one of the women from her awful fate, taking her into a sheltered place and harmlessly flirting with her while the beastly Kunz and his men tear the clothes off her companions. Eulenspiegel does not attempt overtly to reform his patrons; it is not his way. As Sloterdijk puts it, “The kynic plays the role of a moralist who makes it clear that one has to violate morality in order to save it.” Thus, Eulenspiegel plays along with even acts of rape, the better to mock and subvert the concept. His actions throughout the film reflect an empathy for his fellow subversives—his darkest moment comes when he fails to rescue a pack of thieves from the gallows.

In the film Eulenspiegel tricks and exposes the hypocritical acts of clergy in many ways. One example in particular is also representative of his comically literal interpretation of language. He and a priest fleece a cathedral's parishioners out of a pile of valuables by pretending to speak for a saint, whose skull Eulenspiegel holds up as a relic. As they divide the spoils, the priest takes a large majority and justifies it by saying “The church is mine, so the larger part belongs to me.” Eulenspiegel responds with a challenge: “If the church is yours, then

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21 “Bring mir etwas auf dem Tisch.”
22 This woman becomes an awkwardly handled semi-love-interest for Eulenspiegel, as if some producer had insisted on a shallow female lead to accompany him. She shows up in two other storylines, and they share a similar transgressive streak, but she remains mostly on the periphery of the story.
23 Sloterdijk, Critique of Cynical Reason, 142.
[rude noise] lay me an egg in the middle and you get all of it.”

The priest's greed reaches supernatural levels as he, with statues of Mary and Jesus looking on, manages to lay a real chicken egg. Eulenspiegel, not worried about his share, proceeds to measure and prove that the priest had been a few centimeters off of the middle of the church. He shrugs and delivers a punchline that implies many priests act on such avarice: “No one yet has hit the middle.”

One of the most striking scenes of the film makes homages to the art world, to the contemporaries of both Eulenspiegel and of the filmmakers. A wealthy prince (played by Eberhard Esche, Spur der Steine's Horrath) commissions Eulenspiegel to decorate a hall for an upcoming event. Whatever credentials he has seem to be impeccable, as he is able to rattle off an impressive list of demands that includes the services of an assistant and the presence of his donkey in the hall. He ignores the specific instructions for biblical scenes, instead splattering primary colors on the walls in very creative ways. His assistant finds this hilarious and joins in the fun. A painting montage follows: Eulenspiegel and his assistant, whose work betrays him to be Hieronymus Bosch, acrobatically paint the walls, each other, the donkey. Rippling strings and xylophone accompany his anachronistic avant-garde performance. He finds in Bosch, who is known for his baffling, surreal imagery, a kindred spirit, another man outside of his time. As the dust settles from their artistic Bacchanalia, Eulenspiegel asks him: “Do you understand it?” Bosch replies “Absolutely.” Later, as the nobles survey the damage in shocked silence, the camera lingers on another work the artists have managed to accomplish. an almost-faithful version of Bosch's “The Garden of Earthly Delights.” Examining the third panel of the famous triptych, the prince's lady marvels at the accuracy of a portrait of her husband. What she fails to

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24 “Die Kirche ist mein, also steht mir der größere Teil zu.” “Wenn die Kirche dein ist, so ...leg ein Ei mir mitte und du kriegst alles.”
25 “Die Mitte hat noch keiner getroffen.”
26 “Verstehst du das?” – “Vollkommen!”
recognize is that Bosch and Eulenspiegel have prominently painted their patron's face into a horrifying hellscape.

Eulenspiegel's tensest relationship in the film is his placement as the Kaiser's Narr (jester). The Kaiser, in a subtle performance by Jürgen Gosch, seems to be in on Eulenspiegel's joke and is greatly amused by it—as long as the joker does not threaten the status quo. He has his new pet match wits with the finest academics of the land. Eulenspiegel, true to his kynical roots and his predecessor Diogenes, uses lateral thinking to outmatch the Medieval scholars' tired echoes of Plato and Aristotle. Eulenspiegel, though he gets along quite well as the royal fool, always has an innate understanding of his patrons' failings and insecurities, and therefore the only way he can do his kynical job is to erode the Kaiser's power and authority. When they first meet, he addresses the Kaiser potentially as an equal, a “brother”—“of Adam,” he adds when questioned about this insubordination. Lackeys constantly and incompetently frisk him for weapons as he passes multiple levels of security, even when it could not possibly be necessary. Even then, when asked in the Kaiser's private chamber who is the most powerful man in the world, Eulenspiegel slyly pulls out a knife as a minor part of a farcical chicken-based demonstration. In the same moment that he overtly tells the Kaiser what he wants to hear, Eulenspiegel implies that the Kaiser is not even the most powerful man in his own room. Sloterdijk mentions a similar situation in describing kynicism from below: “When the dissatisfied 'serf' jokingly picks up his master in his arms, he gives a foretaste of the violence his revolt would have.” The Kaiser's authority is as fragile as his life, and no number of bodyguards can take Eulenspiegel's knife. (The audience might wonder where he keeps it so securely.) After this implied threat, Eulenspiegel's favored position at the court erodes, and the

27 “Von Adam an.”
Kaiser soon finds a pretext to have him hanged.

Eulenspiegel faces death bravely, asking one small favor of the Kaiser if he is to be executed. It is a little thing and will not cost him a penny, promises the jester. The Kaiser agrees, seemingly still amused at the man he is about to execute. Indeed, he would have to expend little physical energy to fulfill this request. All he has to do is kiss the dead joker's Arsch. This bold request, paired with a visual aid from beneath Eulenspiegel's robe, makes the Kaiser crack a smile, and he decides mercifully to exile the trickster instead. Having won his games against the most powerful men in Germany, Eulenspiegel then turns his attention beyond the fourth wall and toward the audience. With a devilish grin and a flick of his tongue, he bows to show that something is shaved into his scalp: Ende.

Till Eulenspiegel does not shy away from the brutalities of Medieval life. The results can be off-putting, but the shocking content sometimes makes Eulenspiegel's satire of these situations more effective. One exception, which underlines the destructive forces that can come from Eulenspiegel's kynical critique, comes in the final scene. A procession of clergy and noblemen walk down a street through the crowd that has gathered to see Eulenspiegel's hanging. As they pass, people at the side of the street begin to kill chickens for reasons that are not readily apparent. The filmmakers make it obvious that animals were harmed in the making of this film; the camera shows in close-up the cleavers coming down on the birds' necks. The result is an unforgettable though unnecessary image: The men throw the chickens into the street. They rain down, flopping and dying, in front of priests, nobles, and the Kaiser himself. The whole society, despite its superficial piety, seems to revel in the violence that is so prevalent in this film. Eulenspiegel likewise revels in exaggerating this brutal environment: out-toughing the toughs, outwitting the wise, overpowering the powerful and even taking charge at his own hanging.
As I have stated, *Till Eulenspiegel* contains few overt or even oblique references to the contemporary power structures of the GDR. The potential subversion of this story, however, is pronounced. In fact, Alexei Yurchak ties Sloterdijk's concept of the kynic to many late Soviet-era comedic actions.\textsuperscript{29} He uses the slang term “stiob” to describe a certain strain of Soviet irony that “required such a degree of overidentification with the object, person, or idea at which this stiob was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two.”\textsuperscript{30} Like Eulenspiegel, these satirists often got close enough to the power structures that they could almost be mistaken as such. Unlike the Eulenspiegel story, however, the power structures of late socialism were often seated not in individuals but in its bureaucratic infrastructures. Instead of holding a magnifying glass to the human faults of the ruling class, these pranksters ridicule the inhuman aspects of Soviet power. Yurchak cites imitation documents that mimicked the bureaucratic style—like many of the jokes in Chapter 2—of official communication. For example, one nonsensical note on official-looking letterhead offers many strange juxtapositions, including: “On August 13, 1953 the non-ferrous metallurgical industry of the USSR has suffered a great loss ... In commemoration of this outstanding event ...”\textsuperscript{31} He also describes many behaviors by alternative Soviet artists that fit perfectly with Eulenspiegel's mindset.

*Till Eulenspiegel* represents well the compromised position that the SED took in attempting to co-opt German cultural touchstones: Eulenspiegel, the Grimms and Andersen. Such films offered some sense of cultural continuity to the inhabitants of an East German state that had been established inorganically, like a severed limb sewn to a new body. In a country that wanted to forget and repudiate its recent past, the distant past offered comfort. Over one-tenth of

\textsuperscript{29} Yurchak, *Everything was Forever*, 277-9.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 250.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 261.
the children's films produced by DEFA were Märchen (fairy tales). These tales, however, left much room for interpretation and subtlety. Many films, like Till Eulenspiegel, were able to spark anti-establishment thoughts without saying a single word about the SED.

*Hasenherz*: Wishes Fulfilled?

DEFA films of the 1980s reflected a turn away from political substance and towards pure entertainment. Many scholars cite a cultural brain drain brought about by the 1976 exile of Wolf Biermann. This spurred an exodus of talented public figures, including the actor Manfred Krug. In addition, East Germany was by this time inundated with competing broadcasts from the west. The DEFA features, therefore, needed to provide real entertainment to compete with their western counterparts. Though these films were mostly devoid of political criticism or allegory, this does not mean that they were bad or uninteresting. An imperative for DEFA Kinderfilme was that they should contain some sort of message or lesson. *Hasenherz*, a children's coming-of-age comedy from director Gunter Friedrich, is no exception, but it also pokes fun at the common genre of Märchenfilme. The main character learns to be assertive and gets a better idea of what her identity is in the world. This 1987 film serves as a good example of the quality entertainment-oriented films of the 1980s and a reminder that comedy often took forms that were harmless to the aging SED.

*Hasenherz* is an acknowledgment and, in some ways, a parody of the prevalence of Märchen among DEFA children's fare. The protagonist, a 13-year old girl named Janni, stars as a prince in one such film, and this turns out to be a humorous and formative experience for her. Janni begins the film insecure about her still-androgynous figure. Boys taunt her about this in the

32 Shen, “Barometers of GDR Cultural Politics,” 70. Eulenspiegel is obviously no children's film, but similarly draws from a folkloric source from earlier German history.
33 Ibid., 83.
34 Ibid., 86.
opening scene, filling a swimsuit top with water balloons to highlight what Janni lacks. She lives alone with her kindly mother in a decent-sized apartment, and has a crush on a boy who towers over her. Her adolescent troubles seem to come to a head when a DEFA director comes to her school trying to cast an unknown child actor for the role of Prince Hasenherz (Rabbit-heart) in an upcoming Märchenfilm. Mistaking Janni for a boy, he invites her to audition. As her classmates laugh derisively, she rushes out of the room in tears.

The director, undeterred and still convinced that Janni could be a prince, turns out to be a kind-hearted soul, and patiently convinces Janni that it may be a good experience to play this part. In her first day on the job, she would rather try on the ornate dresses in the costume department than her princely garb. She is not thrilled about the experience at first, but an event soon changes her mind. When Sabine, a potential new friend, mistakes her for a boy (and, with comic awkwardness, seems to show romantic interest), Janni decides not to correct her. After the first day of filming, she meets Sabine again and rushes home to tell her mother “It's great to play a role!”36 The secret double meaning of “playing a role” is known only to Janni. As the story progresses, Janni uses her misunderstood relationship with Sabine to widen her experiences and improve her acting skills. Although this ends up hurting Sabine, Janni is able to become more comfortable making her own way in the world.

Much of the comedy in this film is simple slapstick aimed at children. At Janni's birthday party on set, for example, a young woman trips on an electrical cord and launches the birthday cake into the director's face. The first scene in which Janni plays is interrupted when the rabbit on the queen's lap uses her as a royal bathroom. Some is even simpler. Janni and her mother start laughing at a broken egg, apparently expecting a young audience to laugh along. However, the

36 “‘Ne Rolle Spielen ist schön!’"
film also plays subtly with teenage conceptions of gender. Janni's cross-dressing act bleeds into her real life in a case of mistaken identity. This mistaken identity is played up for comedy, but also spurs Janni to make decisions and become more self-assertive. The film production sequences play up the artificiality of film (and of Janni's forays into building false identities) with subtle winks toward the fourth wall. In the scene that depicts the first day of filming, the camera slowly zooms in over a feast toward the royal family. The first perspective is from the camera that films the film-within-a film. When they must retry the shot, the perspective is then focused on the production apparatus. The camera with the director and cinematographer is on a cart with a movable platform, and in order to get the shot they need, it hovers where the heads of the other actors at the table should be—the actors have to duck.

Beyond the basic premise, the film treats gender roles very playfully. Janni soon meets Sabine's brother, and a strange teenage love triangle emerges from her role playing. Both Sabine and Sebastian continue to think that Janni is a boy as Janni takes fencing lessons with Sebastian, an opportunity ordinarily not available to girls. They find out Janni's secret when she is given away by a stray pronoun, but Sabine comes up with a way to determine if it is really true: kiss her. Janni's lie collapses and it seems like she has lost her two new friends, but she has gained a greater self-confidence from her experiences playing a boy. She realizes that there are no real problems with being unconventional (though she once again embraces her femininity) and thinks less of negative opinions from other students. The film's final scene demonstrates this growth in her character while inverting fairy tale tropes with a sight gag. After the film's successful premiere, Sabine makes it clear that the betrayal was too much to be easily forgiven. However, Janni borrows a horse from the film studio, smoothly joins Sebastian at a park, and rides off into the sunset with him. Contrary to tradition, the princess carries her fair knight away.
The filmmakers emphasize focal points of physical gender identification and Janni’s self-identity, most prominently the state of her hair. Janni has relatively short hair, which, along with her undeveloped figure result in others mistaking her for a boy. When she begins the film role, she spikes her hair up and then maintains it that way to keep up her “act” with Sabine. She is not accepted by the other students at school, both because of her appearance and because of the strangeness of her acting circumstances. While playing Prince Hasenherz she wears a longer wig with stereotypically princely hair. After her friends find out her secret identity, however, Janni tries to reclaim femininity in the same way she claimed masculinity. She seemingly no longer identifies herself with either side and depends on her outward appearance to signify even her biological sex. She borrows a long and curly wig from the costume department and unveils it awkwardly to the other girls at school. Unsurprisingly, her classmates are unimpressed. When they begin to respect her after the movie premiere, she starts to realize that her accomplishments are independent of her outward appearance and stops worrying about her looks. She expresses her new confidence with the grand horseback gesture and Sebastian recognizes something has changed about her beyond outward gender associations. He delivers the corny line “I'm seeing you as a princess for the first time.”

*Hasenherz* is, first and foremost, entertainment for children. Most of the jokes are broad and simplistic, and the story fulfills the wishes of the young, pubescent protagonist; she becomes comfortable in her own skin and more confident in her social relations. The film makes an attempt to keep up with western competition on the music front. Drum machines, synthesizers, and a strident electric guitar tone place it firmly within the realm of 1980s American popular music and clash with the fairytale theme. The theme and subject matter have far more to do with

37 “*Ich sehe dich Fürstin ersten mal.*”
the experiences of adolescents than with any sort of political message.

The film's more dramatic themes are treated in subtle nonverbal ways. There is little overt discussion of the complexity of masculine and feminine concepts in East Germany; instead, the filmmakers portray many of these issues through action. Janni as a boy is able to join in activities—a pick-up soccer game and fencing lessons—that normally would exclude girls. The bittersweet ending, in which Sabine rejects her and Sebastian accepts her, adds a bit of equivocation to Janni's life lesson. She has truly hurt her friend by lying, but the fact that Sabine appeared at the premiere at all shows that the relationship could heal in the future. Unfortunately this conversation and the final horseback scene are far too simple and rushed to bridge the gap between the two siblings' reactions. As it stands, Janni is both punished and rewarded for her lies. Due to the truncated ending, it is hard to determine whether this is intentional or merely a result of sloppy storytelling.

*Hasenherz* does deal with gender politics, often in surprisingly subtle ways, but it exists outside of the categories of complaint outlined in the previous chapter. Janni and her mother have a spacious, modern apartment, a color television and plentiful food. The only government presence in the film consists of DEFA and Janni's school, and both are given a fairly neutral or positive treatment. The filmmaking crew, especially the director, are quite warm and friendly and have Janni's best interests in mind. The uncontroversial film was met with positive reviews that praised its message and its subtlety.\(^{38}\) Janni's struggle for self-identity and agency, along with the film's entertainment-oriented composition, reflect an emphasis on the importance of individuals within the GDR. Though the films of the 1980s contained less political commentary than the *Märchenfilme* of previous decades, *Hasenherz* and other apolitical films serve as a reminder that

many of the problems faced by inhabitants of the GDR existed outside of politics and within a still-existing private sphere.

Conclusion

The DEFA studio, throughout the GDR's existence, managed to produce diverse films of much artistic merit. The hand of the SED should not be overestimated in analyzing DEFA films. The film studio, though a small portion of films were blocked, did not often act as a propaganda arm of the SED. The bulk of the creative people involved in filmmaking were interested in creating legitimate cultural works within the existing framework of the GDR. Further slippage of the SED leadership's grip came because of the complexity of film as a medium. State censorship and control could not reach all of the subtleties of a film's production. Performances and images could be loaded with ambiguity, and allegory could allow much freedom for interpretation. The star power and context of so-called “audience darlings” could add additional layers of meaning outside of the film's universe.39 For these reasons, it was hard to assimilate film into socialist orthodox speech. The attitude toward DEFA's production was generally more positive than toward the publications that the SED could better control. Although Balla takes a meta-jab at DEFA's early work in Spur der Steine, jokes about newspapers were far more prevalent in the general population. This difference in opinion surely did not stem only from the fact that film reels make terrible toilet paper.

The three films analyzed above are by no means a full representation of DEFA comedy, but serve as interesting case studies. Representing three different decades and genres, they offer three different attitudes toward humor: as a constructive force, a destructive force, and as an innocuous form of entertainment. Defined and understood broadly, humor serves all of these

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39 This term was preferred in the GDR over “stars.” Daniela Berghahn, Hollywood Behind the Wall: The Cinema of East Germany, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005): 36.
functions. DEFA comedies are a very rich, interesting subject that scholarship has yet to examine categorically in a detailed way. Although film is a well-established way to escape and relieve stress, comedies often, through subtlety and double meanings, allowed audiences to “let off steam” in other ways that undermined the SED establishment's grip on freedom of speech.
CHAPTER FOUR

EULENSPIEGEL MAGAZINE: A FUNHOUSE MIRROR ON THE WORLD

The German Democratic Republic published a satire magazine almost from its beginning. The original publication, beginning in 1949, was called *Frischer Wind*, but the title was changed to *Eulenspiegel* in 1954.\(^1\) Although satire publications, most notably the long-running *Simplicissimus*, had languished under the harsher political climate of the Third Reich, *Eulenspiegel* did not have any trouble with circulation. In fact, demand was huge throughout its entire run in the GDR.\(^2\) *Eulenspiegel Verlag* (Eulenspiegel Press) printed almost half a million weekly issues, each with sixteen pages and costing consistently 40 pfennig. Bytwerk writes, based on correspondence with *Eulenspiegel*’s editorial staff, that if enough paper had been available they could have sold twice as many copies weekly.\(^3\) The magazine offered an eclectic mix of humor, satire, interaction with its readership and international propaganda. This mixture makes it a fascinating source in the study of East German humor. For the purposes of this project, I examined three years of *Eulenspiegel* issues: 1961, 1968 and 1987. I chose the first two years to gain an understanding of the publication’s response to monumental events in the eastern bloc and abroad. I chose the 1987 issues to track changes in the magazine over a longer term and to determine whether the propaganda messages changed at all when Mikhail Gorbachev’s policies of *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* began to soften the message of the Soviet Union.

*Eulenspiegel* responded to world events with propaganda campaigns that pushed the same message for weeks or months, reinforcing the orthodox communist language and message that was present in more serious news publications. By the term “propaganda,” I mean media whose

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2 The publication has continued under the same name since German Reunification.
primary purpose is to evoke an emotional response in support of the propaganda-writer's aims. Within the magazine, propaganda was juxtaposed with real though limited critiques of life in the GDR, even a few that called into question the dogmatic thinking that was encouraged by many other sources. When the international satire was based on real problems in the imperfect USA and Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), it could be quite effective. However, the presentation of tired orthodox communist messages right alongside humor that encouraged lateral thinking and “counterlanguages” had the effect of weakening the propaganda content that was easier to debunk. The plentiful reader feedback that the magazine published provides a way—though not a perfect one—to see what readers felt most passionately about. My analysis of the magazine's content and of this feedback shows that most readers were interested in the magazine for its humorous content and for its status as an outlet for complaints and improvement, and that the international propaganda was a less attractive feature for many reasons.

The content of the magazine remained fairly stable throughout its run. The front and back covers almost always featured full-page cartoons with varied content. The magazine offered many long-running features, including reader letters and submissions, localized critique of GDR life, responses by organizations to this critique, and a crossword puzzle. The editors interspersed cartoons and illustrations throughout the magazine. Cartoons were often grouped with a common theme, and were sometimes borrowed from other satirical magazines. The political cartoons usually stood apart from the sillier illustrations. A long-running monthly feature, “Funzel,” included nude or near-nude women along with playful quips. Page-length articles covered a variety of subjects, from satire of western lifestyles or East German idiosyncrasies to apolitical humorous stories. Content generally fell into four major categories: light humor, international propaganda, inward critique of the GDR, and reader interaction.
*Eulenspiegel*’s more critical content could serve as a barometer of what humorous expressions were acceptable. On the whole, much of the humorous critique that *Eulenspiegel* produced could fit into the joke categories outlined in Chapter 2. The types of criticism that were acceptable included complaints about inefficiency, waste, and public nuisances. Individual foibles were also a prime target; articles attacked or satirized laziness, drunkenness and smoking. The closest that *Eulenspiegel* got to reflecting systemic ills involved the mockery of the misapplication of socialist maxims or work principles. For example, one cover cartoon features a soccer team practicing next to a sign that reads: “Our production team's duty: more goals in the same time for the same amount of money.”

There were definitely taboo categories that were notable in their absence. Jokes about the police and the Stasi were not present, nor those that bemoaned the GDR’s leadership. Systemic condemnations were not within the magazine's parameters, as its content focused on narrow, concrete items that could theoretically be fixed. Complaints about the GDR’s relationship with Moscow were also absent. Mentions of the USSR, such as a 1968 campaign touting an upcoming Soviet probe to be sent to Venus, were unfailingly positive.

Thanks to parts of the magazine’s extensive interaction with its readership, it is possible to gain demographic information about its audience and insight into readers’ motivations. A very useful 1961 article gives the results of a reader survey that had been conducted by mail in the preceding autumn. Of about 1700 submissions, 76% of respondents were men, 18.7% women, 4% youth and the remainder illegible or anonymous. Similarly, the demographics were dominated by city-dwellers, who were overrepresented with nearly a three to one ratio. The survey also asked, “What do you find missing from *Eulenspiegel*?”

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curated of course by the editorial staff, are quite eclectic. Requests range from “A 10-Mark note in every issue” to “More printing errors” to “More beautiful girls' legs” and “More critique of men.” One reader asks if the magazine can deal more directly with current events, and the staff responds with another tidbit that is helpful in understanding Eulenspiegel's interaction with contemporary events: He replies that the magazine has a three-week turnaround in production. Also, the work of an enterprising statistically-minded reader in a 1987 issue shows that a similar gender gap still remained among readers in 1986, at least among contest winners. Men won 101 prizes, women 33, and “other” won 22. The magazine included material targeted at both men and women, but aimed more toward a male audience. I will discuss this in more detail below.

Eulenspiegel was not a unique publication within Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe. The Soviet Union published a similar magazine called Krokodil, and many other small states put out their own magazines. The state publishers' motivations for publishing satire were complex. Eulenspiegel reflects much genuine effort toward providing entertaining content, but satire was seen by leadership more as a tool for political gain and self-improvement. Thankfully, Eulenspiegel shares the overt aims of its satire in many places. A 1961 issue includes a valuable quote from Soviet Premier Khruschev, surrounded by political cartoons and the Krokodil logo (See Appendix A, Fig. 2):

And [satire] was never apolitical for us; it is one of the sharpest kinds of weapons. Because it ridicules vice, holdovers, and shortcomings, it alerts people about maladies, it helps them overcome flaws. Therefore satire must continue to be a tool of our party and our people in order to help eliminate everything that stands in our way toward Communism.  

6 Ibid.
7 Eulenspiegel 1987, No. 3, 2.
8 ”Auch sie war bei uns niemals apolitisch; sie ist eine der schärfste Waffenarten. Da sie Laster, Überbleibsel und Mängel verspottet, warnt sie die Menschen vor Krankheiten, hilft sie ihnen Mängel überwinden. Deshalb muss die Satire auch weiterhin Rüstzeug unserer Partei und unseres Volkes sein, um alles beseitigen zu helfen, was sich unserem Weg in den Kommunismus entgegenstellt.” Eulenspiegel 1961, No. 42, 4.
This reflects a view of satire as self-critique with clear goals of improvement. When turned outward, this critical mirror could be used to trigger emotional responses toward foreign policy issues. Much of the satire seen here, both inward and outward, was effective in pointing out and mocking flaws. However, it was impossible to reach the sublime, detached mockery of Diogenes and the original Eulenspiegel, given the strict constraints on what was eligible for critique.

These publications often pooled their comedic resources and sometimes met to discuss common goals. A 1961 feature outlined an international meeting of satire editors from Bulgaria, the GDR, Poland, Romania, the USSR, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. The article does not describe substantial talk about common goals, but rather the activities the editors undertook. The trip included drinking, toasts, a bit of self-parody and a symbolic trip to Auschwitz for ideological inspiration. A more useful article a few issues later prints congratulations that these magazines sent to *Eulenspiegel* on its fifteenth anniversary. The *Krokodil* submission expressed a wittily optimistic view of satirists' goals: “The more energetically we satirists fight against shortcomings, the fewer themes present themselves for glosses and caricatures and the harder our work becomes. Along these lines I wish you great hardship and at the same time much success.”

A regular feature called “Gesucht und Gefunden” (Sought and Found) borrows guest cartoons from these publications, but the cartoons featured here are often apolitical. In fact, this feature often published cartoons from *The New Yorker* or the United Kingdom's *Punch*. Though these western cartoons tended toward silliness, their presence indicates that *Eulenspiegel* staffers had a separate solidarity with fellow satirists of all backgrounds or a prioritization of humor over political geography. Or perhaps they were merely grateful that they did not have to fill that space

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9 *Eulenspiegel* 1961, No. 8, 8-9.

with a cartoon of their own.

Till Eulenspiegel, the name-sake of this magazine, held up a figurative mirror (Spiegel) to the follies of Medieval feudalism, and the editors and writers of the magazine wished to follow in his tradition to some extent. Much of the magazine's content was based on legitimate complaints and effectively lampooned problems at home and abroad. The writers and editors limited themselves to “concrete critique”¹¹ This meant that the magazine could criticize elements of the GDR's society and economy, but such critique had to be limited to specific instances or patterns of behavior. As with most other cultural productions within the GDR, the staff of Eulenspiegel eventually internalized the restrictions that censors gave them and were able to self-regulate their output to fit those restrictions, regardless of personal opinion.¹² The result was a distorted reflection that exaggerated some features of the world and made others disappear. The magazine staff was successful in creating a source of entertainment and humor, but its selective critique hobbled its effectiveness as a satire publication. Almost any satire is subject to editorial restrictions of some sort, but the party-mandated blind spots and targets were crucial failures that made it impossible for Eulenspiegel to truly live up to its namesake.

Satire and Foreign Policy

The magazine's foreign coverage consisted of many cartoons and some articles that pointed out, exaggerated or fabricated foibles in the FRG, the United States, capitalism and colonialism. These attacks often followed current events, though the magazine could not comment immediately, and can be observed as multiple-issue campaigns. These campaigns were especially evident when the SED had major ideological points to push, such as the hollow propaganda surrounding the erection of the Berlin Wall or the outrage at the United States'
development of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) in the late 1980s. These multi-week thematic pushes were not strictly limited to foreign propaganda, but most of the inward critiques were directed at instances of chronic problems. Therefore, inward coverage was less intensely concentrated, but continued for a longer time period.

The outward-facing propaganda content in *Eulenspiegel* has many parallels with advertiseomens in a for-profit publication. Messages were deployed in what resembles multi-issue advertising campaigns. Propaganda fills a significant portion of every issue, yet it was largely ignored in comparison to other content. Reader letters almost never engaged with the foreign propaganda content; the party leadership's messages, unlike *Eulenspiegel*'s humorous contributions, could be found in many other GDR media sources. When it came to critique, the readers were much more interested in what affected them directly in their everyday lives, such as piles of rubble on the street or faulty housing.

The propaganda content can be divided into two groups addressing “acute” and “chronic” issues. Acute issues included events that required a consistent message, but soon passed. Many of the “campaigns” put heavy emphasis on certain events, such as Olympic games or nuclear disarmament gambits, but then moved on. The “chronic” issues were endemic or long-term points that *Eulenspiegel* writers could take a jab at every once in a while. The chronic issues of the United States, through *Eulenspiegel*'s lens, were the decadence and inequality of capitalism, general militarism, the Vietnam war, and ongoing racism. The FRG was cast as the sole inheritor of Germany's Nazi past. Cartoons targeted its capitalist economy as well. Competing sensationalist western journalism, especially the West German tabloid *Bild*, was also a common long-term target. There was little difference in the techniques used for acute and chronic propaganda campaigns, but the long-term repetitiveness of the chronic campaigns sometimes
made their satire less effective.

Foremost among the short-term propaganda campaigns in these years was the one spurred by abrupt creation of the Berlin Wall in August 1961. This campaign was especially intense in the few weeks following the 13th of August, beginning with issue 35 of that year. In this issue, eleven cartoons, articles or blurbs refer to the wall as positive for the GDR's security or negative for West Berlin's economy. The most strikingly manipulative is a cartoon that shows West Berlin officials in tears underneath a street sign for the “Straße des 17. Juni,” which West Berlin had renamed to commemorate the GDR's 1953 protests. On the eastern side, a citizen and soldier smile up at the street sign for “Unter den Linden,” the corresponding street on the eastern side of the new wall, upon which a new sign has been hung: “Straße des 13. August.” To show why the Wall is such a victory, several cartoons show West Berlin business owners—especially moneychangers—suffering or closing their business after losing their customers from the East. Other cartoons dismiss the former West German offerings as beneath East Germans. In one, West Berlin men look on greedily at an unflatteringly-portrayed nude mud-wrestling match. One of the observers says to his friend in an informal, uneducated dialect, “And our 'brothers' from the east sector have to miss out on cultural achievements like this!” In the same issue, dirty western magazines are caught in the “Schmutzfilter” of barbed wire. The smug East Berliners shown in this campaign do not seem to miss the filthy offerings of the West.

The Wall campaign continued for several weeks, and the national election soon after was held up as a referendum on the GDR's practices. Issue 37 unironically prepared readers for a fun

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14 See for example Eulenspiegel 1961, No. 35, 3; No. 36, 7; No. 36, 9; No. 36, 16.
15 The Eulenspiegel illustrators often worked to sexualize scenes and offer exaggerated or idealized portrayals of female bodies for males' enjoyment. It is clear in this case they had the opposite intent. “Und uff so ne Kulturschaffe muss 'Keule' ausn Ostsektor nu verzichten!” Eulenspiegel 1961, No. 36, 6.
16 Ibid., 8.
and enthusiastic trip to the polls with many cartoons and articles. The results of such elections were never in question, but the next issue trumpeted the results as a second victory similar in scope (and in shape) to the Berlin Wall. Grumpy-looking westerners use magnifying glasses to examine an airtight wall of ballots that signifies the near-unanimous result. The drawing is titled “The second blow” and the caption reads: “Can't find a gap to slip through!”17

Not all campaigns were so disingenuous. Another 1961 cluster touted a Soviet space probe that was launched to Venus. It was easier to sell a genuine technical achievement, and so the campaign put less emphasis on convincing the public that the rocket was a good thing. The intent was more to raise public awareness and excitement about the rocket. It was also easier to engage the readership on this topic. The editors, for the reader-submitted cartoon of the week two weeks in a row, chose submissions that had to do with the rocket. One boasted about the distance it had traveled, comparing it favorably to other vehicles of the eastern bloc. A sign hangs on the rocket that reads, “300,000,000 km without general repairs.”18 A similar campaign in 1968 trumpeted the East German national team's success in the Summer Olympics. Likewise, the task was to raise enthusiasm for a positive rather than glossing over negatives.

The Prague Spring, a move in Czechoslovakia toward reform and decentralization, seems to have been a harder subject to tackle than even the Wall. *Eulenspiegel* puts only a few token attempts toward spinning the subsequent invasion of Czechoslovakia as something positive, then lapses into silence about the topic. The first mention of events in Prague comes only after Soviet tanks rolled in. Again, it seems the wily West Germans are to blame. An old man in a suit looks teary-eyed to a calendar, cursing the month of August. He holds a book that memorializes August 13, 1961 on one page and August 21, 1968 on the other. A “frontal assault” had not worked in

1961, so this time they tried an Umfassungsangriff. The word Umfassung and the illustration denote both encirclement and embracing, so one could translate this as both “encircling maneuver” and “charm offensive.”\textsuperscript{19} The message of this cartoon is that the events in Czechoslovakia really had little to do with its inhabitants, the allies of the GDR. The following issue reiterates this message in its “Kontra-Bonntes” feature (a play on “contraband” and the West German capital), and a short poem tries to implicate the USA as masterminds as well.\textsuperscript{20} The coverage falls off to a few photo captions in a third issue, then nothing more.

A propaganda campaign that was prominent throughout the 1987 issues preached the evils of Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative. This was an ongoing project for the USA, rather than a single event, but did not reach the systemic proportions of what I have labeled chronic issues. The proposed missile defense system was portrayed in the pages of \textit{Eulenspiegel} as an incredibly dangerous game of nuclear brinksmanship and a boondoggle meant to enrich industry. On a single page, three different critiques come through. A model satellite laser melts through a model of the earth. The reckless scientists decide: “These lab attempts are getting more and more dangerous—it's time that we finally take it into space!” In a guest cartoon from Cuba, Reagan rides a missile, \textit{Dr. Strangelove}-style, past an ashamed Statue of Liberty who has dropped her torch and put her hands over her eyes. In the third cartoon, a man sits in a palatial office with profit projections related to the project literally going through the roof.\textsuperscript{21} The campaign against this project is unrelenting throughout the 1987 issues.

The chronic topics that \textit{Eulenspiegel}'s propaganda satirized reflected long-term, systemic critiques of the GDR's Cold War rivals. Foremost among these issues was the market-based capitalism of the United States and West Germany. Attacks on capitalism used many common

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Eulenspiegel} 1968, No. 38, 5.  
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Eulenspiegel} 1968, No. 39, 4.  
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Eulenspiegel} 1987, No. 10,
motifs. Urban poor were common subjects; for example, a back cover cartoon shows several small black children sitting on a stoop. A cat scavenges through overflowing garbage cans in the foreground; broken furniture litters the sidewalk in the background. The children seem to be keeping up with politics, somehow. The caption reads, “The government says that something must be done against these slums.” “God knows where we would live then!”22 As can be expected, Eulenspiegel portrays the other side of capitalist inequality as fat, greedy, out-of-touch men in suits accompanied by vain women. These capitalists are often portrayed as profiting from the USA's military-industrial complex. Another 1987 cartoon, for example, portrays the SDI system as an enrichment scheme. A woman at a decadent US government party tells her friend, “If George didn't still have business with SDI, we would soon be left with nothing!”23 These cartoons often offer in an exaggerated form the same critiques that left-wing United States citizens launched at their own country.

The Vietnam War was an easy target for long-term criticism, and cartoons sporadically reiterated disapproval of what was seen as the USA's imperialist war. They portray American soldiers alternatingly as individual monsters and as dupes of a higher-level conspiracy. Two prominent 1961 cartoons depict American soldiers as rapists. In the second cartoon, the soldier calls the Vietnamese man who is trying to pull him off of a woman the worst thing he can think of: “Communist!”24 On the other hand, high-ranking officers inspect an “invention of the Cosa Nostra: Coffin with a double bottom. With this trick we could reduce our official casualties by half!”25 Eulenspiegel portrays the United States' war effort as corrupt and cynical on multiple occasions.

22 “Die Regierung sagt, es muss was gegen diese Slums getan werden.” “Um Gottes willen—wo sollen wir dann wohnen?” Eulenspiegel 1987, No. 25, 16.
24 Eulenspiegel 1961, No. 49, 4. The other cartoon referenced can be found in Eulenspiegel 1961, No. 8, 16.
levels. This mirrors domestic critique within the United States, but offers the reader less context for evaluation of the position. The portrayals of the rapist soldiers invite the generalization that every US soldier did the same, and the same goes for the cynical (in Sloterdijk's modern sense of the word) generals.

One of the most worn-out propaganda devices in *Eulenspiegel* was its constant attempt to cast the FRG as the true inheritors of the legacy that Hitler left. Although the populations of both states were riddled with former Nazis, the GDR was built on the myth of a clean break from the Nazi era. Hitler had demonized socialists, who made up the GDR's entire leadership. As a result, East German propagandists felt able to mock West Germans relentlessly for what they portrayed as continuation of Nazi policies. Sometimes these attacks had specific and deserving targets, and sometimes they were general smears. The majority of these attacks used obvious symbols of Nazism: the swastika, the SS logo, and the Hitler mustache. For example, one front cover portrays the western National Democratic Party as an iceberg with a harmless snowman above but with sinister faces of the past leering below the surface.26 Sometimes the jabs were more clever, though. One cartoon shows a young woman tanning under a bright light. When her friend asks who she is going out with, she replies, “A big wig from Munich who works in justice.” Her friend replies, referring to the color commonly associated with the Nazi Party, “Ah, is that why you want to get so brown?”27 This and other cartoons portrayed Munich still as a hotbed of Nazi ideals.

The propaganda had disadvantages in comparison to *Eulenspiegel's* other content: it was not very funny.28 As the examples above show, much of this political satire relied on crude, tired

26 *Eulenspiegel* 1968, No. 5, 1.
28 As Bytwerk points out, humor was not the point of this content and not an essential part of Marxist-Leninist satire. “Official Satire in Propaganda,” 306-7.
symbols and gross generalizations. The editorial staff, with minds definitely attuned toward quality in satire, was aware of these problems: In 1962, Peter Nelkin, its editor, wrote against lazy portrayals: “Not every warmonger looks like an ape and not all monopoly capitalists bite their nails in anxiety. These sorts of cliches do not only minimize the severity of the struggle, they also ignore an important function of satire: to provoke the reader or viewer to thought, to force him to contemplate, to draw conclusions, that will affect his action.”

More clever cartoons subverted things westerners saw as positive. A picture labeled “Economic Wonderboy 1961” displays a fat, bloated West German youth lying on the ground. It construed as gluttony and waste what some saw as plenty. Another technique featured historical figures shaking their heads in disapproval when faced with the contemporary world. Abraham Lincoln, perhaps the only American portrayed positively, looks on horrified at the United States' race problems of 1961 (see Appendix A, Fig. 3) and wishes Fidel Castro luck. Similarly, Jesus stands forgotten and disappointed in an orgy of crass Christmas commercialism. In lieu of humor, the best that could be hoped for was striking imagery, and the cartoonists were often successful in this respect. The best example, captioned “Words and Deeds,” depicts Uncle Sam speaking peace—literally spitting up doves—and, as they fly off, shooting them through the heart (See Appendix A, Fig. 5).

As a part of the “orthodox communist language” described by Young, these cartoons and articles as a whole ignore even the possibility of counterpoints. They are meant to tell the reader how the world is—period. This propaganda, though, was ineffective in doing so for a reason independent of its content, humor or truthfulness. The magazine interspersed these flat messages

29 Bytwerk, Bending Spines, 120.
31 Eulenspiegel 1961, No. 17, 13; No. 19, 9.
32 Eulenspiegel 1961, No. 51, 16.
with other material that encouraged lateral and creative thinking as well as critique of East German ways of life. The other content of the magazine weakened the propaganda messages by providing the building blocks of counterlanguages juxtaposed directly against the central government's messages. The following section will examine the magazine's other, more effective functions.

Reader Interactions, Welcome Distractions, and Conflicted Criticism

*Eulenspiegel* solicited diverse responses from its readers. Each issue had a *Post* section that selected four or five letters to the editor. These mostly contained feedback on the magazine's content. Each issue also contained a reader contest. The 1961 contest was the “Reader Idea of the Week,”[^34] for which entrants conceived of and drew their own cartoon. A contest that started in 1968 and continued on weekly to celebrate its 1000th winner in 1987 was called “Readers Join in.”[^35] This contest provided a cartoon and asked the readers to supply their own captions. Both of these contests offered as their prize 100 marks. A third weekly feature, *Passivisten und Spassivisten* (Loafers and Jokesters), allowed readers to contribute to the magazine's inward critique of the GDR. This page often included reporting on three or four separate issues, which very carefully localized the problems, often including a specific address. Although reader submissions are not often credited, the staff relied on a multitude of readers to help identify troubles.[^36] The column “Acknowledged/Countered” included responses by organizations that had been mentioned in the previous feature.[^37] This was the spot meant to demonstrate the value of inward critique, as the public shame of being called out by *Eulenspiegel* proved a good motivator.

[^34]: “Leseridee der Woche” is on page 7 of every 1961 issue.
[^35]: “Leser machen mit” is almost always on page 15.
[^36]: One issue includes a plea to submit unique and interesting problems only. See *Eulenspiegel* 1968, No. 4, 10.
[^37]: “Quittiertes”
The Post feature was a grab bag for miscellaneous reader comments and feedback on the magazine. The content of these notes reflects both reader and editorial interests, and both of these steer away from Eulenspiegel's propaganda content. As a randomly selected sample, of the 55 reader letters published in the September 1968 issues, zero have anything to do with foreign policy and one mentions negative attitudes toward western films.\textsuperscript{38} The bulk of these letters engage with the magazine's inward critique or praise articles the readers found especially interesting. This feature is helpful in showing what content the readers felt was most noteworthy about Eulenspiegel and what they could not get from other publications.

The reader contests reflected a similar interest in silliness and critique over all else. The above cartoon submissions about the Venus rocket proved to be exceptions. Most winning reader-submitted cartoons fell into the apolitical category. They often played with well-known tropes or aphorisms, like “The captain is the last to abandon ship.” In this case, the ship is the sign for a bar as a crew of sailors stagger drunkenly away.\textsuperscript{39} Others relied on visual puns. On the whole the winning submissions were almost indistinguishable in tone from the staff cartoonists' apolitical work. A note from the editors mentioned that few of the overall submissions were good ideas and many were stolen.\textsuperscript{40} The caption submissions sometimes tended toward more critical jokes about shortages and other complaints that the magazine's other content regularly highlighted. The magazine staff measured the number of submissions in creative ways that may or may not be credible. They highlighted the sheer popularity of the contest: The tenth contest winner was supposedly selected from “8.01 kg of postcards,” another from “a stack 1.96 m tall,” a third from “1.8 km of postcards.” Three months later, the 8.01 kg had exploded to 40 kg.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{38} Eulenspiegel 1968, No. 38, 2.
\textsuperscript{39} Eulenspiegel 1961, No. 7, 7.
\textsuperscript{40} Eulenspiegel 1961, No. 47, 7.
\textsuperscript{41} Eulenspiegel 1968, No. 10, 15; No. 12, 15; No. 18, 15; No. 22, 15.
popularity further reflected that the readers were most interested in *Eulenspiegel's* entertainment value and its inward satire.

The *Passivisten und Spassivisten* feature consisted mostly of reporting by Eulenspiegel writers on issues of laziness or inefficiency throughout East Germany. It often poked fun at other publications for typographical errors and included photographs of public eyesores accompanied with witty commentary: a rusted, abandoned train car, a pile of rubble left for months, a broken-down shack with a mock real estate ad. Other photographs included signs with accidental humorous or ironic meanings, such as a bathroom whose sign says “men” and whose pictograph is wearing a skirt. More substantive complaints were made in short articles, like one highlighting the ridiculousness of the GDR's system for grading apple quality. There were 11 different grades of apple quality in the GDR, ranging from IA down to C. The article points out that even grades near the top consist of apples with bruises and rot. “I don't know if anyone has yet consumed an apple of B III quality. It must be frightful.” Importantly, this feature's complaints were often met with apologies from the guilty parties and explanations of how they are working to fix the issue. The language of these responses is very serious and formal, though the problems had been pointed out with levity. One response from a city council reads: “We thank you very much for your notice, which contributed to the fact that the already once-deferred building project would not be pushed back again. All efforts are being made by the district council of Potsdam to restlessly make use of its 1961 resources for mass-produced large-block apartment construction.”

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42 There are numerous examples of these shame photographs. See, for example, *Eulenspiegel* 1961, No. 16, 10.
43 *Eulenspiegel* 1987, No. 9, 10.
far some institutions were from socialist ideals, but never to give general critiques of why such problems were widespread. Because many of the troubles in the GDR were truly systemic, the magazine never ran into the “problem” that *Krokodil* had wished upon it. There always remained something to point and laugh at.

The criticism within the magazine was not limited to *Passivisten und Spassivisten*. Cover art, two-page center spreads, articles and cartoons often pointed out troublesome aspects of GDR society. The criticism was officially limited to concrete problems, but sometimes the cartoonists generalized, especially about widespread problems like queuing and laziness. The critiques were mostly constructive, but every so often they reached their most subversive when they attacked the language and structures of the GDR's administration.

The most obvious and numerous problems addressed by *Eulenspiegel*'s inward mirror stemmed from economic inefficiencies. Long lines into stores were a common sight. The bulk of the *Passivisten und Spassivisten* complaints deal with this category: broken buildings and complaints about delayed projects abounded. One cartoon hits two points at once: Auto hobbyists lurk near a road filled with potholes, picking up plentiful spare parts that are knocked off the fragile passing vehicles. The poor quality of GDR products was a constant topic of contention: autos, consumer products and especially housing—even newly built housing.

The magazine tackles these problems with biting humor. Like the shoddy goods it mocks, the humor is not always of great quality, often resorting to cliches. It can be expected, though, that a weekly publication responsible for so much material would contain uneven quality. Based on reader feedback, the existence of a critical voice was more important than its tone. Pun titles for articles or cartoon spreads were common, some more clever than others. One more original

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title combines *Maschinenbau* (engineering) with *Bauchschmerzen* (stomachache). \(^47\) Sometimes jokes were thrown together only because they featured a certain letter. \(^48\) Periodically the magazine would devote a full page or two to highlighting problems within specific cities. \(^49\)

Another common mode of critique was aimed at personal shortcomings. Laziness and alcoholism were the most common personal problems to be criticized because they prevented citizens from doing their share toward improving the GDR. On a 1961 cover, a man practices excuses in a mirror: “It is really pure coincidence, doctor, that my vegetative dystonia only occurs exactly on Mondays.” \(^50\) These attacks sometimes generalize against certain groups: youth or manual laborers. \(^51\) Smoking was another target, although it was a less common target than the first two. These were safe topics for the magazine's satirists because they were problems that stemmed from individual foibles.

*Eulenspiegel* occasionally served as a platform for explicit discussion of gender issues. Recall that a large majority of its readers were men. The cover of one issue highlighted inequalities in the perception of gender roles and the division of labor. The GDR had made changes that brought many more women into the workplace than previously, but the woman here symbolically carries the baggage of the other duties that are still expected of her because of her gender. Three men look on, carrying allegorical briefcase-desks representing a day job. The woman carries this in addition to two toddlers in cribs, groceries and dishes. These tasks were all still seen as work for women. The men have a free hand to smoke, and say condescendingly, “Yes, everyone has their own burden to bear.” \(^52\) There were also token attempts to include pages

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\(^{47}\) “*Maschinenbauchschmerzen,*” *Eulenspiegel* 1961, No. 5, 11.
\(^{48}\) *Eulenspiegel* 1961, No. 43, 5.
\(^{49}\) See *Eulenspiegel* 1968, No. 38, 11.
\(^{50}\) “*Es ist wirklich purer Zufall, Herr Doktor, dass meine vegetative Dystonie ausgerechnet immer montags auftritt.*” *Eulenspiegel* 1961, No. 3, 1.
\(^{51}\) *Eulenspiegel* 1987, No. 10, 9; 1968, No. 52, 15.
\(^{52}\) “*Jaja, so hat eben jeder sein Päckchen zu tragen!*” *Eulenspiegel* 1968, No. 47, 1.
specifically for women. The magazine presented a far from united front on gender equality, however.

The sporadic efforts toward gender equality were overshadowed by problematic attitudes toward sexuality. Sexual politics and gender politics are separate issues in their own right, but they often intersect. Conceptions of gender and sexuality affect individual and societal behaviors in many ways. A semi-regular feature called “The Eternal Masculine” often stood at the intersection of gender stereotypes and sexuality. As in the cartoon mentioned earlier, it pokes fun at men for entitled behaviors toward the women in their life, or giving preferential treatment to attractive women, ignoring their performance in the workplace. this feature often reinforces stereotypical images of men who lust after every passing woman, and shrewish wives who keep them imprisoned. While, on one hand, the magazine tried to cast women as deserving of equal treatment in the workplace, its portrayal of women in the sexual realm is quite the opposite.

Eulenspiegel aimed to titillate its male readers, often including nude or exaggeratedly sexualized sketches and photos of women. These were often presented purely as pinup pictures. For example, one rear cover presents a visual pun, three nudes from behind: “Three beautiful examples of hindsight.” Cartoons that featured young and attractive women often portrayed them as sexual objects, even in nonsexual contexts. For example, one back-cover cartoon uses the flimsy excuse of complaining about flimsy stockings to show an attractive young woman in her underwear. The monthly back-cover Funzel feature originally featured mostly women in bikinis, but by 1987 the clothes had disappeared entirely. To contrast, the men in the magazine's cartoons remain fully clothed and occupy the positions of power. The previous example

53 Eulenspiegel 1968, No. 33, 12.
55 Eulenspiegel 1968, No. 13, 16.
56 Eulenspiegel 1961, No. 7, 16.
illustrates this strikingly. The young woman in the stockings speaks with her husband, who holds
his briefcase on the way out the door. Her job, as an attractive woman, is seemingly only to sit
there and look pretty. One poem in the same issue as the double-duty woman does actually try to
address the objectification and exaggeration of female bodies that these images put forth.
Emblematic of the magazine's schizophrenic gender portrayals, the poem's critique is
accompanied by a nude sketch—exactly what it is calling out as troubling. Called “Virgo
Incognita,” the poem vocalizes insecurities felt by the sketch's subject. She is drawn to the job by
curiosity, but has second thoughts. “Should I be distributed many hundreds of thousands of times
as an Eulenspiegel nudie? Will they keep finding me a highlight of the collection, for everyone's
delight, in kitchens, bars, [etc]? I'm not eager for such popularity. Grant me one request: change
my face a bit, so that it doesn't become known: It's Brigitte.” The girl does not feel comfortable
about her likeness being shared, but her likeness remains, slightly altered, for thousands to do
with it as they wish. The poem may make oglers uncomfortable, but the nude sketch is there for
them as well. For these reasons, like the propaganda content, the attempts the Eulenspiegel staff
made at encouraging gender equality were marred and undermined by its portrayal of women as
sexual objects for men's enjoyment.

Some of the most effective critical content the magazine offered took on the bureaucracy
and the obfuscated language of the SED's apparatus. Like the Andropov joke—“Enemies of the
Revolution never sleep!”—in Chapter 2, some cartoons warn that oft-repeated mottos can be
useless when misapplied. One clever attack on the abstraction of the SED's official language is a
crossword puzzle made entirely of real acronyms (See Appendix A, Fig. 8). The acronyms'

57 “Soll ich als Eulenspiegel-Nackedei viellhunderttausendfach verbreitet werden? Wird man men Konterfei in
Küchen, Bars, [etc], als clau des Inventars zu jedermanns Entzücken wiederfinden? Auf soviel Zuspruch bin ich
nicht empfert. Gestatten Sie mir darum eine Bitte: Verändern Sie ein wenig mein Gesicht, damit nicht ruchbar
58 Eulenspiegel 1987, No. 28, 7.
abstraction and the crossword's further removal of context combine to create a supremely meaningless jumble of letters. A second example shows a party official who has a good message, but who hides it in overly complex speech (See Appendix A, Fig. 7). He holds his speech so that it is visible; the first sentence drones on and on without getting to the point, threatening an immortality wrought of dependent clauses. A young cheerful man peeks from behind the corner of the page and translates: “Colleague Meier means that we need to be kinder.” This type of joke toes the line of subversiveness that Eulenspiegel's staff was careful not to cross. The cartoon does not challenge the message, but heavily critiques the party's preferred method of transmission—and other jokes criticized its administration. A modern-day Sisyphus is doomed to roll his stone forever between the desks of two bureaucrats (See Appendix A, Fig. 9). Many other gags show labor mottoes misapplied in the workplace. One cover illustration shows dozens of people chasing one solitary pig into a slaughterhouse. The leader says over his shoulder, “It's true, we did not fulfill the plan with this. But all are working together.” The common message is that the slogans and the plans of the central government are useless unless they are clearly communicated and properly applied.

Similar thematically are jokes and cartoons that ridicule pseudoscientific Taylorist attempts to increase workplace efficiency. In one cartoon, six men stand examining a mouse hole, trying to think of a solution. One of them yells at a cat, ignoring its mousing aptitude, “Get out, you undisciplined beast! In our firm everything is first thoroughly analyzed!” Another shows four men working to feed a water wheel that turns a Rube Goldberg-type machine that, in

59 “Kollege Meier meint, man muss menschlicher sein.” Eulenspiegel 1961, 14, 1.
60 Eulenspiegel 1987, No. 51, 1.
the end, lifts the lid of a trash can.\textsuperscript{63} Eulenspiegel portrays the scientific work methods as a waste of time, introducing needless complication to many simple tasks.

The satire aimed at the GDR was a very successful function of Eulenspiegel magazine. For the magazine, criticism was acceptable as long as it was concrete, well-specified and aimed at improving the East German state by increments. The magazine's readers engaged with this satire and added their own contributions; much of the domestic critique focused on everyday frustrations that affected many. The reader submissions served as an outlet for letting off steam. They also offered a possible way to humiliate those responsible into actually fixing problems.

Conclusion

Eulenspiegel's content demonstrates that it was a magazine with conflicting goals. It was a public intersection of the SED's propaganda efforts and individuals' gripes about their everyday lives. The editors, writers and cartoonists were left to try to bridge that gap, along with providing weekly humor and satirizing from both perspectives. The result is a jumbled, rambunctious, enthusiastic mess. As I have demonstrated, these goals did not exist in parallel but intersected and interacted with one another in ways that lessened the impact of much of the magazine's satire. The foreign propaganda often questioned the messages of the USA and the FRG, but to apply the same to troubles of the GDR's governance and its human rights violations would have been unfeasible. Likewise, the inward critique defines topics that were concrete and constructive, but similarly limited and conflicted. The logical delineation of these lines of critique leaves a black hole where bolder domestic criticism (as is seen in the jokes described in Chapter 2) should be. If the magazine had embodied its namesake, the Till Eulenspiegel of the GDR would have been a hobbled one. Even if he might have wished to, he had no tricks up his sleeve (or up his

\textsuperscript{63} Eulenspiegel 1961, No. 48, 8.
robe) that could help him mock the contemporary “Kaiser” with impunity. *Eulenspiegel* magazine remained what the original legend and the film's protagonist only pretended to be: a willing, amusing and only slightly subversive lackey of those in power.
CONCLUSION

Cynicism, as Sloterdijk defines it, was the norm within the GDR's politics, and was to some extent expected of its citizens in order to function. “Psychologically, present-day cynics can be understood as borderline melancholics, who can keep their symptoms of depression under control and can remain more or less able to work. Indeed, this is the essential point in modern cynicism: the ability of its bearers to work—in spite of anything that might happen and especially, after anything that might happen.”¹ A cynical outlook was essential in order to accept, or at least learn to live with, the SED's basic premises of the GDR's inception: that the passions, crimes and consequences of Nazism, of which GDR citizens had fresh memories, had little bearing on the citizens of the new state; that the conquering Soviets were suddenly allies.

The humorous behaviors and cultural products seen in the previous chapters rarely reflect the bold, destructive and almost self-sacrificing kynical impulse of Diogenes and Till Eulenspiegel. According to Sloterdijk, the boldness and performance of kynicism are essential to its effectiveness.² A hidden Diogenes is no Diogenes at all. Yet a Diogenes with a platform would have been promptly removed. Pretense was essential to the existence and continuance of the GDR, and the SED and Stasi³ defended it with force. Any humor or critique that was used as a coping method, a way to harmlessly let off steam, was born of this cynicism. Jokes could not be freely spread without risk. Performers and artists felt the need to self-censor and obscure overtly critical impulses or risk blacklisting, exile or imprisonment. Satirists, who mocked for a living, had to leave a gaping hole in their framework of disillusionment. Consequently, the

¹ Sloterdijk, Critique of Cynical Reason, 5.
² Ibid., 106.
³ I do not mean to essentialize these groups. Both were made up of many individuals who made human decisions for reasons that were their own. Cynical acts in service of self-preservation were a fact of life for party bigwigs dealing with outside forces, for Stasi informants, and for many others whose official acts went against their better judgment.
environments that allowed for critical humor in the GDR were suffused with cynical mindsets.

Privately shared jokes allowed individuals to imagine alternate possibilities and express ideas contrary to the SED's prescribed reality. However, the content of most of these jokes includes the implied assumption of helplessness against the status quo. They explain in straight talk the problems and contradictions that existed in the GDR, and that is all. The secretiveness of the *Fluesterwitz* underlines this individual helplessness. In spite of this, political jokes won a rhetorical victory over the totalitarian language of the state. The jokes' shades of meaning and ambiguity clashed against the essentialism of orthodox communist language.

The comedic films that I have analyzed demonstrate the difficulty in studying the genre categorically. Comic elements can be a prominent part of very earnest films that carry a lot of emotional and ideological weight, such as *Spur der Steine*. Comedy can also figure into many other genres, including children's entertainment, or it can be a genre of its own. Comedy is also a tool that can be used for many purposes, as these films and *Eulenspiegel* magazine demonstrate. There has been no categorical study in English of DEFA film comedies. Many comedies are mentioned in the context of general studies of DEFA film, but no scholars have attempted to work through comedy as a category. Although the amorphous genre is difficult to define, it would still be a valuable topic for a concentrated scholarly effort to tackle.

The three films that I have selected are interesting studies of circumstance, but should not be interpreted as representative of DEFA comedy overall. The inflection point toward uncritical fare after Wolf Biermann's exile is an interesting concept to work with, but not a hard and fast rule. With that said, these three films display a wide range of comedy techniques, ranging from sardonic, cutting wit to harmless but overplayed slapstick, and they represent three very different approaches to humor as the tool of an artist.
Though the humorous subject matter I have examined was produced through cynical methods of getting by within the GDR, the antics of the legendary figure Till Eulenspiegel still echoed through the GDR's cultural landscape. The joyful vulgarity of the film adaptation truly follows his kynical spirit: he effortlessly finds the weaknesses of his “masters” and exploits those weaknesses to show that they are always on his level. This was an effective mode of critique that joke-tellers applied to GDR leaders. The early Hannes Balla displays similar behaviors. Pulling a policeman into the duck pond and hijacking building material to use it efficiently are calculated public performances, a kynical mode of critique without regard for consequence. As he becomes more invested in the success of the project's management and more emotionally invested in his fellow characters, Balla loses or suppresses his puckish streak. This can be seen on one side as “growing up,” but on the other side he sacrifices the effectiveness he had previously exercised in flaunting his subversion.

_Eulenspiegel_ magazine, in its editorial style, imitated the cheeky attitude of its namesake. Its self-adapted logo was an owl holding a mirror in its talons, wearing Eulenspiegel's jester's hat (See Appendix A, Fig. 1). It was successful in holding up, with a detached and jolly tone, a critical mirror to some of the troubles of everyday life, and encouraged its readers to do the same with a sort of _Eingaben_ system that included an element of public shame. In order to survive as a publication, however, _Eulenspiegel_ had to distort its critical message, which resulted in a weakening of its critique and its ties to the original Eulenspiegel. But this was a self-aware distortion. In its boldest cartoon of 1987, _Eulenspiegel_ addresses the miniscule effect of individual _Eingaben_ as critique and obliquely references the SED's culture of surveillance. A man inserts an envelope into the mail slot of a massive marble edifice. Stern observers above, sitting next to telephones, complain that he is a “reprehensible ... repeat offender! He's already
written one *Eingabe!*”⁴ (See Appendix A, Fig. 10)

Humor is an anarchic, destructive force. The crux of almost any joke is the demolition and reformation of expectations. In the GDR, however, those who used this destructive force had to temper it and dull its edge to avoid personal consequences.⁵ The most subversive jokes were told only to the most trusted friends. Satirical artists, effective in perceiving, isolating and mocking problematic circumstances, had to shunt their creative impulses away from substantial criticism of the GDR and toward exaggerated criticism of its rivals.

Sloterdijk's categorical concept of cynicism can help bridge the gap between the totalitarian theory represented by Young's *Totalitarian Language* and Fulbrook's more atomized view of life in the GDR. Totalitarian goals and impulses did exist within the SED's apparatus, and thousands of people did work toward these ends. At the same time, each of those people had individual agency within and outside of their service of oppressive bureaucratic inertia. Like the disillusioned party bureaucrat who matter-of-factly explains the party's paradoxical actions in *Spur der Steine*, many managed to work around the dysfunction and embrace the contradictions implicit in their work.


⁵ Joke-tellers in any situation can face this problem to a lesser degree. Humorous impulses have the potential to damage relationships and reputations, regardless of their legal status.
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Fig. 1: the *Eulenspiegel* logo.
Fig. 2: Khruschev on satire:

“And [satire] was never apolitical for us; it is one of the sharpest kinds of weapons. Because it ridicules vice, holdovers, and shortcomings, it alerts people about maladies, it helps them overcome flaws. Therefore satire must continue to be a tool of our party and our people in order to help eliminate everything that stands in our way toward Communism.”

Fig. 3: Lincoln is the only American leader that *Eulenspiegel* portrays as a positive example. *Eulenspiegel* 1961, No. 17, 13.
Fig. 4: the real reason for the nuclear arms race. “We oppose Soviet atomic tests—mainly because they are bigger than ours!”

_Eulenspiegel_ 1961, No. 46, 2.
Fig. 5: Uncle Sam's “words and deeds.”
Fig. 6: Junk found in low-quality cigarettes.
Eulenspiegel 1968, No. 11, 10.
Fig. 7: simplifying party language.
Fig. 8: crossword puzzle of GDR acronyms.
Eulenspiegel 1987, No. 28, 7.
Fig. 9: a modern Sisyphus.
*Eulenspiegel* 1987, No. 51, 1.
Fig. 10: *Eingaben* under scrutiny.
*Eulenspiegel* 1987, No. 32, 1.
APPENDIX B: COPYRIGHT PERMISSIONS

Email exchange with *Eulenspiegel Verlag*, October 2013
Screenshot taken October 31, 2013

Ben Heili <bheili97@gmail.com>
Oct 13

Hallo Eulenspiegel,

Mit freundlichen Grüßen,
Ben Heili
Bowling Green State University

Eulenspiegel Sekretariat
Oct 15

Hallo Ben Heili,
sofern Sie die Kopien nicht zu kommerziellen Zwecken nutzen, dürfen Sie sie für Ihre Magisterarbeit verwenden.

Frohes Schaffen und maximale Erfolge

Martin Kremmer
Sekretariat Chefredaktion
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