

Chapter 12

1977: The GDR's Most Normal Year?

Mark Allinson



By any criteria, 1977 was a year of routines for the GDR. The year's only unusual characteristic was the absence of almost any unusual events, both within domestic affairs and in the GDR's foreign relations. Indeed, 1977 marks something of a halfway point between the end of the cycle of events that established the GDR's new status in the international sphere and, arguably, the start of the sequence of internal events that contributed to the state's eventual dissolution. The early 1970s had seen the emergence of Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* and its implementation, with the GDR's consequent establishment of diplomatic relations with much of the world; the GDR's participation in the Helsinki summit of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) cemented the GDR's international position, although at the expense of growing domestic dissatisfaction over the SED's failure to implement the Conference's civil rights agreements. More than was realised at the time, the SED's 1978 compromise with the GDR's Protestant churches would open the door to a nascent home-grown opposition, which would develop slowly during the early 1980s.¹

1977 was relatively free of exceptional events. Though the year was marked by the departure of the actor Manfred Krug and the arrest of Rudolf Bahro, author of *Die Alternative* (soon published in English as *The Alternative in Eastern Europe*), 1976 had by contrast witnessed the much higher profile effective expulsion of the singer and songwriter Wolf Biermann, the house arrest of the dissident philosopher Robert Havemann, and the self-immolation

1. Cf. Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship. Inside the GDR 1949–1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 124–25.

of the Protestant clergyman Oskar Brüsewitz on a public square in Zeitz. The keynote events which marked the passage from one five-year plan to the next—the SED’s party congress and the elections to the GDR’s parliament, the *Volkskammer*—had already occurred in 1976, along with the FDJ’s latest (tenth) *Parlament*. By 1977, the GDR’s course had been mapped out as far ahead as 1980, and was essentially in line with the policy initiatives introduced by Erich Honecker in 1971 following his rise to the pinnacle of the SED leadership. In 1977, therefore, it remained only for the bloc parties and mass organisations, including the FDGB trades union, the *Kulturbund* (Cultural League), and the Sorbs’ umbrella association, the *Domowina*, to echo the announced course at their own congresses.

Whenever possible, the SED coupled its exhortations to the workforce to increase productivity and its political work to significant events or anniversaries. The SED linked most of its 1977 campaigning to the year’s one significant landmark, the sixtieth anniversary of the October 1917 Russian Revolution (‘Red October’). This apart, no other anniversary could compete for similar attention in 1977, and even Erich Honecker’s 65th birthday on 25 August remained low key.²

By 1977, the GDR had settled into the routine cycle of events that remained fixed during the Honecker era. Some of these events, such as party congresses and elections, occurred on a five yearly basis; others took place annually, such as days to celebrate the work of teachers (12 June) or workers in the chemical industry (9 November), as well as the national holidays to mark International Labour Day (1 May) and the founding of the republic (7 October).³ The struggle (often termed a *Kampf*) to fulfil and exceed the targets of the five-year plan and the subordinate annual plans was ongoing and unrelenting.

The relative dearth of exceptional events—planned or unplanned—in the GDR during 1977 means that we can view this unremarkable year as a cross-section of what passed for ‘normal’ life, as ‘Alltag’, in the country at all levels, from the grassroots to the senior political leadership. The GDR citizens’ and leaders’ view of their country in 1977 is essentially undistorted by

2. Nonetheless, lesser anniversaries were also used to political effect wherever possible. The *Pionierkalender 1977* (Berlin: Kinderbuchverlag, 1977) draws particular attention to the 120th anniversary of Clara Zetkin’s birth (p. 59), the 25th anniversary of the first Pionierrepublik “Wilhelm Pieck” (p. 61), the 60th anniversary of the murders of Albin Köbis and Max Reichpietsch, two would-be revolutionaries in the imperial navy (p. 71), and the 20th anniversary of the first Sputnik (p. 77), among others.

3. The list could be considerably extended to include ‘Civil Defence Day’ (11 February), ‘Youth Brigades’ Day’ (16 May), ‘Railway Workers’ Day’ (8 June), ‘Day of the Border Troops of the GDR’ (1 December), and many others.

some of the exceptional events that overshadow other years. Here, the term 'normal' is not intended to denote any type of value judgement. It would be hard to counter the oft heard criticism that no state which depended on instruments such as the Berlin Wall and the *Stasi* to ensure its own survival could be described as 'normal' in international or chronological comparison.⁴ And yet: within the settled European geopolitical framework of the post-war era, a specific GDR normality emerged, developed, and settled, to which the Berlin Wall and the *Stasi* were as integral as Spee washing powder and the difficulties of securing regular supplies of bananas and oranges. The aim of this chapter is to sketch the contours of this internal normality in the Honecker era and to evaluate the extent of its stability. However, this brief portrait of 1977 clearly cannot provide a comprehensive overview of life in the GDR in this single year, so the focus is limited principally to the GDR's economic circumstances and to the attitudes of the population to the status and vitality of their state.

Perceptions of the GDR Economy in 1977

In his New Year address, Erich Honecker underlined the ambitious but, in his view, realistic economic plans for the year ahead.⁵ The five-year plan, as agreed to the previous year, foresaw a 27.9 percent increase in national earnings, which would finance 'the greatest social programme in our national history'. 'Our aims are realistic,' Honecker declared, while reflecting 'that for the economy of the German Democratic Republic foreign trade difficulties result from the signs of crisis in the imperialist world'.⁶ Honecker's public mood was equally positive twelve months later. In an article published on 31 December 1977, he spoke of a year 'of economic upturn'. 'On the threshold of the new year we can say that the hard work of all has paid off. . . . The economic successes have been turned into social policy measures, in accordance with our socialist principles.'⁷

Throughout the year, the campaign to boost economic production was at the core of party work. In January, Günter Ehrensperger, the head of the SED's planning and finances department, emphasised the importance

4. Cf. Mary Fulbrook, *The Concept of 'Normalisation' and the GDR in Comparative Perspective*, elsewhere in this collection.

5. 'Allen Bürgern unserer Republik viel Glück für das Jahr 1977', in Erich Honecker, *Reden und Aufsätze*, Band 5 (Berlin: Dietz, 1978), pp. 102–8.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 104–5.

7. 'Viel Glück und Erfolg allen Bürgern unserer Republik für das Jahr 1978', in Erich Honecker, *Reden und Aufsätze*, Band 6 (Berlin: Dietz, 1980), pp. 7–14, here p. 7.

of the SED's 'strict management of plan fulfilment from the very first day of the new year'.⁸ His article for SED functionaries listed the themes which would recur throughout the year: the plan 'serves the welfare of the working class and of the entire nation', would cement still further the 'unity of economic and social policy', and, with the planned rises in personal income, there would be a greater need 'to offer the population more and better consumer goods to satisfy the quantitatively and qualitatively higher requirements'. A top political priority would be progress within the framework of the plan to construct new residential flats, centred on the 'FDJ-Initiative Berlin'. Though the GDR's increased difficulties in importing fuel and raw materials was not specifically mentioned, the careful reader might also have sensed a period of increasing austerity planning in Ehrensperger's emphasis of 'intensivisation', in other words, 'the acceleration of economic and technical progress with the aim of significant productivity gains'. Technological advancement would be key to achieving 'rationalisation', 'savings of working time', and optimum efficiency in the use of raw materials. Increasingly, firms would move over to shift working so that assets were utilised to the maximum extent.⁹

Despite the positive sounding forecasts at New Year, the real economic difficulties faced by the GDR were apparent in reports compiled for the SED hierarchy throughout 1977. The GDR was attempting to grow its national income by 27.9 percent over the five-year period from 1975 to 1980,¹⁰ but lacked the resources to match the ambitious plans. The shortcomings were exacerbated by the poor quality of goods imported from other socialist countries, and the GDR's inability to fund the necessary imports from hard currency countries. As serious as these problems were, they appeared still greater in the eyes of the population given the obvious mismatch between the failure to achieve results and the oft-repeated aspirations and assertions of success.¹¹

A number of distinct themes punctuated public experience and discourse of the GDR's economic performance during 1977. An ongoing theme was the availability of goods. While the retail authorities were generally able

8. Günter Ehrensperger, 'Volkswirtschaftsplan 1977—Kurs des IX. Parteitages', in *Neuer Weg*, Nr.1/1977, pp. 1–6, here p. 2.

9. *Ibid.*, passim.

10. *Neuer Weg* (2/1977), endpiece.

11. LDPD members were not alone in commenting that the published figures on the GDR's economic success bore no relationship to the 'inadequate supplies for domestic retail'. 'The many shortages which have persisted over years make the announcement somewhat implausible.' LDPD Sekretariat des Parteivorstandes, 'Information Nr. 26/77', 29 August 1977, p. 3, Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv (SAPMO-BA) DY30/vorl. SED-19406, vol. 2. (Further archival references refer to SAPMO-BArch, except where noted.)

to maintain supplies of food and other goods throughout the country and throughout the year, the precarious nature of the situation was sometimes acutely apparent. During 1977, the GDR experienced huge difficulties in maintaining coffee supplies. The increasing cost of importing high quality beans (world coffee prices peaked in mid 1977¹²) led to the withdrawal of the popular 'Kosta' brand and its replacement with a new 'Kaffee-Mix', apparently containing 51 percent roast coffee beans, but 49 percent rye, although from the smell, many doubted that any real coffee was involved. Only 'Kaffee-Mix' would henceforth be available at all but the most expensive cafés and restaurants, fuelling comments that the GDR was creating a two-class society. The public frequently commented that the new blend effectively wasted real coffee, since it was being mixed to produce a brand which was widely boycotted, and in many cases proved unusable in GDR coffee machines.¹³ The poor value for money of 'Kaffee-Mix' also led many to conclude that back door price rises were occurring in the GDR, despite the official denials.¹⁴ With price rises recently announced in neighbouring Czechoslovakia for cocoa products as well as coffee, some panic buying began. Increased sales of cigarettes, alcohol, and chocolate were recorded in Berlin in early September, as (false) rumours spread of imminent price rises in the GDR.¹⁵ As world coffee prices began to sink back, the SED's policy seemed increasingly questionable in the eyes of critical citizens ('We're having problems with coffee, but in the west it's got cheaper. . .').¹⁶ By the end of September, the altered trade conditions and the strength of popular opinion forced a rethink by the state. The price of 'Kaffee-Mix' was reduced, and by November the recipe was changed, while the well known, better quality brands, including 'Mona', 'Rondo', and 'Mokka-Fix-Gold' (the latter of which had remained available in Berlin and Halle during the crisis) were reintroduced throughout the country in time for the state's birthday celebrations on 7 October.¹⁷ The extent of popular discontent prompted Honecker to address the coffee crisis directly in a keynote speech of late September, in which he highlighted the high cost of importing raw beans (some \$300

12. Cf. David Hallam, 'Falling commodity prices and industry responses: some lessons from the international coffee crisis', in *Commodity Market Review 2003–2004*, viewed at <http://www.fao.org/documents/show_cdr.asp?url_file=/DOCREP/006/Y5117E/y5117e03.htm> (accessed 30.6.2006).

13. CDU Sekretariat des Hauptvorstandes, 'Zur Diskussion der Mitglieder. . .', 13 September 1977, p. 7, DY30/vorl.SED 19680.

14. Nationale Front, 8 September 1977 report, DY30/vorl.SED 18401, vol. 1.

15. SED-Bezirksleitung Berlin, 'Monatsbericht', 12 September 1977, DY30/2200, p. 109.

16. DBD Abt. Parteiorgane, 'Information Nr.20/77', 17 August 1977, p. 3, DY30/vorl.SED 21550.

17. 'Information zu ausgewählten Versorgungspositionen. . .', reports of 27 September and 29 November 1977, DY30/vorl.SED 20223.

million annually).¹⁸ The episode left more than a sour taste: it clearly demonstrated how marginal the GDR's prosperity had become.

Though less remarked upon than the coffee crisis, at year's end oranges proved particularly problematic as supplies were increasingly sourced from Cuba. Unlike Mediterranean oranges, the Cuban variety was frequently greenish in colour as a result of local temperature conditions. With an average of 31 percent of green coloured oranges imported from Cuba in the fourth quarter of 1977,¹⁹ the retail authorities faced a dilemma. While complaints were made to the Cuban authorities about the poor quality of the fruit, and only partial improvements were achieved by attempts to improve the colour by altering storage conditions, there was a choice to be made between withholding the fruit altogether or releasing it for sale and risking negative comments, which would overshadow the otherwise good impression made by the Christmas retail supply situation. Finally a compromise was proposed: to withhold the 'grass green' oranges until they could be coloured or used for other purposes, and to sell the rest before they rotted while issuing public statements about the high juice content and general quality of Cuban oranges—an interpretation not shared internally by the SED's trade department.²⁰

More generally, the combination of late deliveries of promised goods and shortages of hard currency to finance imports necessitated a policy of careful balances between goods. For example, the import of additional sweet almonds to meet Christmas baking demands was financed by reducing the planned quantity of imported lemons. Appearances were everything, especially at times of high seasonal demand: the sale of Christmas goods in each district was not to begin too early in case there were not enough goods still on sale immediately before the holiday itself.²¹ The SED's trade department was not afraid to note in its report that even where the planned quantities of certain goods had been produced and delivered on time, supplies did not always meet demand. This was true at Christmas 1977 of bags and other leather goods (popular as presents), skis and skates, consumer electrical goods, Christmas decorations, bed linen, and fur-lined coats. For all of the detailed central planning, the SED was not above ordering additional last-minute production of essential or

18. Erich Honecker, 'Die sozialistische Revolution in der DDR und ihre Perspektiven', 26 September 1977, in Honecker, *Reden und Aufsätze*, Band 5, p. 493.

19. 'Information zum Import von Kuba-Orangen. . .', 21 January 1978 [?], p. 3, DY30/vorl. SED-23660, vol. 2.

20. Various memos of early 1978, *ibid.*

21. Präsidium des Ministerrates, 'Information für das Politbüro. . .', 7 November 1977, pp. 4, 6, DY30/J IV 2/2J/7801.

highly desirable goods,²² suggesting rather fluid production cycles, a fact not lost on workers at the grassroots whose trust in the political processes surrounding the plan was tested ('... what is the point of discussions [about the plan] if the plans are changed anyway?').²³

The distribution of supplies around the country regularly provoked critical comments, as the SED systematically prioritised the GDR capital with supplies of scarce or luxury goods. The results could be crass and unjust. Residents of Marienberg district (Bezirk Karl-Marx-Stadt), where toys and Christmas decorations were manufactured, could not understand how these goods were available for purchase in Berlin but not at home.²⁴ The relatively good supply situation in Berlin was, however, deliberate policy, particularly at times when particular festivities placed the image of the capital at the centre of political activism, such as the celebrations of the sixtieth anniversary of the Russian October revolution in 1977. Observers in the provinces believed the party's economic managers had very skewed priorities. 'It's no wonder that there are supply problems in the republic (vegetables, fruit, coffee). There will certainly be an overabundant supply of these goods for the Red October celebrations in Berlin, and meanwhile the population in the provinces will have to suffer the consequences.'²⁵ Thus in early October, while apples were to be had throughout the country, Berliners could also buy pears and grapes.²⁶

These were not consumers' only complaints. Shortages of spare parts were a common complaint, particularly where they rendered expensive goods such as cars and colour televisions useless.²⁷ This was particularly problematic where spare parts had to be imported.²⁸ The growing role of the Intershops, where only hard currency could be used for imported and other scarce goods, also caused frustrations and the inequalities they represented in a state apparently striving for socialism represented an own goal in many eyes. SED members in Berlin were concerned that any economic advantages would be outweighed by the potential ideological effects, and activists in the

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 13–16 and *passim*.

23. FDJ Abteilung Verbandsorgane, 'Schwerpunkte und Probleme... ', 19 August 1977, p. 6, DY30/vorl.SED 21405.

24. LDPD Sekretariat des Zentralvorstandes, 'Information Nr. 2/77', 25 January 1977, p. 7, DY30/vorl.SED 15733, vol. 1.

25. These comments were reported from around the country. LDPD Sekretariat des Parteivorstandes, 'Information Nr. 29/77', 4 October 1977, p. 4, DY30/vorl. SED-19406, vol. 2.

26. 'Information zu ausgewählten Versorgungspositionen...', various reports, DY30/vorl. SED 20223.

27. 'Übersicht über eingegangene Eingaben im 1. Halbjahr 1977', 27 July 1977, p. 7, DY30/J IV 2/2J/7683.

28. For example, of the 122 colour television sets awaiting repair in Berlin in early September, 76 required colour tubes from the USSR: 12 September report (as note 15), p. 113.

Liberal Democratic Party (LDPD) agreed that: ‘The Intershop is destroying our ideological work.’²⁹ Honecker’s public defence of the Intershops as an important means of keeping hard currency within the GDR, his promise to extend the chain of ‘Exquisit’ shops where high quality goods would be available for GDR currency, and his assurance that the goods included in the plan would continue to be available ‘in all price ranges and in all shops’ cut little ice with the population.³⁰ Reports compiled by the National Front continued to record ‘incorrect or unclear opinions about these measures’, with fears that only the highest earners would be able to access the ‘Exquisit’ stores, and that the Intershops would encourage ‘the illegal acquisition of western currency’. Contrary to the state’s ideological aspirations to a classless society, citizens believed that these policies would achieve the ‘division of GDR citizens into three categories’.³¹

Underpinning the poor experience of the GDR’s would-be consumers were chronic logistics and management failures, well illustrated by some of the problems noted in discussions with the workforce of various trade collectives in *Bezirk* Erfurt. Staff at Weimar’s wholesale division noted that some goods had to be stored outdoors in all weathers under tarpaulin because the warehouse roof was in such a bad state; at the Erfurt retail dispatch centre, vehicles would wait between two and four hours to be loaded because essential equipment such as forklift trucks was lacking, while the loading ramp at the Weimar branch had been in a poor state of repair since 1968. Even where proposals had been drawn up to improve retail outlets, years could pass before any decision was made; plans to rebuild a shop in Greußen had been on ice since 1960.³²

Retail problems were exacerbated by the GDR’s need to export as many goods as possible in order to secure the required imports. The costs of this policy imperative were apparent to citizens at the grassroots who complained ‘that the best products go abroad and we have to make do with lower quality goods which frequently need repairs’.³³ The long waiting lists for cars related to the GDR’s export imperative: 77,378 new cars were sold abroad during 1977, some 46 percent of the country’s total production.³⁴ GDR citizens reacted to

29. SED-Bezirksleitung Berlin, ‘Zwischenbericht...’, 21 March 1977, p. 6a, DY30/IV B 2/5/132; 4 October 1977 LDPD report (as note 25), p. 3.

30. Honecker, ‘Die sozialistische Revolution...’, p. 493.

31. Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, reports of 8 November and 13 December 1977, DY30/vorl.SED 18401, vol. 1.

32. SED-Bezirksleitung Erfurt, ‘Informationsbericht Nr. 35/77...’, 18 November 1977, DY30/IV B 2/5/543.

33. 29 August 1977 LDPD report (as note 11), p. 3.

34. *Statistisches Jahrbuch der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik 1978* (Berlin: Staatsverlag der DDR, 1978), pp. 119, 243.

market forces and sold used cars at home for extortionate prices, leading to complaints that these practices were distinctly unsocialist in nature. Why, petitioners to Erich Honecker inquired, was the GDR press printing adverts for these goods and thus fuelling price speculation?³⁵

Most worrying of all was the poor availability of medicines. The Erfurt SED reported that supplies of drugs to treat heart and circulation problems had been inadequate for months:

The shortages and the inadequate provision of medicines for heart and circulation problems are causing great anxiety among patients. Pharmacies are often only able to dispense the necessary drugs in small quantities or not at all. This leads to citizens visiting pharmacies frequently in vain and forming queues.³⁶

Besides the everyday difficulties associated with shopping, housing was a problem uppermost in people's minds in the mid 1970s and is a good example of a policy area where the GDR's population had developed unrealistic expectations based on the unrealistic promises made by the SED leadership. Certainly, the starting conditions were poor. As 1977 began, 55 percent of the country's homes had no bath, 50 percent no inside toilet, and 16 percent were not connected to the water mains. It was estimated that in 1975, two thirds of all residential buildings had defects that would need to be repaired to avoid further deterioration.³⁷

Although the building programme initiated by Honecker in 1971 was in full swing by 1977,³⁸ aspirations inevitably grew far faster than the country's ability to construct high quality new homes. However, more than thirty years after the end of the war, those living in unacceptable conditions were increasingly unwilling to wait patiently and, taking the party's promises at face value, measured the GDR's effectiveness against the progress made towards solving the housing crisis. Of the petitions (*Eingaben*) addressed directly to Honecker, by far the largest number (40 percent of the 8,026 received in the first half of 1977, comparable with the proportion of 43 percent in

35. 27 July 1977 report (as note 27), p. 7. Honecker's pencil markings indicate he was concerned by these occurrences.

36. SED-Bezirksleitung Erfurt, Bräutigam to Honecker, 21 October 1977, DY30/2221, p. 106.

37. Taken from an analysis accompanying the draft for a 'Beschuß zur besseren Gewährleistung der Erhaltung und Verwaltung des Wohnungsbestandes', 22 March 1977, p. 2, DY30/vorl.SED 30415, vol. 1.

38. In 1977, 106,826 new flats were built, though net growth was 87,811: *Statistisches Jahrbuch 1978*, pp. 142–43.

the first half of 1976) concerned housing issues.³⁹ Those due to be rehoused from substandard accommodation into anything less than one of the many modern flats being constructed within Honecker's programme were likely to refuse such a transfer, fearing that this would end any prospect of a further move into a new residence.⁴⁰ In the meantime, the lack of suitable—or in some cases, any—available accommodation made it practically impossible for key workers to be reassigned to areas where they were needed.⁴¹ The education ministry reported rising numbers of complaints about accommodation issues during the year. In Berlin-Lichtenberg alone, 146 teachers were seeking flats, with 58 citing cases of hardship. However, the borough could only offer 30 communal flats, with a further 25 possible over the following three to four years.⁴² When the new school year began, 15 newly qualified teachers complained that they had no accommodation at all, despite having received vague assurances from local mayors. Some of these new teachers felt that their willingness to go where they were needed had been abused.⁴³

While investing as heavily as possible in the construction of new flats, the GDR failed to allocate sufficient resources to maintaining the old housing stock or even the newly built flats, where the installation of newer electronic technologies with higher specifications (lifts and ventilation units, for example) placed higher demands on repair services.⁴⁴ In 1976, agreed and planned buildings repairs (themselves just a proportion of what was really needed) to a value of more than 380 million Marks had not been carried out. Although numerous citizens undertook repairs in voluntary initiatives (particularly the '*Mach mit!*' (Take part!) scheme) or as paid overtime apart from their normal jobs, the shortage of essential materials (particularly for repairs to roofs, doors and windows), and of spare parts for electrical, heating and sanitary equipment dampened enthusiasm for such efforts, particularly where would-be customers were advised to try securing supplies in the Intershops (for hard currency which they normally lacked). Similarly, the maintenance contractors organised in local state-owned firms (under the

39. 27 July 1977 report (as note 27), p. 2. The next largest proportions concerned applications to emigrate (11.2 percent) and requests to visit the FRG (10 percent).

40. SED-Bezirksleitung Erfurt, Abteilung Parteiorgane, 'Informationsbericht Nr. 27/77', 2 September 1977, p. 3, DY30/IV B 2/5/543. Reports from various departments and regions mention this problem.

41. 27 July 1977 report (as note 27), p. 4. Examples in this report concerned the health service.

42. Ministerium für Volksbildung, 'Analyse der Eingaben für das 1. Halbjahr 1977', p. 22, in: Bundesarchiv DR2/A7493.

43. Ministerium für Volksbildung, 'Analyse der Eingaben für das 2. Halbjahr 1977', p. 6, in *ibid.*

44. Cf. Instrukteurabteilung beim Vorsitzenden des Ministerrates, 'Information über die Durchführung der Beschlüsse. . .', 13 December 1978, p. 5, DY30/vorl.SED 30415, vol. 2.

title VEB Gebäudewirtschaft) lacked the materials, tools, and equipment to do their work, and were no more able to access spare parts for defective domestic appliances than ordinary citizens. Training in these companies was poor, wages low, and staff turnover high: 33.1 percent of the repair staff in the VEB Gebäudewirtschaft had left between 1974 and 1976.⁴⁵ In this respect, the situation was similar to that at local councils' housing departments, where often untrained staff faced the complaints of angry citizens. Typically for the larger cities, 56 of the 130 staff in the Leipzig offices had resigned since 1974, 51 of 175 in Erfurt.⁴⁶

The adoption of a resolution (*Beschluß*) by the Council of Ministers on 21 July 1977 was designed to alleviate these problems of maintenance and repairs to the housing stock. The document called for better resources planning by the local authorities, which held responsibility in this area, and attempted to avoid buck passing between different firms and authorities by allocating specific tasks more carefully. The government prioritised the establishment of around the clock repair services, and placed great emphasis on cooperation between maintenance firms, local councils, individual citizens, and residents' committees. The local VEBs, which ran and maintained public housing, were required to develop centres where residents could hire the necessary equipment to undertake their own repairs. Statistics on completed repairs would henceforth be collected centrally.⁴⁷ A draft of this resolution had proposed establishing a 'central body for the management of buildings and flats', but this was energetically opposed by the SED's department for research and development; prime minister Willi Stoph resisted discussing the implementation of aspects of the resolution at the Council of Ministers in September.⁴⁸ Instead, central government seemed minded as far as possible to avoid direct involvement in the practicalities of housing policy, and to leave the local authorities to manage the disappointments that seemed certain for many citizens.

By the end of 1978, a government review noted some improvements, but concluded that: 'Overall progress has not yet been sufficient to achieve a

45. Analysis for a 'Beschuß zur besseren Gewährleistung. . .' (as note 37), *passim*; cf. Sekretariat des Hauptvorstandes der CDU, 'Auszüge aus Informationsberichten. . .', 1 February 1977, p. 1, DY30/vorl.SED 19680.

46. Wettengel to Sorgenicht, 'Information über kaderpolitische Probleme im Bereich Wohnungspolitik. . .', 3 May 1977, pp. 4–5, DY30/vorl.SED 30415, vol. 1. Similar staff turnover problems existed in Berlin. See: 'Material zur Auswertung und Verallgemeinerung der Berliner Erfahrungen. . .', 8 December 1977, in *ibid.*, vol. 2.

47. 'Maßnahmen zur besseren Gewährleistung der Erhaltung und Verwaltung des Wohnbestandes', 21 July 1977, *ibid.*, vol. 1.

48. See the department's 'Stellungnahme', 14 April 1977, and an 'Akttenotiz' of 12 September 1977, *ibid.*

thorough improvement in the maintenance of residential buildings.’ The development of long-term preventative maintenance programmes ‘will only be realised over a lengthy period at the current rate of development’. Statistics illustrated the point effectively: on 30 September 1978, there were 35,000 outstanding repair jobs in Magdeburg and some 2,200 in the Mitte district of Berlin alone. Roof repairs were a general concern, and waiting times of up to two years were not unusual. Local authorities were still prioritising new building work over repairs and maintenance, even directing building firms away from working for maintenance departments or residents’ associations, and provided little or no money for the purchase of materials and spare parts to support citizens prepared to carry out repair work themselves.⁴⁹ The July 1977 resolution had had very limited effects, and as the decade closed, the situation remained untenable in the eyes of the 40,000 Berliners who were still submitting *Eingaben* on housing issues. The catalogue of problems remained much as in the mid 1970s.⁵⁰

Ultimately, the SED was unable to satisfy all of the population’s housing demands with the resources available, not least because of the wastage and pilfering of building materials on construction sites.⁵¹ However, although the SED’s policies effectively stored up more problems for the future by delaying repairs and maintenance, diverting capacities from the new building programmes would only have exacerbated other grievances, not least from the 57 percent of applicants for new flats who still lacked their own address.⁵² In localities with particular difficulties, citizens’ comments (‘To solve the housing problem by 1990 the whole of old Bitterfeld would have to be erased from the map’)⁵³ indicated that the state’s credibility was already stretched to the limits. The apparent preferential treatment of Berlin,⁵⁴ where construction workers from around the GDR had been gathered to push forward with new housing projects, prompted complaints comparable to those expressed about retail distribution: ‘Unfortunately not every GDR

49. 13 December 1978 report (as note 44), *passim*.

50. Abt. Staats- und Rechtsfragen, ‘Information’, 25 October 1979, DY30/vorl.SED 30415, vol. 2.

51. LDPD Sekretariat des Parteivorstandes, ‘Information Nr.18/77’, 1 July 1977, p. 11, in DY30/vorl.SED 19406, vol. 2.

52. Abteilung Forschung und technische Entwicklung, ‘Stellungnahme zu den Beschlüßentwürfen. . .’, p. 4, 14 April 1977, DY30/vorl.SED 30415, vol. 1.

53. Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, ‘Anlage zum Informationsbericht vom 11.5.1977’, DY30/vorl.SED 18401, vol. 1.

54. Though Berlin was the focus of FDJ and other construction initiatives, the *Statistisches Jahrbuch 1978* (p. 143) records greater numbers of new flats built in Bezirke Dresden, Halle, and Karl-Marx-Stadt in 1977; however, the total average costs were significantly higher in Berlin than elsewhere.

citizen can be a resident of the capital. But we would like to have nice flats as well.⁵⁵

The 'Political-Ideological Situation' in 1977

It will be clear from much that has gone before that the GDR population's view of the country's political leadership and prospects was strongly linked to economic factors. Nonetheless, in a state where the leading party placed great emphasis on popular support for and conviction in the benefits of socialism, grassroots reactions to the SED's more purely ideological concerns are also a good indication of the GDR's stability in this 'normal' year.

Since the GDR's very existence depended on the continuing Cold War and the political support of the Soviet Union, the SED had since its inception attempted to nurture close bonds of friendship between the populations of East Germany and the USSR. The sixtieth anniversary of the October Revolution offered the party's propagandists an opportunity both to strengthen ideological support for socialism, and to underline the benefits of good GDR-Soviet relations. The media planned its supporting coverage well in advance; for example, GDR television viewers could look forward to reports, dramas, documentaries, and entertainment throughout the year in support of the Red October theme.⁵⁶ With the SED's party congress over, the normal round of pledges for greater productivity was linked in 1977 to honouring the achievements of Red October, as were other initiatives such as the '*Mach mit!*' campaign for voluntary work to improve housing conditions and the appearance of residential areas. The campaign was temporarily relabelled '*Mach mit—auf Oktoberkurs!*' ('Take Part—on course for October!') in Bezirk Dresden, where it was hoped that everyone could be persuaded to join in to work in their communities on Saturday, 24 September. The National Front held numerous 'friendship meetings' in areas close to Soviet garrisons, and the Urania organisation arranged public lectures about the Soviet Union. In Altgliezen, 200 locals and thirty Soviet soldiers attended a ceremony to inaugurate the new shop and post office, built within the '*Mach mit!*' project on a square renamed in honour of German-Soviet friendship. Besides the national campaign ('For my best friend') to send presents to the Soviet Union, Bezirk Schwerin excelled in establishing further initiatives

55. Complaints of this nature were reported from all Bezirke in the 1 July 1977 LDPD report (as note 51), p. 10.

56. Cf. Staatliches Komitee für Fernsehen, 'Jahresplan 1977 des Fernsehens der DDR', BArch DR8/157.

such as ‘60mal Salut’ (60 salutes), and ‘60 rote Nelken zum 60.’ (60 red carnations for the 60th).⁵⁷

Despite the outward expressions of solidarity with the Soviet Union and the other socialist countries on set-piece occasions, such as the Red October festivities or the ‘Friendship Meeting’ with the People’s Republic of Poland held in Frankfurt an der Oder during 1977, relations with the USSR and the other members of the Soviet-led trading bloc, the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA), were often viewed by GDR citizens through the lens of trade and the quality of imported goods. There were many concerns that the deepening trade and economic planning links between the CMEA states would limit the GDR’s development. Widespread questions included: ‘As a highly developed industrialised state, isn’t the GDR disadvantaged by socialist economic integration?’; ‘Doesn’t integration mean economic dependence?’; and ‘The socialist countries rightly demand high quality products from the GDR, but why don’t we always get the same in return?’. These were questions to which SED propagandists often lacked satisfactory answers.⁵⁸ Grassroots comrades were not beyond denouncing Poland and Romania as the ‘weakest links’ of the socialist community, and expressing their prejudices against these nations.⁵⁹ Similar voices could be heard among SED members in Bezirk Suhl:

We cannot overlook the tendency for the effectiveness of socialist integration often still to be measured against the difficulties, the inadequate quality of goods and the poor availability of spare parts. Too often, the source of the causes is sought in other fraternal countries. Equally certain prejudices still need to be overcome.⁶⁰

For all the efforts put into party education, some comrades persisted in the view that: ‘World standards are only to be found in the west.’⁶¹ In the wider population, the year did not pass off without the comment that ‘we’d be better off without the Russians’.⁶²

57. Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, reports of 23 June, 22 August and 21 October 1977 in DY30/vorl.SED 18401, vol. 1.

58. SED-Bezirksleitung Halle, ‘Information zum Thema 6 des Parteilehrjahres. . .’, 14 April 1977, pp. 3, 4, 6, DY30/vorl.SED 19099, vol. 1.

59. SED-Bezirksleitung Karl-Marx-Stadt, ‘Bericht über Hospitationen. . .’, 28 March 1977, p. 4, *ibid.*, vol. 2.

60. SED-Bezirksleitung Suhl, ‘Information über das Parteilehrjahr. . .’, 22 April 1977, DY30/vorl.SED 34937.

61. As at the VEB Maßelektronik works in Berlin: SED-Bezirksleitung Berlin, ‘Bericht über das Parteileben. . .’, 9 June 1977, p. 8, DY30/IV B 2/5/132.

62. SED-Bezirksleitung Erfurt, ‘Informationsbericht Nr. 33/77’, 28 October 1977, p. 5, DY30/IV B 2/5/543.

There was greater unity and real concern about the USA's decision during 1977 to develop the neutron bomb. The move was roundly denounced by state and people alike. However, a degree of fatalism and pessimism about the future prospects of the socialist camp also underlay popular reactions to this latest phase of the arms race, with fears that civil defence measures would be ineffective against the new weaponry, and that the Soviet Union's attempts to develop new weapons systems would have negative effects on the standard of living in the socialist countries.⁶³ The pacifism that would come to the fore in the 1980s was already present in the view that the socialist bloc should demonstrate its moral superiority by taking the first steps towards disarmament.⁶⁴ Even amid the general rejection of the USA's plans, critics sought to exploit potential differences between communist countries. Why, LDPD members asked, had the Romanian and Yugoslav communist parties not signed the joint protest of communist and workers' parties against the neutron bomb?⁶⁵ Romania's semi-detached relationship with the USSR and the rest of the bloc created frequent opportunities for comment by those who doubted the fraternal unity of the socialist countries.⁶⁶ Equally, the SED's seminars offered opportunities for members to pose all types of potentially embarrassing questions, ranging from the position of the GDR and the Soviet Union relative to 'eurocommunism', the political nature of the People's Republic of China, and even why Vietnam had joined the organisations of the non-aligned states rather than those of the socialist bloc.⁶⁷

The travel issue remained a prevalent topic in popular opinion throughout the year. However, as sixteen years had passed since the final closure of the borders, change seemed so unlikely that discussions and complaints about housing, the availability of goods, and the general economic situation were reported more frequently.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, travel restrictions remained a live issue, particularly following Honecker's interview with the *Saarbrücker Zeitung* in February. In this text, widely publicised in the GDR's press, he emphasised that there could be no general freedom of travel to the west until

63. 13 September 1977 CDU report (as note 13), p. 2.

64. CDU Sekretariat des Hauptvorstandes, 'Informationsbericht', 22 March 1977, p. 4, DY30/vorl.SED 19680.

65. LDPD Sekretariat des Parteivorstandes, 'Information Nr.25/77', p. 3, DY30/vorl.SED 19406, vol. 2.

66. Cf. also DBD Abt. Parteiorgane, 'Information Nr.17/77', 10 June 1977, pp. 3–4, DY30/vorl.SED 21550.

67. Ministerium für Verkehrswesen, 'Bericht über die Durchführung des Parteilehrjahres. . .', 19 August 1977, Anlage 6, DY30/vorl.SED 19099, vol. 1.

68. In the first half of 1977, 21.2 percent of petitions to Honecker concerned trips to the west or permanent emigration, but 40 percent raised accommodation problems: 27 July 1977 report (as note 27), p. 2.

the Federal Republic recognised GDR citizenship, and in view of his country's shortage of hard currency to finance such trips.⁶⁹ These comments did little to alleviate the situation. While Honecker's aspirations for improving relations with the west were widely welcomed, the logic of refusing travel rights on financial grounds found little acceptance,⁷⁰ and it was hard to reconcile the general restrictions pending the recognition of GDR citizenship with Honecker's boasts in the same interview about the 1.1 million citizens who had visited the west. To the cynical, it appeared 'that our government is now looking for a new justification to prevent the extension of travel opportunities for the long term. . .'.⁷¹ SED agitators found it hard to persuade citizens that peace would not be furthered by allowing greater travel freedoms.⁷² Overall, however, by 1977 extreme discontent on this issue remained principally restricted to those with specific personal grievances about the travel ban, rather than becoming a mass talking point. Nonetheless, there was considerable interest in the Belgrade conference organised to take forward the Helsinki process and which might, many hoped, achieve further progress in east-west relations. No wonder the SED shifted towards a policy of demarcation from the west, mindful of its ongoing failure among most of the population to establish a sense of identity that excluded sympathies for the West German state. The view could still frequently be heard that 'we're all Germans when all's said and done'.⁷³ Similarly, there was a general 'playing down' of the imperialist tendencies in the FRG and 'illusions' about workers' prospects there.⁷⁴

While the GDR's long-term stability would rest at least in part on the commitment to the socialist ideal which could be inculcated in the general population, the task of sustaining the socialist project from day to day fell to the smaller number of activists gathered in the bloc parties and principally the SED. On the surface at least, the four bloc parties appeared secure. All held their party congresses during 1977, and in this public forum met the aspirations of the SED's political planners.⁷⁵ Behind the scenes, however, the

69. 'Interview des stellvertretenden Chefredakteurs der "Saarbrücker Zeitung", Erich Voltmer', 17 February 1977, in Honecker, *Reden und Aufsätze*, Band 5, pp. 137–60 (esp. pp. 141–42).

70. Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, 'Information. . .', 22 February 1977, p. 4, DY30/vorl. SED 18401, vol. 1.

71. Sekretariat des Hauptvorstandes der CDU, 'Erste Information. . .', 24 February 1977, p. 2, DY30/vorl. SED 19680.

72. 28 October 1977 report (as note 62), p. 4.

73. SED-Bezirksleitung Erfurt, Abteilung Parteiorgane, 'Bericht über die Verwirklichung der Direktive. . .', 18 November 1977, pp. 3–4, DY30/IV B 2/5/543.

74. 19 August 1977 FDJ report (as note 23), p. 2.

75. E.g., 'The main message of the LDPD's 12th Party Congress corresponded to the plan laid before the Secretariat of the SED's Central Committee.' Cf. 'Information über den 12. Parteitag der LDPD. . .', 13 May 1977, p. 1, DY30/vorl. SED 21815.

commitment to socialism of bloc party members caused some worries to the SED. In the case of the Democratic Farmers' Party (DBD),

It must be concluded that some functionaries and local groups still find it difficult to take an offensive and convincing stance on topical political events, always to take basic socialist principles as their starting point and constantly to observe the unity of politics, ideology and economics.⁷⁶

The LDPD inspired similar concerns:

For all the positive evaluations of the LDPD's activities after their party congress, it must be noted that great differences are still apparent, particularly in political and ideological work. . .⁷⁷

Even among the SED's relatively highly placed allies upon whom the system depended, commitment was lacking. Of the National Front's executive members, 40 percent in the fifteen Bezirke regularly missed meetings, while attendance dropped to just 41 percent in Bezirk Potsdam.⁷⁸

The SED also remained politically heterogeneous in the GDR's apparently established phase. Ordinary SED members were as ready to criticise as non-politically affiliated citizens. They too had difficulties justifying the emergence of the Intershops and Exquisit shops, fearing that the supply of goods to lower earners would be threatened.⁷⁹ The '*Parteilehrjahr*' (annual party study programme) was designed to underpin comrades' ideological positions ('This is the forum for communists to obtain their intellectual expertise, . . . and in comradesly debate to develop the best arguments for political work with the masses . . .'⁸⁰), and to counter divergence from the central line. However, the results appeared decidedly limited. Though the curriculum for each year was carefully planned in advance around a number of themes,⁸¹ in practice many sessions appear to have concentrated on current international politics (often to circumvent emergent criticisms of the party line) or recent speeches by the leadership. Enthusiasm for the exercise was

76. DBD Abt. Parteiorgane, 'Information über einen gemeinsamen Operativeinsatz. . .', 5 January 1977, p. 3, DY30/vorl.SED 21550.

77. Pilz to Honecker, 13 May 1977, DY30/vorl.SED 21805.

78. Nationale Front, 'Information über die im Jahr 1977 durchgeführten Tagungen der Bezirksausschüsse. . .', 20 December 1977, DY30/vorl.SED 18401, vol. 1.

79. 28 October 1977 report (as note 52), p. 6.

80. Kurt Tiedke, 'Revolutionäre Tat erwächst aus unserer Überzeugung', in *Neuer Weg*, Nr.16/1977, pp. 721–26 (p. 24).

81. Cf. 'Themenplan für die Zirkel und Seminare im Parteilehrjahr 1977/78', a supplement to *Neuer Weg*, Nr.5/1977.

clearly lacking. On occasion, participants turned up entirely unprepared, with neither study books nor pencil and paper.⁸² Among Dresden groups studying the history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, only half the participants possessed the set text.⁸³

The sessions revealed some unexpected views among the SED's less ideologically secure members, such as: 'In the GDR the dictatorship of the proletariat is exercised only by the SED, and the party imposes its will on the other parts of the population!'⁸⁴, or: 'Is a complete satisfaction of people's needs at all possible in communism?' (apparently a typical question).⁸⁵ Even where the correct ideological conclusions were drawn, it proved difficult to extract personal consequences to sharpen the party work of individual comrades, and there was a tendency to view problems experienced in particular factories as systemic to the socialist project.⁸⁶ The Neubrandenburg SED was forced to conclude that: 'Many comrades still have problems in reacting convincingly in the dispute with imperialist ideology. It often takes a long time to overcome certain oppositional arguments'.⁸⁷ If grassroots members displayed political shortcomings at the seminars, the same was also true of the 'propagandists' entrusted with the implementation of the '*Parteilehrjahr*'. The SED in Bezirk Dresden considered that its seminar leaders generally needed a higher 'theoretical and ideological standard', and some 45 percent of the expected participants failed to attend training sessions in most districts. Only half the districts bothered to send representatives to the Bezirk's training session for the parallel '*FDJ-Studienjahr*'.⁸⁸

The SED leadership found it just as hard to attract new members as to maintain the ideological purity of existing comrades. Recruitment slowed during 1977, and comments from those unwilling to join revealed the party's image in the wider population. Reasons included perceptions that personal freedom would be restricted by party membership (particularly in relation to any prospect of visiting the west), and workers in factories with no SED

82. 'Information. Zirkel im Parteilehrjahr VEB (K) Bau Malcin am 21.2.1977', DY30/vorl.SED 19099, vol. 2.

83. SED-Bezirksleitung Dresden, 'Information über die Durchführung des Parteilehrjahres im Monat November 1977', 9 December 1977, p. 5, *ibid.*, vol. 1.

84. SED-Bezirksleitung Halle, 'Information zum Thema 8 des Parteilehrjahres. . .', 13 June 1977, p. 4, *ibid.*

85. SED-Bezirksleitung Karl-Marx-Stadt, 'Bericht über die Durchführung des Parteilehrjahres 1976/77', 11 February 1977, *ibid.*, vol. 2.

86. SED-Bezirksleitung Dresden, 'Information über die Durchführung des Parteilehrjahres im Monat November 1977', p. 5.

87. SED-Bezirksleitung Neubrandenburg, 'Bericht über das Parteilehrjahr. . .', 18 July 1977, DY30/vorl.SED 19099, vol. 1.

88. SED-Bezirksleitung Dresden, 'Information über den Beginn des Parteilehrjahres 1977/78. . .', 7 November 1977, p. 5, *ibid.*

groups feared they would be unable to counter their colleagues' political views: '... they shrink from any open discussion.' The requirement to join the workers' militia was also a disincentive.⁸⁹

For all of the difficulties, the year saw just one violent explosion of public dissatisfaction, following an accident on the Alexanderplatz in Berlin during the festivities for the 28th anniversary of the GDR's founding on 7 October.⁹⁰ When nine youths climbed on scaffolding that had been erected over a ventilation shaft, it collapsed under their weight and they fell some two metres. All were injured, three seriously. This chance accident sparked spontaneous anti-state protests. Most of the large crowd were unaware of the reason for cordoning off the area of the accident, and the police were subjected to individual insults and chanted slogans. 'A spontaneous polarisation of the two forces occurred in which 100 young people formed a mob on one of the balustrades of the television tower . . .', though the majority of the crowd remained passive or distanced themselves from the brewing trouble. Fans of the Berlin football club 1. FC Union who had been robustly policed at football matches in June and September,⁹¹ saw an opportunity to assert themselves against the authorities, and began mass chants, increasingly anti-socialist in nature. These included 'Down with the police state!', 'Down with the GDR!', 'Down with the Wall!', 'Germany awake!' and, still somewhat topically, 'Honecker out—Biermann in!'. Anti-GDR lyrics were sung to the tune of Germany's traditional national anthem, the '*Deutschlandlied*', and the police were physically attacked (mainly by youths aged between fifteen and seventeen). As many as 66 people were injured, and damage to buildings and property was estimated at 50,000 Marks. Order was fairly quickly restored: 313 arrests were made,⁹² although many of these people were quickly released. Later investigations demonstrated that the disturbances had not been premeditated.

The incident very clearly demonstrates a latent potential for broad opposition to the GDR among younger citizens, ready to explode even from very specific causes if once given a vent. The Interior Ministry's analysis of those involved in the violence, though clearly politically coloured in its language, foreshadows a key factor that empowered the individuals involved in the huge

89. 9 June 1977 Berlin SED report (as note 61), p. 15.

90. This paragraph is based principally on: Ministerium des Innern, 'Schwere Vorkommnis. . .', 10 October 1977, DY30/J IV 2/2J/7762.

91. Generalstaatsanwaltschaft der DDR, 'Erfahrungen der Staatsanwaltschaft. . .', 1 November 1977, DY30/vorl.SED 19513.

92. A further 155 arrests were made following later investigations; in all, 95 people were given prison sentences; cf. a report to Honecker from the SED's ZK-Abteilung Staats- und Rechtsfragen, 9.1.1978, p. 1, *ibid*.

but peaceful demonstrations of September and October 1989: 'Believing themselves anonymous and to be acting in unison with like-minded people, they felt themselves strengthened in their aggression and egged one another on.'⁹³

Though this was the most significant act of political protest during the year, there were others. In schools, 1977 saw a total of 350 incidents classed as 'political provocations' by the education ministry, involving 646 participants. This represented a minor increase on 1976, but both years compared badly for the SED, with the much lower levels recorded in 1975 (150 incidents).⁹⁴ These incidents included fascist graffiti and greetings, the singing of the '*Deutschlandlied*', anti-semitic comments (sharply up on the previous year), 'discriminatory' remarks against the GDR state and representatives of party and government (also sharply up), anti-Soviet utterances, and desecration of the GDR flag. Officials also included in this category the four cases where a minute's silence was held for the West German industrialist Hanns Martin Schleyer, assassinated by the Red Army Faction in October 1977, and support for West German sport clubs.⁹⁵ Though the year saw no cases of 'gang formation', there were 168 cases of 'rowdiness' involving 362 pupils. Such incidents involved violence against teachers, petty theft and intimidation and blackmail of other pupils. There were no signs of coordinated activities or concentrations of individuals working to undermine the state.

Conclusions: How stable was the GDR in 1977?

Outwardly, the GDR appeared stable and peaceful in 1977, and nothing occurred either internally or internationally that seemed capable of prompting a significant change in the state's circumstances. Even the publication in January of the Charter 77 manifesto by dissidents in neighbouring Czechoslovakia was barely remarked upon by the East German population. Yet, in 1977 the very foundations on which the SED relied for the effective continuation of its rule were shaky.

One prerequisite for the GDR's success was a widespread willingness to support both the political aims and the economic activity that would sustain the state in its socialist form. However, the SED's incessant efforts to

93. 10 October 1977 MdI report (as note 90), p. 6.

94. Ministerium für Volksbildung, Hauptschulinspektion, 'Information über die Entwicklung besonderer Vorkommnisse im Jahre 1977', 31 January 1978, Anlage 4, in BArch DR2/A8520. Comparable reports in the same file indicate a near doubling of such incidents in 1978, but a fall back to 1977 levels in 1979. The number of participants remains tiny compared to the total number of pupils, estimated at 2,594,418 in 1977: *Statistisches Jahrbuch 1978*, p. 286.

95. Ministerium für Volksbildung report, 31 January 1978 (as above).

promote passion for the cause had long since ceased to bear fruit. The Red October ceremonies were barely complete when on 18 November, the SED announced a big campaign to mark the GDR's 30th anniversary in 1979.⁹⁶ Enthusiasm was lacking. Comments included: 'All these calls to action will create a lot of unrest'; 'For goodness' sake leave us in peace just for a moment'; and 'We rush from one highpoint to the next—it's the citizens who suffer'.⁹⁷ DBD members had been similarly unimpressed by the launch of the Red October celebrations in the spring: 'There's always something new we have to get involved with. Who on earth is supposed to read and deal with it all?'⁹⁸ Even FDJ members were cautious about the announcement of the '*FDJ-Aufgebot DDR 30*', a new programme for young people to work to improve the GDR in honour of the latest anniversary: 'There's nothing new about it at all, it's just a new name!'⁹⁹ Given this rejection of party strategies, it was hardly surprising that some local functionaries simply wrote their group's pledges to support the latest campaign themselves, '... without the power, the knowledge and the commitment of the membership',¹⁰⁰ as the central FDJ bureaucracy wearily noted.

Not only was enthusiasm lacking, but criticisms also could be heard. The steady stream of important party and government delegations from socialist and other friendly countries had to be greeted by flag-waving crowds, but this prompted concerns about the associated loss of working hours. Berlin students, who bore the brunt of much of this work, were becoming particularly disenchanted at being used in this way.¹⁰¹

Most worrying for the party was the willingness of many in the population to draw general conclusions about the viability of the socialist project from the difficulties faced in their everyday lives. The lack of certain goods and spare parts prompted widespread doubts about the SED's assurances of economic growth and that plan targets were being met. Such views were linked to comments 'in which doubts are expressed about the strength of socialism'.¹⁰² By 1977, it was clear to many that the SED's early hopes of building a strong economy were unravelling: 'When will these productivity increases be over? Will it never

96. Ulrich Dähn et al., eds., *Unser Staat. DDR-Zeittafel 1949–1988* (Berlin: Dietz, 1989), p. 179.

97. Nationale Front, Abteilung Ausschüsse, 'Information über Meinungen und Fragen der Bürger. . .', 8 September 1977, DY30/vorl.SED 18401, vol. 1.

98. DBD Abt. Parteiorgane, 'Information Nr.9/77', 8 March 1977, p. 3, DY30/vorl.SED 21550.

99. FDJ Abteilung Verbandsorgane, 'Information. . .', 1 December 1977, p. 1, DY30/vorl.SED 21404.

100. FDJ Abteilung Verbandsorgane, 'Schwerpunkte und Probleme. . .', 22 December 1977, p. 2, DY30/vorl.SED 21405.

101. 9 June 1977 Berlin SED report (as note 61), p. 13a.

102. FDJ Abteilung Verbandsorgane, 'Schwerpunkte und Probleme. . .', 19 July 1977, p. 4, DY30/vorl.SED 21405.

end? Ever year we're told that next year will be the most decisive year.¹⁰³ Farmers in particular believed that there were natural limits to productivity, and that higher output in each successive year was becoming unrealistic, particularly given shortages of fertiliser and animal feed.¹⁰⁴ The coffee crisis appeared exemplary for the fundamental problems of the socialist bloc, buffeted by fluctuations in world prices, and the misleading nature of the party line: 'We're told over and over that the CMEA countries are the most dynamic economic region in the world. But how stable are we really if we have to make compromises to the capitalist world even to get goods like coffee?'¹⁰⁵ And for all the crises in the west's economy, and the apparent progress in the east, why, citizens asked, did so few people emigrate to the GDR?¹⁰⁶

Even the much vaunted improved social security measures and reduced working hours, which took force in May 1977, though welcomed in practice, inspired fundamental doubts and some criticisms. In many sectors, workers and managers could not quite see how the new policy could be practically implemented. In the transport sector, as elsewhere, the only answer seemed to be overtime,¹⁰⁷ but what then was the point of reducing working hours while the state also encouraged additional voluntary shifts to fulfil the state plan?¹⁰⁸ There were also serious doubts about the practicality and wisdom of these changes in the health sector, where there were already serious staff shortages and which depended to a great extent on the female workers, particularly mothers of young children who could henceforth refuse night shifts and overtime. 'Some directives still seem to be far ahead of real life.'¹⁰⁹ Against a background of poor planning and widespread local difficulties, many concluded: 'We don't believe that the aims of the social policy programme can be fully realised. The GDR's current economic situation just won't run to it.'¹¹⁰

There was an acute sense during 1977 that things were getting worse, not better, and that difficulties on the ground were clearly linked to systemic factors: 'The provision of materials and spare parts is becoming increasingly

103. 19 August 1977 FDJ report (as note 23), p. 6.

104. DBD Abt. Parteiorgane, 'Information Nr.21/77', 15 August 1977, p. 7, DY30/vorl.SED 21550.

105. DBD Abt. Parteiorgane, 'Information Nr.20/77', 17 August 1977, p. 2, *ibid.*

106. SED ZK Abteilung Gesundheitswesen, 'Information zu politisch-ideologischen Problemen. . .', 27 July 1977, p. 3, DY30/vorl.SED 21898, vol. 1.

107. For example, in transport: cf. 19 August 1977 report (as note 67), p. 5.

108. Nationalrat der Nationalen Front, 'Information über Meinungen und Fragen der Bürger. . .', 8 August 1977, in DY30/vorl.SED 18401, vol. 1.

109. SED ZK Abteilung Gesundheitspolitik, 'Information zu politisch-ideologischen Problemen. . .', 27 July 1977, p. 4, DY30/vorl.SED 21898, vol. 1.

110. LDPD Sekretariat des Parteivorstandes, 'Information Nr. 30/77', 14 October 1977, p. 3, DY30/vorl. SED-19406, vol.2. Cf. also 15 August 1977 DBD report (as note 104), p. 2.

difficult. That just shouldn't happen in socialism.'¹¹¹ Optimism about the viability of socialism was obviously lacking. The efforts of the television service and of other propagandists to promote the strength of the Soviet Union seemed in vain when, at year's end, citizens around the country believed that it was impossible to claim that the Soviet Union's progress to communism had achieved 'the highest level of societal development' given that productivity and living standards were far behind the developed capitalist countries.¹¹² Such observations prompted more personal reflections, as young workers noted that: 'You could be unemployed in West Germany and still earn more than me.'¹¹³ Damningly, health workers believed that the difficulties the GDR was experiencing in implementing the new social measures demonstrated '... that socialism is also incapable of creating the unity of economic rationality and humanity'.¹¹⁴

In 1977, there were still enough citizens willing to rally to the SED flag and to maintain socialism in the colours of the GDR, albeit with no great enthusiasm. But even among those who bore the system aloft, serious doubts about the long-term prospects and viability of the socialist project were common, and widespread doubts occurred in the general population in the face of shortages of basic goods, appropriate housing, and medical essentials. Integration into the economic systems of the socialist bloc appeared an unnecessary hindrance to their prosperity, and the austerity package appeared to be a product of their isolation from the western world rather than an inherent necessity. Even in this typical year in the GDR's most stable decade, there are striking continuities in popular opinion with both the initial decades of construction and the gradual decline through the 1980s. Equally constant was the willingness to express vocal and damning complaints about specific grievances and the system in general, despite the well understood presence of the *Stasi*.¹¹⁵ The main change since the 1950s appears to have been a widespread loss of belief and enthusiasm in the project.

In discussing these aspects of popular opinion in 1977, we can challenge the teleological instinct to trace the collapse of popular support for, or tolerance of, the GDR to a process which began in the mid-1980s and which continued inexorably to the *Wende* of late 1989. While the organised oppositional

111. 4 October 1977 LDPD report (as note 25), p. 3.

112. LDPD Sekretariat des Parteivorstandes, 'Information Nr.35/77', p. 2, 8 December 1977, DY30/vorl.SED-19406, vol. 2.

113. 19 August 1977 FDJ report (as note 23), p. 2.

114. 27 July 1977 report (as note 109), p. 4.

115. The contours of popular opinion as recorded in files of 1977 are remarkably similar to those reproduced in this author's *Politics and Popular Opinion in East Germany 1945-68* (Manchester University Press, 2000).

structures had not yet emerged in 1977, the motivations to consider radical political change were already well developed and widespread. Clear ideas about adopting the structures of West German capitalism were no more apparent in 1977 than they were in 1989 until some time after the opening of the Berlin Wall. However, had an international catalyst permitted regime change in the GDR in 1977, it seems certain that this opportunity would have been seized as willingly then as proved to be the case in 1989.

Finally, this contribution has attempted to establish a sense of the GDR's internal normality within a typical year, that is, to present a cross-section of the GDR as it was experienced from a (far from exhaustive) variety of perspectives, rather than to portray the GDR in 1977 as being at a particular stage along a continuum of normalisation (or, for that matter, decline). To consider the events of one single year in this fashion logically precludes any firm conclusions about tendencies in the GDR's historical trajectory, for which a diachronic methodology would be required. Yet this approach perhaps does allow some conclusions to be drawn about the extent to which 'normalisation' and 'routinisation' had occurred by this point in the GDR's history. Mary Fulbrook has proposed elsewhere in this volume that there are three principal facets to normalisation. First, there should be a congruence of norms. The material outlined above would certainly support this contention. Second, routinisation should occur. Here, also, there appears more than adequate evidence that the GDR's routines were well established by 1977: the run of official events and the expected responses were very clear to functionaries at all levels, and to the population at large. However, while this phenomenon produced a considerable level of internal stability (people largely behaved as was expected of them), it also resulted in high levels of boredom and outwardly negative reactions to the system, which in 1977 (and doubtless both beforehand and thereafter) were certainly undermining the SED's claimed ideological legitimacy. Finally, Mary Fulbrook proposes that normalisation would be characterised by stabilisation, in other words that there would be no sense of internal threat.¹¹⁶ This final facet

116. *Editor's comment:* Actually, this is somewhat too restrictive an interpretation of what is meant by the 'stabilisation' aspect of the normalisation concept; stabilisation has less to do with the absence of a 'sense of internal threat' than with practices geared towards a 'restoration' or 'maintenance' of a political order which is, in face of recent political challenges or following a period of upheaval, now assumed to be capable of reproduction over a foreseeable period of time, whether or not there are continued threats both from within and abroad. Mechanisms may have been devised to deal with both internal and external/international sources of insecurity; yet stability is always inherently fragile, open to further challenge. Cf. the longer discussion in Chapter 1, above, and Marilyn Thomas's discussion of the international situation in Chapter 2.

These theoretical remarks do not, of course, detract from the validity of the substantive point regarding attitudes which Mark Allinson is making here; and indeed, the year 1977 was on the cusp of the descent into ever more visible economic decline, with renewed international tensions and the growth of domestic political challenges increasingly evident from the late 1970s onwards,

appears from the material presented here to be largely absent from the GDR in 1977, since there were widespread doubts about the wisdom of the socialist economic project and little true ideological commitment below the highest levels of the party and state apparatus. Yet, paradoxically, the failure to achieve this third strand of normalisation and the tensions that stemmed from this deficiency were key characteristics of the GDR's internal normality.

culminating in the ultimate collapse of the GDR and the Soviet system more broadly at the end of the 1980s.