

Chapter Four

Citizens at play: Leisure

To read '1989' backwards into the whole of the previous forty years, or focus concentration primarily on official aims and institutions, is to paint only a partial, and hence a distorted, picture. In part, the story is clearly one of good intentions subverted by economic shortcomings: thus the housing problem was never satisfactorily resolved, and indeed, despite numerical successes on paper, over time the physical realities appeared ever more dilapidated. But at the same time, life in the GDR was about far more than decrepit physical circumstances or a constraining political framework. It is extraordinary just how much of East Germans' lives were lived outside of formal political institutions or official organisations. The greater part of the leisure time of most people was spent not in political gatherings or at organised meetings, but with friends and family. 'Recreation' meant not only participation in the offerings of the mass organisations, but also talking, walking, playing games, swimming, playing or listening to music, drinking beer or watching television. Leisure in the GDR for the vast majority of the population was far more 'normal' than studies of official organisations on the one hand, or oppositional subcultures on the other, would suggest when taken without this wider context.

Of course life was lived within a context of social, political and economic pressures and constraints. But where is it not? The conditions, constraints and points of tension and conflict in the GDR were of a different order and character from those in capitalist democracies; but a concentration on official pressures and the institutional framework alone does not give a complete picture of how life was lived and experienced for most of the people, most of the time. For many East Germans, *Freizeitgestaltung* meant precisely that: an active shaping of one's free time. And ironically, the development of consumer socialism served to sustain and enhance the tendencies towards the ever more individualistic pursuit of personal goals for 'private happiness': a narrowing

down of focus onto home and garden, car ownership and television, rather than the grand task of 'building socialism'.

In short: leisure activities could readily be politicised, and the voluntary use of leisure time could on occasion hit politically neuralgic points, but there was also a great deal going on between these two poles.

'Free time'

The SED was of course concerned to organise leisure time and harness the spare energies of people to fruitful pursuits. The official conception of leisure time was that it played a different role in capitalism and communism. In capitalist countries, leisure supposedly fulfilled the function of therapy from the exhaustion of work; but in socialism, leisure should, on the official view, serve the development of talents, capacities, creativity, health and physical well-being.¹ Operating, too, on the communist version of the Calvinist principle that 'Satan finds work for idle hands to do', certain sections of the leadership of the SED were somewhat fearful of the potential threat of the 'class enemy' in the form of subversive Western influences, particularly in the area of youth culture, if leisure time was not strictly controlled. Thus, in addition to making available a wide range of state-sponsored activities, a close eye was kept on what people actually did in their remaining free time – from the time of its foundation in 1966, the Leipzig Central Institute for Youth Research (Zentralinstitut für Jugendforschung, or ZIJ) was particularly active in this connection. Nevertheless, despite political interest in leisure activities, ZIJ publications by the 1980s provide a remarkably relaxed approach to the character of leisure and the importance of voluntary activities and personal enjoyment of leisure time.² Articles on television, discos, fashion, lifestyle issues and personal relationships jostle for space alongside entries on art, sport, learning and the organised activities available in state youth clubs; much of the advice from ZIJ experts (for example, on healthy eating and the dangers of smoking) could as easily have been given in any equivalent Western publication of the 1980s. It is, of course, difficult for the historian to tap into activities that do not show up either in the success stories of political, state and mass organisations or in the records of authorities concerned with dissident, 'criminal' or politically undesirable behaviour. But there is nevertheless a substantial amount of evidence, from both the ZIJ research and a range of other sources, for the relative 'normality' of everyday life and leisure in East Germany for most people most of the time.

The unconstrained experience of childhood free time was relatively untouched by the heavy hand of the state, except in so far as that impinged on

the availability and energy levels of parents. Young people engaged in all manner of initiatives and pursued cultural, musical and other interests often almost regardless of the state youth organisations' official offerings and interventions. Adults socialised and drank with family, friends and neighbours, although often also in the context of factory-based gatherings and outings. Over time, even with the growth and stabilisation of state-run organisations, there was arguably an increasing 'individualisation' in the sphere of leisure, with ever-larger numbers of people having access to private motorised transport (motorbikes, cars) and individual sources of entertainment (radios, television). Leisure was of course flavoured by GDR circumstances: but it was not all a matter of either official indoctrination and control, or subcultural subversion and dissent.

A wonderful insight into children's experiences of family life and leisure in the early 1960s is, for example, given in a collection of children's essays from 1964.³ Apart from the essays written under the title 'How would I like my parents to be?', 81 copies of which were collected and retained, there is a further analysis of the original total of 576 essays, including those written in response to the questions 'How I spent last weekend' (referring to the weekends of 29 February–1 March 1964, and 7–8 March 1964) and 'How I would like to spend the weekend'. The ages of the essay writers ranged from 10 eight year olds at one end to one seventeen year old at the other; about two thirds (381) were aged between ten and twelve. Nearly 90 per cent of the 292 boys and 284 girls spent the weekend 'alone, with brothers and sisters, or with friends'. Rather more than half of them (301) watched television, 95 visited a cinema, 75 of them read, and 58 went for a walk; 108 played in their own room, and 176 played outdoors. Only a small minority listened to radio (27), played sport (23), watched a sporting event (29), or went roller-skating (25) or cycling (7). There were seven who confessed to playing with dolls, and four who went to church. A mere two went to an organised event at a Jugendklubhaus (youth club centre). This startling figure – less than 0.5 per cent – should perhaps help to put the state organisation of leisure activities, at least in the early 1960s, into some perspective.

The 81 essays about the ideal parents reveal for the most part a very similar picture, in somewhat more detail.⁴ Many children mention that they have to spend a lot of time looking after their young siblings and that their parents do not have the time or energy to do much by way of recreational activity with them. The pressure on most of the parents, and their sheer exhaustion at the end of the day, comes through in many of the essays. So too, however, does a conception of 'normal' leisure activities, which must have formed at least a part of the children's real experience, if not in their view a sufficient part, for

them to write about with such enthusiasm. There is much mention of the small pleasures and pains of life: being allowed to buy sweets on a shopping trip to the nearest town, wanting to have more pocket money, to be sworn at less, to have *Bratwurst* and *Kartoffelsalat* (sausages and potato salad) for dinner. Most of the children write that they would like to spend more time with their parents: just talking, going swimming in summer, playing badminton and table-tennis, going for walks or to 'take photographs' in the woods on Sunday afternoons (photography receives a remarkable number of mentions), playing popular card and board games (Rommi, Skat, 'Mensch, ärgere Dich nicht', Mühle and Dame are all favourites) or watching television together. Some yearn for family outings to the Baltic Sea, or the possibility of going to a holiday camp for a week. Although the strains on the parents of long working hours and having to attend evening meetings are repeatedly palpable in these essays, the overwhelming sense is that the conception of leisure time is not so very different from that of many youngsters in Western Europe in the early 1960s, or indeed in the early twenty-first century, although the technology and material conditions forty years later (computer games, CDs, DVDs, fast foods and steamy leisure pools) are very different from the board games, potato salad and lake swimming of the early 1960s.

Available leisure time increased in the later 1960s, in part due to the introduction of a shorter working week in 1967, and, for agricultural workers, to the re-organisation of agricultural work in collective farms such that farming was no longer a seven-days-a-week year-round occupation. There was at the same time a growth in ownership of radios and television sets in the 1960s, allowing increasing numbers of East Germans the chance of greater access to Western news channels and the Western popular culture of the 1960s (on which more in a moment). The potential dangers of these developments prompted greater official interest in the character and implications of leisure time.

Surveys by the ZIJ from the later 1960s onwards confirm the picture of the ways in which most people's free time continued to be spent outside of official activities and organised channels. A confidential report in 1968 by the ZIJ on free time and youth, based on an intensive survey of 350 young people in the small town of Grimma (population 17,000), used a combination of time-budget diaries, interviews and questionnaires. The researchers found that far and away the largest proportion of leisure time was spent on 'socialising' (*Geselligkeit*), housework or gardening, and watching television. Only minimal time was devoted to 'community work' or activities within an institutional framework.⁵ Friendship groups were extremely important for these young people, and the report noted that the FDJ had 'up till now barely any

influence on these groups.⁶ Most young people spent the bulk of their free time 'often or very often' with close friends, or with their parents; only 6 per cent of those questioned spent their time 'often' with their FDJ group, and a miserable 1 per cent spent their time 'very often' with their FDJ group (presumably this 1 per cent included all the functionaries).⁷ Yet 84 per cent of those questioned claimed to be members of the FDJ.⁸ In 1971, the ZIJ once again found that 'informal leisure groups . . . [are] a very typical and normal form of communication among young people . . . that possess great significance for personality development'.⁹ Between 90 per cent and 100 per cent of young people by this time had access to radio and/or television, and only 7 per cent of fourteen- to nineteen-year-olds did not watch or listen to Western media.¹⁰ A study in November 1979 confirmed once again that the top leisure pursuit, at 92 per cent, was 'spending time with friends, acquaintances, partners'; a somewhat unspecified 'recreation and relaxation' came a close second at 81 per cent, followed by 'travel and tourism' at 70 per cent and 'fashion' at 65 per cent.

Even these apparently informal and innocuous leisure pursuits could of course have political implications. From fears of the subversive influence of Levis blue jeans, symbol of the US, to apocalyptic reactions to long hairstyles for boys, fashions in appearance were inevitably at certain times highly controversial political issues. It might in passing be noted that this in itself is nothing new in human societies: styles in self-presentation are always key aspects of cultural and political stratification, identity claims and role-playing. But perhaps few governments have taken the outward appearance, particularly of youth, quite so seriously as did that of the GDR.

In the course of the 1960s, male hair length and androgynous or provocative clothing styles among females aroused fears among certain SED functionaries and older members of the wider East German population about the collapse of morality and the end of civilisation as they knew it, in a manner not dissimilar from generational responses to youth styles in Western societies at the time. Ulbricht had already given the moral lead from the top with his 'Ten Commandments for the New Socialist Person' of 10 July 1958, including in ninth place the commandment to live 'in a clean and decent manner and respect your family'; his moral concerns were repeated frequently in the 1960s, as for example in an impromptu interjection in a Central Committee discussion of the draft Youth Law in 1963, when Ulbricht threw in a critical comment about 'female teachers who go into schools wearing make-up and short skirts etc., giving the children this example' (one wonders what lay behind the 'etc.').¹¹ Briefly, from 1963 to 1965, there was a moment of greater

apparent toleration.¹² But in the later 1960s, in a new phase of repression of popular youth culture, extraordinary measures were taken not merely to criticise the 'layabout' or 'drop-out' hairstyle (*Gammler-Haarschnitt*) of boys and the 'dirty and disorderly clothing styles' common to both boys and girls (allegedly providing clear evidence of the 'influence of the capitalist way of life'), but even on occasion actively to arrest young people on the streets and take them for a compulsory haircut.¹³

Fashion only ceased to be a major arena of generational and political conflict in the course of the 1970s. As a report of the ZIJ put it in 1979, by which time blue jeans were no longer the mark of the Western devil but had indeed been domesticated and produced in socialist colours (at least metaphorically, for they were still made of blue denim): 'It took the authority of the Party and its General Secretary to make it clear that the length of hair and the tightness of trousers are not sufficient indicators of political attitude and societal involvement.'¹⁴

More importantly in the present context, it is worth underlining the fact that the vast majority of young people, aged between their mid-teens and mid-twenties, were barely involved in activities arousing significant political attention, let alone oppositional or confrontational behaviour. And by the later 1970s a significant minority were also participants in activities central to the functioning of the regime (or knew where their future prospects lay): 34 per cent were engaged in some form of further political education, a quarter (24 per cent) were by now actively involved in the FDJ, and one in ten (11 per cent) in some form of societal activity in their residential area or in the National Front.¹⁵ Percentages are not very different among the 1,800 young adults (mostly at work, but including 330 apprentices) surveyed by the ZIJ in a study of October 1984. Just over one third (35 per cent) participated in some kind of further political education, and around a quarter (26 per cent and 24 per cent respectively) participated in organised and non-organised sporting activities. Only 7 per cent participated in some form of organised 'cultural-artistic' activity (singing groups or bands, theatre, film or photography).¹⁶ At the other end of the spectrum, it is worth remembering that an arguably even smaller minority were involved in what were seen as potentially subversive youth subcultures, from the 'young hooligans' (*Halbstarken*) and rock 'n' roll fans of the 1950s to the punks of the '80s, attracting a great deal of attention from the authorities at the time (as well as later academics), as we shall see in a moment.

As in any Western state, unofficial leisure activities varied according to the size and character of the local community, with notable differences between urban and rural areas. Although in the 1960s village life had been viewed as a

merely 'transitional' phenomenon (an *Übergangerscheinung*), by the mid-1980s the policy was to stabilise life within villages and seek to prevent further rural-urban migration. An important element in this strategy was to ensure that those living in small communities were able to enjoy their leisure time. A report by Kurt Krambach and colleagues is remarkably straightforward in its commentary on this question.¹⁷ According to Krambach and his 'authors' collective, those engaged in manual labour in agriculture have distinctive leisure needs, including a lot of rest and relaxation, reliance on consumer goods and sources of entertainment within the home (radio, television, newspapers and books), and the facilities for socialising. Although the possibility of membership of the various mass organisations receives a mention, the far lengthier discussion of the need for simple 'time out' with family, house, garden and pets, for occasional replenishment of social as well as physical needs in *Gasthäuser* (local pubs, restaurants and hostels), and the desirability of making communal facilities available for young people to hold dances, are rightly recognised as being higher up most people's agendas for spending what leisure hours remained after the rhythms and demands of rural life have been met.

The official view in this report by Krambach and his colleagues is remarkably factual and informative. Nevertheless, it does tend to paint a somewhat idealistic picture of how life in small communities ought to be. Other sources suggest that life was not always experienced in quite this essentially picture-book manner of a harmonious community or *Gemeinschaft*. Both lack of adequate facilities for different activities and conflicts of interest between different age groups and subcultures played a part. A study by the ZIJ in 1979 found that while young people in rural areas had more than two hours a day leisure time, few were satisfied with their leisure opportunities. Their favourite pastimes were watching television, listening to music and going to discotheques and dances; very few were in any way active in cultural or artistic pursuits, and young women appeared to spend much of their 'free time' on housework duties.¹⁸ A 1980 study of commuters from small communities in rural areas into larger towns during the 1970s found that such *Pendler* had very little leisure time in any event, particularly young women with children. Over 75 per cent of small communities had nearly a third of their residents commuting out elsewhere to work, and in 15 per cent of communities as many as three quarters of the residents actually had to travel a significant distance to work in a larger town, so this was no negligible proportion of the overall population of the GDR that found there was indeed precious little leisure time left after the work shift, travel and essential household duties had all been accomplished. Nor were there many leisure facilities available in the small communities in

which they were resident once they had returned.¹⁹ Leisure activities in the so-called *Randdörfer* – the villages and small towns on the outskirts of larger urban areas – also appear by all accounts to have been increasingly dismal. As one letter of complaint put it in 1982:

Since the restaurants and pubs are nearly all closed down, or as holiday facilities of factories elsewhere are only occasionally open to us, we hardly see each other any more. If on occasion somebody dies, then the survivors all come together again [for the funeral]. The cultural facilities of the villages for our young people are the bus stops. This is where private discos and other events take place ... Our grocery shops of the 1950s and 1960s have become alcohol sales outlets, which are not there to satisfy the needs of the population. If you want to buy daily necessities, you have to go to the local or district town.²⁰

Many people thus had to make their own informal leisure activities inside the home or with circles of friends almost by default.

It has also to be remembered that patterns of what one wanted or expected from leisure time varied dramatically across different social groups. Reading some of the diaries, letters and fictional and autobiographical writings of the East German intelligentsia such as Christoph Hein, Günter de Bruyn, Christa Wolf, Brigitte Reimann or Maxie Wander, one gains a very different sense of the character of life and leisure in small communities in the GDR.²¹ Much informal circulation of books, often hard to get hold of, and attendance at literary and cultural gatherings, seems to have lent interest to the leisure time of the intelligentsia and even among wider members of the community. Brigitte Reimann, for example, writes in a letter of March 1969 to Christa Wolf about readings she has given in small country villages:

A lot of fun [*lustig*], above all out there, in villages off the beaten track, where the people are very nice, uninhibited, decent, read an amazing amount – in some communities of about 700 souls more than 350 people are regular readers in the library – tell stories, stuff a person who is too thin for this spot of land with huge quantities of cake, and where there are teachers who remind one of women in Russian films ... Then driving at night between fields which also, in the moonlight, have something Russian about them, wide open spaces ... instinctively you listen out for a wolf howling somewhere.²²

Clearly a one-off visit for a reading by a Brigitte Reimann would be something rather out of the ordinary for these villagers. And not all rural and small-town East Germans were as interested in reading as those who turned out for a meeting with Reimann. Christa Wolf, in a letter of February 1969 to Reimann, commented rather more critically on the less intellectually inclined people she had met on her winter holiday: 'there are no happier people in the GDR than

the semi-state manufacturers and their sons and daughters . . . Well-fed, contented people do not write or read.²³ But the attempt to 'bring culture to the masses' through lending libraries and cultural activities was widespread and, in many respects, increasingly routine – not necessarily a heavily politicised activity, but increasingly just a part of 'normal' leisure, often organised by functionaries with no party affiliation.²⁴

Life in certain urban areas could be just as dispiriting as that described for the deserted 'satellite villages' or *Randdörfer*. A revealing collection of photographs of the Grünau new-town area of Leipzig was taken by Harald Kirschner and students from the Hochschule für Graphik und Buchkunst Leipzig to accompany a report on the ways in which young people in a 'large socialist city' spend their free time.²⁵ These photographs depict dispirited-looking groups of young people standing around in the communal waste lands between the large housing blocks of a no longer quite so new-looking estate, with rubbish bins, washing lines, bicycles, Trabi cars, prams and a 'Waffle Shop' as the somewhat dismal background. It would take only a few changes of the accompanying material props (make of car, style of pram) to transpose these scenes to estates built in the 1960s and '70s in the more economically deprived areas of virtually any Western European city. Groups of friends could usually find somewhere to meet (though not in the generally small apartments), with variations depending on area. Older city centres were often totally dark and deserted at night, while there might be a youth club, discotheque, ice-cream parlour or even fair ground operating in one of the new town suburbs.

But in urban areas the range of possible cultural attractions was nevertheless greater than in the small towns and villages of the GDR. In 1983, the GDR had approximately half as many theatres as the Federal Republic (178 compared to 346), despite having well under a third of the population; production of highly subsidised German classic plays remained a priority in the land of Goethe and Schiller's Weimar, although more recent theatrical works were subject to the inevitable political considerations, as was the politically acutely relevant production of cabaret performances.²⁶ Theatre visits per thousand of the population in the 1950s ranged from 761 in 1950 to 986 in 1958.²⁷ Going to the cinema was an even more popular pastime: in the 1950s, visits to the cinema per thousand of the population ranged from 10,251 in 1950 to a high of 15,744 in 1958, declining again slightly to 12,823 in 1961.²⁸ It was estimated that as many as 26,000 East Germans crossed the inner-Berlin sector border every day in 1956–7 to see films in West Berlin's 'border theatres', where East Germans allegedly made up 90–100 per cent of the cinema audience on occasion.²⁹ This opportunity was, of course, no longer available after 1961; but cinema-going remained highly popular, particularly among young

adults. In the early 1980s, young people made up on average 70 per cent of audiences, and the average age of film-goers was twenty-four years.³⁰ Individual films from the 'non-socialist foreign territories' were by far the most popular, with 'Flaming Inferno' topping the list as the favourite film of 17 per cent of 'normal' film-goers surveyed. The rather distinctive audiences for the film *Märkische Forschungen*, based on a novel by GDR author Günter de Bruyn, were somewhat older than the average cinema-going public, and nearly half belonged to the intelligentsia; the film topping this audience's list of favourites was the rather more highbrow *Mephisto*, and they also commented favourably on other 'artistic films' such as *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*.³¹ The GDR's own DEFA studios in Babelsberg, Potsdam, produced not only obvious propaganda pieces and light entertainment but also films of some considerable quality and often continuing interest, although under conditions of considerable political constraint and at times severe censorship, most notoriously, of course, the films banned in the Eleventh Plenum of 1965.³²

More important on a day-to-day level for most people, particularly from the later 1960s onwards, were the offerings of television, including both GDR and Western channels (with the exception of people living in those areas, such as the far south-east of the country, known as the 'valley of the clueless', which was unable to receive Western broadcasts); and despite the clear politicisation, particularly of news channels, there were some genuinely popular East German television programmes, including the consumer-oriented programme 'PRISMA', and often good coverage of sport.³³ Other programmes, almost universally hated, nevertheless made their unintentional contribution to a GDR sense of collective identity and humour: the long-term television broadcaster and moderator of the programme *Der schwarze Kanal*, Karl-Eduard von Schnitzler, for example, was widely known only as 'Karl-Eduard von Schn . . .' because it took precisely until this point in his name, announced at the start of his programme, to get up and turn the television off.

Not all magazines were as evidently and narrowly political as the daily SED newspaper, *Neues Deutschland*, although all were necessarily produced under licence and clearly subject to political conditions. But there was nevertheless more space for politically non-contentious light reading than one might think. Readers of the monthly periodical *Das Magazin* (licensed by the Ministry of Culture) in the 1960s and '70s, for example, were treated to translated extracts and short stories by international authors including Aldous Huxley, Ernest Hemingway and others; articles on topics ranging from the death of Marilyn Monroe, an illustrated travel guide to Sri Lanka and the shock occasioned when filmstars Gina Lollobrigida and Elizabeth Taylor turned up to the same film festival wearing an identical dress, to a discussion of the interpretation of

dreams; guidance on what to do to stay young, how to look chic in knitwear ('chic mit Strick') and other helpful fashion advice, and whether single women for whom the biological clock is ticking should launch a 'mini-family' without a stable partner; as well as recipes, cartoons (even reprints from the *New Yorker*), brain-twisters and crossword puzzles, lonely-hearts-club listings, readers' letters, tips on Christmas preparations, periodic pictures of naked women and advertisements that look remarkably Western.³⁴ Younger readers might enjoy losing themselves in the comic *Mosaik*, produced monthly by the Verlag Neue Welt, under the auspices of the FDJ. This exciting series of adventures of the 'Abrafaxe', three plucky youngsters romping through societies around the world and civilisations over time, is perhaps best described as something of a cross between Asterix and Hergé's adventures of Tin-Tin.

Getting away from it all?

Leisure time most of the time was not about film or theatre visits, attending concerts or exhibitions, or getting involved in organised activities. But official policies and organisations were nevertheless for the vast majority of people an essential ingredient in leisure pursuits. Dependence on the state was particularly evident in relation to holidays.

Holidays, even when taken with the family, were not for most people the privately organised affairs characteristic of Western capitalist societies. Dependence on state institutions for holidays started very early on. In the early 1960s, at a time when the increasingly affluent West Germans were beginning to organise their individual dashes for the Mediterranean beaches in cars faster than the British could produce or afford, and mass travel agencies in Britain were springing up organising cheap flights and package holidays in the sun, East Germans were increasingly reliant on holidays and camps organised by state institutions. In 1961, for example, a total of 80,000 children were able to take holidays in camps for Young Pioneers; 750,000 people had holidays organised by their workplace; and nearly 1,500,000 young people, from children through to apprentices, participated in local holiday activities including swimming, walking and youth camps. At a more specialised level, the paramilitary Gesellschaft für Sport und Technik (Society for Sport and Technology, or GST) organised camps for 'Young Patriots'.³⁵ In total, 70 per cent of all schoolchildren and apprentices participated in some form of organised holiday provision.

Large though these numbers may sound, and however much the system was expanded and developed over the subsequent decades, there were never enough holiday places for those who wanted them, at the times that they

wanted, or of a quality with which they were satisfied. Even by the Honecker period, with its greater emphasis on consumer satisfaction and looking after the well-being of workers, the files are full of related appeals and complaints: as many as 47 of the 177 *Eingaben* of 1974 to Fritz Rösel's office in the National Executive Committee of the FDGB related to problems about holidays, and this proportion was not untypical through the 1970s and early '80s.³⁶ Some concerns were simply about the sheer lack of availability of places.³⁷ Frau Luzie R., of Karl-Marx-Stadt, writing in 1986, was concerned that since her small enterprise with 60 employees had been submerged into a large enterprise with 3,200 workers, they had lost control of their own funds and holiday places, which had now gone into the general pot with only 72 beds in holiday homes available, on a fortnightly cycle, for the entire workforce; Frau R. bitterly pointed out that it took little mathematical ability to work out just how infrequently any given worker, along with their family dependants, would actually be able to come up with a holiday on this basis, particularly for those families with children of school age.³⁸ Although the claim was made that families with two or more children would be given priority, it was even officially conceded that there were too many such families for all of them to be able to take a holiday in the summer months.³⁹ There were also particular difficulties for other groups, such as holidays even out of season for pensioners who had not belonged to the FDGB.⁴⁰ There were problems of holiday places for diabetics needing a special diet and appropriate care facilities: as one letter put it, 'more should and must be done . . . for putting into practice the policy decisions of our organisation and our state' with respect to the special needs of diabetics.⁴¹

Those lucky enough to gain a holiday at the right time and in the right place could still be critical, as in the case of the comprehensive critique of the state of the holiday home 'Fritz Weineck' in the otherwise idyllic mountain resort of Oberhof, on behalf of workers from four major industrial enterprises (the VEB Leuna-Werke 'Walter Ulbricht', the VEB Chemische Werke Buna, the CKB and the VEB Filmfabrik Wolfen). Very long waits and high prices for meals, a three-day menu leaving little choice for those with dietary restrictions, no places available for the special New Year's Eve celebrations, difficulties with obtaining tickets for other events despite long queuing, suspicions of 'under the counter' privileging of non-guests, all allegedly required investigation and rectification 'in the interests of our workers in the industrial zone of the Halle District, who daily, under difficult conditions, devote their energies to the fulfilment of our Plans and accomplish high achievements for the strengthening of our Republic'.⁴² Frau Renate S., after working for her enterprise for VEB Herrenmode for sixteen years, was finally fortunate enough to be allotted what she thought would be the holiday of her dreams only to find that the

expected 'bungalows' turned out to be camping with sanitary facilities that she deemed entirely inappropriate for a family with young twins: thus, 'on the basis of the most utterly primitive preconditions', the family felt obliged to abort their planned thirteen-day holiday and return home after only one night.⁴³ Others who did get a holiday in buildings of a more permanent character were critical of aspects such as the rain coming in, the heating not working, the poor food, the lack of a colour television, and the expensive wine that was the only one on offer, as in the case of Herr S., who had been used to better things: 'Since I was employed in the military organs of the state apparatus and in other societal organisations, I often took my holidays abroad or in homes belonging to the enterprises themselves'; this time, he had been to a general FDGB home in the Harz Mountains, and been far from impressed.⁴⁴

This last case illustrates a more general point. People were to varying degrees dependent on the state, and received differential treatment and rewards according to their place and type of occupation and their perceived degree of need. Holidays also more broadly reflected and reinforced class distinctions, more so in the 1960s than in later years given the shifts in the character of class and occupation over this period. In 1966, a survey of 21,000 people living in 6,400 households representative of 90 per cent of the population (excluding only pensioners) found that, while three quarters (74 per cent) of the intelligentsia and two thirds (67 per cent) of the self-employed had taken a holiday that year, only just over half (54 per cent) of workers and employees and fewer than a quarter (24 per cent) of agricultural workers had been able to enjoy a holiday.⁴⁵ The vast majority (85 per cent) of these holidays were taken within the GDR, and only 15 per cent abroad. By the 1980s, as many as four fifths of the population (80 per cent) were able to go on at least some form of holiday, including by now many more agricultural workers, but still only one fifth (20 per cent) of holidays were taken outside the GDR, generally in the closely neighbouring Eastern Bloc countries.⁴⁶ Around 90 per cent of all holidays in the 1980s were organised by the trade union organisation (FDGB) and the state travel agency.⁴⁷ The state travel agency for foreign travel was used primarily by the intelligentsia and the few self-employed people, while young people were occasionally able to organise independent travel on very limited resources.⁴⁸ Attempts to make other informal arrangements, such as swapping of country retreats, could be subjected to administrative hassles such as difficulties in obtaining permission to put an advertisement in a local newspaper.⁴⁹

While people were able to arrange unofficial visits to friends and relatives, state-subsidised organised holidays were very keenly sought after. The length of holidays in factory- and state-owned holiday centres was a maximum of

thirteen days, and the accommodation was, as indicated, apparently not always of the highest quality. But while the tents, wood cabins and 'immobile homes' in campsite locations were not exactly the air-conditioned, five-star international hotels in exotic locations advertised in Western glossy brochures, they did afford large numbers of ordinary working people a real break in often pleasant surroundings with relatively fresh air and a variety of leisure facilities. Despite the criticisms splattered across the archival legacies of the GDR, it is highly likely that the vast majority of people who did not write in with complaints actually enjoyed the cheap, affordable facilities offered by the state. Certainly in the nostalgic views of many East Germans after unification, affordable holidays within the GDR or neighbouring socialist countries were remembered with pleasure, in contrast to the situation, at a time of high unemployment, when in principle they were free to travel anywhere in the world, but in practice did not have the money to leave their own home town.

Organised leisure

Similarly important for large numbers of people was state support of regular sporting and other recreational activities.

Sport was – like so much else – very much a two-edged sword in the GDR. On the one hand was a conception of sporting facilities for the wider population; on the other was the massive state support, particularly in the Honecker period, of elite sport as a means of gaining the GDR international recognition and fostering a sense of GDR pride as a result of Olympic sporting successes. The latter were considerably assisted, as it later turned out, not merely by the abuse of punishing training schedules and practices but also by extensive use of illegal drugs, which took away or put in doubt the significance of any successes in international competition. And the total lack of trainers' respect for honesty, legality and the rights of an individual over his or her own body led for many top sports-people who were the victims of the regime to very serious physical and mental consequences, including the effects of hormone treatment on the sexuality of high-performance athletes dependent on physical strength and muscularity, and early disability and invalid status in the case of some former gymnasts and dancers.⁵⁰

The two aims – sport for the masses and international excellence – were, given the economic constraints, not entirely compatible. The early identification and fostering of sporting talent in order to produce the national sporting elite was a key goal for the regime, and resources were devoted accordingly. In 1989, the GDR boasted a total of 25 special schools for sport, which encompassed 989 classes, with an average of 10.2 pupils per class and a total student

population of 10,053. This was far and away the largest sort of special school in the GDR (the next largest was for foreign languages, with 6,496 pupils, followed by special schools for those with scientific and technical ability at 2,790 pupils, and music at 1,683 pupils).⁵¹ The figures on popular sporting facilities, however, indicate a much lower level of investment. In 1983, there were 886 swimming pools (compared to 3,400 in the Federal Republic) and 3,324,291 people belonged to a sports club (compared to 18,375,270 in the Federal Republic).⁵² Even given the disparity in population sizes, with roughly three times as many residents in the West than in the East, the contrast is evident. The problem with raw data such as these is that they give no indication of the quality of the facilities, or indeed whether or not they were even open (many East German swimming pools were repeatedly closed 'for repairs'); and those that were open were often reserved for competitive training or special events.

But at a local level, active participation in, or enthusiastic support for, parochial sporting events was genuine and widespread. Organised sport was the province of the Deutscher Turn- und Sport-Verein (DTSB). Founded in 1957, this brought together 35 different sporting associations, with, by the later 1970s, close to 2,800,000 members, of whom over 2,000,000 were male. Football, fishing and gymnastics were the most popular associations. Although the DTSB was organised, like all mass organisations in the GDR, on the principle of 'democratic centralism', there is evidence to suggest that, by the later 1970s and '80s, the grass-roots functionaries of this organisation were genuinely representing the interests of local communities in attempts to improve facilities and supplies of equipment under worsening economic circumstances.⁵³ But participation in sporting activities was strongly encouraged by the regime and extended well beyond the membership of the DTSB. Children and young people were encouraged to participate in the periodic *Spartakiaden*, collective sporting contests named after the Roman gladiator Spartacus and designed to get young people involved in competitive sports. Joint campaigns of the DTSB, the FDGB and the FDJ also encouraged adults to engage in sport: thus, in 1980, it was estimated that nearly 5,000,000 East Germans participated in 28,500 sports festivals in factories, residential areas and villages.⁵⁴ Even allowing for a little light exaggeration, it is clear that many forms of recreational sport were genuinely popular. Over a third of a million people (340,000) seem to have taken part in the 'Table Tennis Tournament of the Thousands' (Tischtennistournier der Tausende), over 107,000 were involved in volleyball tournaments, and 1,800,000 young people took part in the heats and finals of the various sports included in the National Youth Festival of 1980.⁵⁵ Walking and rambling remained highly popular

pastimes (as indeed they had been for a century or more), and the German Association for Rambling, Climbing and Orienteering of the GDR (the DWBO), one of the constituent groups of the DTSB, assisted with the production of paths and organised walks. The 'Join in, stay fit!' ('Mach mit – Bleib Fit!') campaign also seems to have attracted high participation rates, as did badminton, bowling and less energetic 'sports' such as chess. Encouragement to take up jogging was fostered under the motto 'Eile mit Meile' (very roughly, 'Make haste with mileage'), while encouragement for children to participate in sport came under the slightly less snappy title: 'For health, recreation, and the joy of life, for capacity to achieve and desire to achieve, for peace and socialism! Everyone do sport!' Organised sport appears not merely to have spawned a veritable avalanche of the classic GDR rhyming slogans, but also even to have permitted an unexpected and slightly inaccurate anglicism, more characteristic of West German language use: one document asserted that 'in some forms of sport more attention needs to be paid to Fairplay [sic]' ('In einigen Sportarten muß stärker auf das Fairplay geachtet werden').⁵⁶

Widespread active participation in sport was increasingly fostered through the holiday and leisure facilities of the FDGB and through the workplace. Whole factories could, from 1980, be honoured with an award for 'exceptional achievements in leisure and recreational sport'; and the FDGB started a brigade competition 'Who can run the most miles?' ('Wer läuft die meisten Meilen?'). In 1982, as many as 3,300,000 East Germans were members of a sports club. Factories supported their own football teams, and heroes in other sporting endeavours appear to have been genuinely popular in their local neighbourhoods. The one team about which there seems to have been considerable ambivalence was the FC Dynamo, Erich Mielke's Stasi team (criticised even for having bought up in advance all the best seats for a particularly important football game).

The not-very-hidden agenda behind the policy of encouraging physical fitness – suggesting a degree of continuity with Nazi emphases – was betrayed in the slogan of the Sports' Awards Programme, 'Be prepared for work and for the defence of the homeland' ('Bereit zur Arbeit und zur Verteidigung der Heimat'). In some areas the paramilitary agenda was even more explicit in practical terms, with training in shooting and related activities. This was very explicitly the case with respect to the GST, with its superior facilities and programme of activities for young people. Acquiring a driving licence, sailing, gaining experience of flying or learning how to be an amateur radio ham were possible alongside learning how to shoot a moving target from a distance. More than four fifths of members of the GST in the mid-1980s, according to one survey, participated in paramilitary sports 'because it's fun' ('weil es mir

Spaß macht'); a mere 14 per cent gave the officially appropriate answer, 'because I would like to prepare myself for military service'.⁵⁷ It was notable that this survey was carried out in 'particularly strong GST branches'; and even in these nearly a quarter of the young people surveyed (and fully one third of the female members) confessed to being either religious or agnostic, with only 77 per cent giving the desired answer of being a committed atheist. GST members apparently also watched and listened to Western television and radio as much as to the GDR media.⁵⁸ Whatever the intended function, clearly the members were gaining some personal enjoyment from the facilities without completely buying into the associated worldview.

The larger significance of sport as a spectacle for the masses and a means of building collective pride in the achievements of the GDR was no more lost on the authorities in the GDR than it was in other later twentieth-century states. The significance of preparation for the Olympics was underlined already in a document presented to the Central Committee of the SED on 28 November 1962, in the run-up to the 1964 Summer Olympics: 'The political-ideological education of professional sportspeople and their successors is to be oriented towards the stronger development of a sense of socialist patriotism, a clear relationship with and open commitment to our workers' and peasants' state, and a firm link with the party of the working class among all sportspeople.'⁵⁹ These attempts were met with at least partial success. It is difficult to gauge accurately what the real responses of the citizens of the GDR were to sporting successes of their team representatives on the international sporting stage. The documents are so frequently full of apparently spurious positive comments that one probably has to discount at least some of the tidal wave of enthusiasm gushing from the pages of the reports on popular opinion (*Stimmungen und Meinungen*) with respect to national sporting successes. However, the reactions are so overwhelmingly positive, and there is a degree of naivety in the reporting that suggests perhaps a firmer bedrock of positive opinion lurking within the reports than is perhaps sometimes the case. Thus, for example, the report of 31 August 1972 (following the success of *Ostpolitik* and the international recognition of the GDR) claims that 'many citizens are filled with great joy, pride and satisfaction that for the first time a completely sovereign and independent GDR team, with full rights, is participating in the Summer Olympics'.⁶⁰ A week or so later, the report is if anything even more enthusiastic in tone:

Among the overwhelming majority of our citizens there is enormous enthusiasm, recognition and high regard for the achievements to date of our sovereign Olympic team. Reports in the press, radio and television repeatedly unleash new joy and

satisfaction. Many citizens are extremely enthusiastic about the competitive spirit [*Kampfgeist*] of the sportspeople of our Republic.⁶¹

Perhaps the only slightly critical note sounded in these reports had to do with repeated questions about the limitations on travel permits and the restricted numbers who could actually attend as spectators. The enthusiasm about sporting successes does nevertheless seem to have been genuine; the contrast with the tone of the reports on the new border regulations of 1 September 1972, which did not appear to arouse any comparable positive reactions, is quite striking in the corresponding reports in this file. There were, however, some intimations that the enthusiasm for German sporting successes was not strictly limited to socialist compatriots, but had wider national resonance, as revealed for example in the following rather typical remark: 'Whether GDR or FRG, we keep our fingers crossed for all Germans, and we will be happy about all their victories.'

For those with more cerebral inclinations, there was a variety of avenues for the exploration and expression of cultural interests – all similarly geared to the ultimate purposes of the socialist state, but to varying degrees dependent on area. The Deutsch-sowjetische Freundschaftsgesellschaft (German-Soviet Friendship Society) was, with 5,500,000 members, the second largest mass organisation after the FDGB. This was perhaps the classic fig-leaf organisation. Its primary task was to bring a love of Soviet culture to the Germans, through films, cultural activities and learning the Russian language. It appears to have barely impinged on the lives of many members, who might have done little more than go to an occasional film viewing. It probably did, however, have some impact on East German cultural trends at the level of 'high culture'.⁶²

A far broader remit was held by the Kulturbund (KB), or League of Culture, which was primarily targeted at intellectuals with 'discussion circles' and 'philosophical circles', through such organisations as Klubs der Intelligenz; but it also encompassed an extraordinary range of special-interest groups of less obviously intellectual character. These covered leisure pursuits across an amazing spectrum, from sailing, allotment gardening and small-animal breeding, to caving, bird-watching, the cultivation of roses and orchids, cacti and other succulents, 'aquarium friends', and those interested in esperanto or astronomy.⁶³ Some of these were almost entirely apolitical, serving their members' interests in terms of; for example, the production of specialist publications of little wider fascination, and on occasion assisting in sorting out neighbourhood disputes (as in the case of over-loud music or boisterous social events in allotment gardens, a favourite weekend excursion goal for hundreds

of thousands of East Germans). In the later 1980s, a majority of GDR households had an allotment or garden plot of some sort (producing no less than 98.9 per cent of the GDR's honey supplies, and 42,400,000 eggs each year); around 3,500,000 GDR citizens were in some way connected with the Verband der Kleingärtner, Siedler und Kleintierzüchter (Association of Small Gardeners, Settlers and Small Animal Breeders) and nearly 1,500,000 were full members of this in 1988.⁶⁴ Others were designed with more obviously political goals in mind. The Gesellschaft für Natur- und Umweltschutz (Society for the Protection of Nature and the Environment, or GNU), one of the small special interest groups under the wing of the Kulturbund, provides a perfect example of the flexibility of the East German system for incorporating and channelling the potentially more political activities and interests of its citizens. Once environmental pollution had become a serious concern in the 1980s, and unofficial movements in the penumbra of the Protestant Churches appeared to be linking this issue with those of peace and human rights, the SED saw the need to channel and contain environmentalist energies.⁶⁵

The women's organisation, the DFD (Democratic German Women's League), combined both overtly political goals and the kinds of general activities found in Western voluntary women's organisations of the later twentieth century. It included in its membership an extraordinarily high percentage of women who did not belong to any political party. Here, arguably, the SED was at its least manipulative. The aims of the DFD were of course – as with all mass organisations and bloc parties – to 'reach the parts the party cannot reach'; and women were notoriously apolitical and hard to contain in any of the traditional communist organisations, appealing as these did primarily to the organised industrial male working class. The DFD therefore of course had as a primary function the task of trying to reach out to women and translate the SED's message into terms that would be more easily accessible on otherwise unreceptive ground. However, at the same time a reading of DFD documents suggests on the part of many DFD activists a genuinely emancipatory vision – and this in a curiously individualistic and humanistic sense. Efforts to get girls to think beyond 'work for a couple of years before getting a husband and a home and children' were not just parts of an attempt to tap a labour reserve at a time of scarcity of labour. There were repeated efforts to get young women to set their sights higher, to consider not only further training and the acquisition of qualifications, but also to work towards taking up positions of leadership and authority. Much of this appears to have been a genuine attempt to persuade women to realise their full human potential rather than internalising and reproducing received traditional roles.⁶⁶ Yet at the same time the reports

are full of activities that would be familiar to anyone looking at Western women's organisations at much the same time: evenings spent in activities and discussions of matters of traditional interest to women whose primary focus remained that of the domestic sphere, such as cooking, needlework, fashion and issues to do with pregnancy and childcare.

A snapshot of the DFD compiled in April 1962, for example, reveals that of the 1,312,980 members by far the largest single occupational group (454,620) was that of housewives. They were followed by 'workers' (366,044) and 'employees' (*Angestellten*, 276,516).⁶⁷ Women working in collective farms made up 98,922 of the members and there were a further 17,895 agricultural workers not in LPGs (agricultural production co-operatives). Those working in educational positions numbered 45,211, and women employed in the health services totalled 26,893. A mere 6,962 women were classified as members of the 'intelligentsia'. How many of this cross-section of the East German population were really active members of the DFD is less easy to quantify. The report notes that older women preferred to attend meetings of the Volkssolidarität, and professional women preferred to attend meetings of the National Front because they could go along with their husbands; in addition to other drawbacks, housewives were apparently unwilling to attend 'because they are afraid that they would immediately have to take on a functionary role'.⁶⁸ But while DFD meetings at this time rarely attracted a turnout of more than 20 per cent of the membership (actually remarkably high in comparison with, say, Labour Party ward meetings in central London), there appear to have been higher turnouts in rural areas, particularly when little else was going on. If, however, there was competition from a village club or other meeting, even peasant women would shun the DFD for fear of being pressured into taking on a function.⁶⁹ A report of late 1962 reveals that women only selectively attended when the meeting might be on a topic of particular interest:

Women and DFD groups were often initiators in forming choirs, amateur dramatics and Agit-prop-groups as well as other circles of artistic and cultural grass-roots activity. It turns out that a large proportion of women – above all also younger women – who do not otherwise participate in political events in their residential area can be brought to take an interest particularly in cultural events, cultural and sports circles, in practical courses for women and in interesting lectures of all kinds. The largest attendance figures are for those events that deal with literature, with readings from books or poetry, or which deal with problems of education, health, travel reports, household tips, cosmetics and fashion.⁷⁰

In 1961, no fewer than 1,200,000 East German women appear to have attended events of this nature – as many as a fifth of the adult female population.

Similar selective enjoyment of at least a sampling of what state facilities and organisations had to offer – attending the intrinsically interesting, avoiding the overtly political, evading the risk of having to take on a functionary role – is evident across a very wide range of sources. It is particularly apparent in relation to youth activities, where the FDJ had a very clear political role, but where state facilities such as youth clubs were readily used by young people to their own ends and were not always under the control of the FDJ.⁷¹

Rethinking leisure in the GDR

Throughout the GDR's existence there was thus a constant interplay between a surprisingly wide range of grass-roots activities and initiatives, and state efforts to channel, harness, foster and control popular interests, always with an eye to the wider international context and the potential political implications of the seemingly apolitical.

As far as organised leisure was concerned, state organisations sought to offer a range of well-controlled activities to cater for different interests as well as providing channels for political influence and 'selection' of promising cadres. Beyond the age of about six, the coverage of the East German population by one or another mass organisation was more or less total. One would have to be an exceedingly rare individual never to have belonged to a single one of these organisations (arguably only an unusually religiously committed, unemployed person of extraordinary willpower, lack of leisure interests or ambitions, and remarkable capacity for survival as a loner in this most collectivised society). The importance of the system of mass organisations in the shaping and experience of East Germans' lives cannot be overestimated. But the nature of this influence is harder to define clearly.

The mass organisations of the GDR are generally represented as 'transmission belts' through which the SED's powers of control, surveillance and indoctrination could be exercised.⁷² The mass organisations were, of course, in essence creatures of the SED; they were also intended to organise and influence people. It is often suggested that people joined these organisations because they could not withstand the 'pressure for conformity' or because certain social privileges and professional career chances were attached to such membership, as well as opportunities for leisure activities and travel. On some accounts, only a minority of members swallowed the 'political-ideological slogans' of the respective organisations at face value.⁷³ Such an interpretation makes it look as if there was simply a form of malevolent control, surveillance and indoctrination at work at one end of the equation; and a degree of largely enforced, unwilling conformity under pressure, or opportunistic pragmatism,

at the other end combined with a possibly cynical enjoyment of the marginal pleasures that could be had while ignoring the ideological wrappings.

However, true as all this may be, there was a great deal more to it than that: the picture is a great deal more complex. For one thing, depending on the organisation, the character of those who constituted the 'representatives of the state' in the shape of functionaries in the mass organisations needs closer inspection. There was very often a genuine community of interests between the functionaries or power-holders in the organisation, particularly at the grass roots, and those ordinary members whose views they sought to represent. On some recent interpretations, there was not so much a process of the 'state drenching society' but rather one of 'society affecting the state' or 'socialisation of the state' (*Vergesellschaftung*; characteristically, this play with labels works better in German than English).⁷⁴ By the 1980s, functionaries were often becoming increasingly frustrated with central authorities at the failure to provide the means or material resources for members to pursue their interests as well as they would wish.

In addition, there were also often what may be termed 'cultural affinities' between what the state had to offer and what many ordinary members wanted; indeed, considerable efforts were expended in the attempt to ascertain and cater to widespread interests. There were serious attempts to attract people to attend particular organisations by putting on varied and supposedly attractive programmes of events, without which no wider influence could possibly be exerted. Good recreational, sporting and holiday facilities were genuinely in the interests not merely of those enjoying the immediate pleasures of leisure time and vacations, but also of an industrial state needing a fit and healthy workforce. And many of the ways in which people chose to spend their free time were in any event politically more or less irrelevant, or only relevant in a trivial sense.

The essential point here is to note that the mass organisations were therefore not simply or always experienced as (merely) coercive, but were for many people at one time or another enabling, and experienced as a provider of entertainment and facilitator of holidays, hobbies and interest groups. In some respects, the extraordinarily high degree of organisational channelling of social activities has a long history in Germany (one need only think of the plethora of such social organisations in Wilhelmine or Weimar Germany). The difference in the GDR was, of course, the fact that all were SED monopolies, without the richness of choice of pre-1933 Germany (Catholic, Protestant, SPD and other rambling, cycling, musical or reading associations, for example); and the SED had a strong political agenda, although with greater consequences in some contexts than others. But within this state-controlled

organisational framework, large numbers of people were genuinely able to pursue certain leisure activities and follow their own interests, from fishing, singing and bee-keeping to cacti collection, pottery and cooking, particularly when these were not obviously of immediate political relevance. The concept of 'niche society' is therefore hardly apposite in this context.⁷⁵

Finally, the vast majority of most people's free time was spent in ways that were neither actively fostered nor actively hindered by the state – except of course in so far as the faltering economy proved a brake on the development of many leisure possibilities for many people, not to mention the blindingly obvious fact of the Wall providing a rather serious visible obstacle to foreign travel (and rather more evident to the naked eye than the fact of limited financial means restricting the capacity for foreign travel of the poor in capitalist societies). The history of specific clashes, conflicts and confrontations between state repressive organs and certain social subgroups has been better served than the history of the 'silent majority' who had little interest in what were quite widely seen as the subversive activities and 'scenes' of various minority subcultures, and this not merely on the part of SED apparatchiks and hardliners. It is, of course, crucial to write the histories of those groups whose interests were suppressed, silenced, distorted, by SED and Stasi repression; but it is important also, in the interests of a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of East German society, to recognise that arguably the majority of the population were not participants in these subcultural currents. For many, the sense that they had been able to lead 'perfectly ordinary lives' was grounded in part in experiences of pleasure in leisure, aided by an often supportive environment at least at local level, if not at all times, by an inefficient regime that could not always deliver the goods in this area as in so many others.

Chapter Five

Matters of life and death

The situation with respect to health and illness immediately after the war was dire. Those who had survived the war within Germany were shattered physically and mentally by their experiences of shortages, bombing raids, injuries and illnesses, as well as of living among ruins and daily confronting death. Massive numbers of adult males had been killed in the Second World War, and many others returned from the front or from internment suffering from severe war wounds and near-starvation. 'Dealing with the past' was for many Germans at this time not so much a matter of confronting the crimes committed by the Nazis, as one of sheer physical survival.

Famine was a serious problem. The post-war rationing system provided, as many bitterly complained, too little to survive, too much to die: in the winter of 1945, the basic rations amounted to around 750 to 1,200 calories on average per day, about half of what an average adult person needs.¹ Brigitte Reimann, in a letter of August 1947 to a schoolfriend in the West, describes graphically how hungry and thin everyone was, so much so that, when her brother fell badly and grazed his abdomen, each sticking-out rib had a separate graze.² People who had work often complained, even as late as 1949, that what they were given to eat even on relatively privileged ration cards was insufficient and that having to work prevented them from going on 'hamstering' expeditions for food in the countryside.³ Much energy was devoted to considerations of how to increase the food to which one was entitled, leading, for example, to unseemly squabbles about who qualified for what sort of 'victim of Nazi persecution' status, if this was to bring additional rations.⁴

Hunger had an impact on lowered resistance and heightened susceptibility to disease. In 1945–6 there were 129,000 cases of typhus, from which 16,830 died; 56,780 cases of infectious tuberculosis, from which 23,600 people died; 149,580 cases of diphtheria, as well as thousands of cases of other serious