Economic necessity and political reality in the GDR: Establishing an overseas port at Rostock

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Abstract
Opened in April 1960, the overseas port at Rostock resulted from a convergence of factors related to geopolitics, geography, economics and the unique needs and challenges of building a socialist port. Local, national and global pressures played on each other in establishing the port, making Rostock a singular product of the Cold War in the German Democratic Republic. The history of decision-making that went into the building of the port demonstrates the importance of politics in the Cold War, as well as its limits. Although informed by geopolitics, economic decisions in Europe’s socialist economies reflected a broad array of factors. This article argues that national and local decision-makers managed competing regional and national interests in order to develop their own economic strategies that functioned on several different levels. Rostock’s history highlights the common problematic of operating within and outside of the boundaries that the Cold War produced.

Keywords
government officials, infrastructure, ports, regions, socialism

As a member of the former Hanseatic League, the city of Rostock owed its foundational success as a port to the ‘classic’ Hanseatic trade on the East-West axis across northern Europe. Located in an agricultural region on Germany’s northern coast, the port grew to

1. Johannes Lachs, ‘Die Entwicklung des Hafens bis zum Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts’, in Die Geschichte des Rostocker Hafens (Rostock, 2002), 11.

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regional prominence in the modern era as an exporter of grain and importer of English coal. Rostock’s shipping fleet expanded in the mid-nineteenth century, but capital investments in the port did not always keep pace. Due to tariff and price fluctuations in the grain trade, the advancement of competing rail routes, as well as competition from the port at Stettin/Szczecin, the port of Rostock never grew beyond its regional status. Though not without further development in the twentieth century, Rostock was eclipsed by other German ports and only accounted for around 0.5% of total German shipping turnover in 1937. The port and other industries benefitted from the military build-up before the Second World War, however, and by 1939 the city’s population had grown to over 120,000 residents. The port remained of regional importance into the Second World War and after, until Rostock was rather suddenly thrust into the national spotlight with the building of a new overseas port in the late 1950s.

The decision to build a deep-sea port in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was brought about by territorial, economic and political factors stemming from the unique historical context of the Cold War. Territory was the most intractable factor as the GDR tried to reconcile its economic needs with the boundaries established both by politics and geography. From a transportation perspective, the territory that would become the GDR was badly served. In the eastern portion, the Baltic port of Stettin/Szczecin, once Germany’s third largest port and major port for Berlin, was ultimately ceded to Poland. In the west, the line dividing the Soviet and Allied zones cut the route from the Elbe to Hamburg and the North Sea, while simultaneously severing the major artery of the Midland Canal across Eastern and Western Germany. Furthermore, there was no major estuarine port on the GDR’s Baltic coast, and the existing waterways in the region did not generally connect production centres to required material inputs. The pre-war geography of Germany’s economy was very different from that of the GDR’s, so much so that by the end of the Second World War there was comparatively little sea trade to speak of in the area that would become the GDR. As such, the territory never had the need for its own deep-sea port, one capable of servicing both the size and cargo capacity of the ocean-going vessels of the twentieth century. The two larger ports in this territory (Rostock and Wismar) together were the base for just 23 ships with a capacity of 34,100 gross tonnes in 1939, as opposed to 1,122 ships based in Western Germany with a capacity of four million gross tonnes.

2. Lachs, 'Die Entwicklung des Hafens’, 20.
3. Lachs, 'Die Entwicklung des Hafens’, 23–33.
4. Lachs, 'Die Entwicklung des Hafens’, 29–31.
5. Horst Prignitz, 'Der Rostocker Hafen 1900 bis zur ‘Wende’ 1990', in Die Geschichte des Rostocker Hafens (Rostock, 2002), 51.
6. Rostock in Zahlen 2020, leaflet (Rathaus Rostock, 2020), 1, https://rathaus.rostock.de/de/rathaus/rostock_in_zahlen/veroeffentlichungen/faltblatt_rostock_in_zahlen_2019/276434 (accessed 30 August 2020); Prignitz, 'Der Rostocker Hafen', 51–3.
7. Roy E. H. Mellor, The Two Germanies: A Modern Geography (London, 1978), 411.
8. Franziska Cammin, Die Deutsche Seereederei als Staatsreederei der DDR: Die Handelsflotte zwischen Staatlicher Kontrolle und Freiheit auf See (Hamburg, 2014), 27.
Although the lines drawn by the Cold War would come to have a significant impact on the transport needs of the GDR, it is important to understand that the economic blocs of the Cold War developed over time. Hamburg had strongly lobbied in an effort to regain its shipping business from Eastern Germany and Walter Ulbricht, First Secretary of the GDR’s Socialist Unity Party (SED), explained in 1950 that a new overseas port would not be built in the GDR as Hamburg and Lübeck could be used as transit hubs for the republic’s foreign trade. More an issue was the absence of any major seaport in the GDR and the subsequent cost that might be incurred from conducting national sea trade through a foreign port. This would have been problematic regardless of any bloc-building, but the issue was exacerbated in the long run by the mix of existing resources in the GDR, as well as the wish to reduce payments settled in convertible currency for the use of foreign ports. In terms of raw materials, GDR territory only accounted for five per cent of pre-war Germany’s total production of iron ore and only 2.3% of its anthracite. The GDR needed trading partners in both the West and the East. Even so, a compelling argument can be made that economic bloc formation had already been encouraged by the creation of the Bizone, by the extension of Marshall Plan aid to the Allied zone, and by the creation of the Deutschecksum in 1948 – none of which encouraged trade between Eastern and Western Germany. Economic bloc formation threatened a vital trade pattern for the East German economy, with estimates showing the total trade with capitalist countries to have accounted for 82.7 per cent of the Soviet Occupied Zone’s trade in 1936. An effective transportation system geared towards the new geography of the Cold War was thus essential, but the insidious and erratic nature of bloc-building precluded the foresight needed to execute such a plan.

When the Red Army took up occupation of the coastal region of the Soviet Occupied Zone, its primary interest was in procuring reparations. Although the area of today’s Mecklenburg-Vorpommern was not a major centre of industry, railway track in the north had been a target of dismantling efforts. Furthermore, by 1946, over 200 firms in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern had been seized for dismantling. Ports naturally factored into reparations as transit points; however, existing sites at Wismar, Rostock and Stralsund only accounted for a combined turnover of one million tonnes before the Second World War. In procuring reparations from the region, the Soviets focused initial attention on a variety of goods, but the production and salvage of ships became important as industry recovered. Here, Wismar played a leading role as the site of the first major ship salvage.

9. Prignitz, ‘Der Rostocker Hafen’, 75.
10. Landesarchiv Greifswald (LA Greifswald) Rep. 200 2.1. Nr. 111, ‘Bericht der vom Wirtschaftsrat eingesetzten Kommission zur Untersuchung der Perspektive der Seehäfen der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik’, fol. 16.
11. Mike Dennis, German Democratic Republic (London, 1988), 128.
12. Dennis, German Democratic Republic, 148.
13. Dennis, German Democratic Republic, 129.
14. Mellor, The Two Germanies, 406.
15. Landeshauptarchiv Schwerin (LHAS) 10.34–1 Nr. 239, ‘Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands Landesleitung Mecklenburg–Vorpommern to Zentralkomitee der Kommunistischen Partei Deutschlands, Abt. Wirtschaft’, 29 June 1946, fol. 2–14.
16. Mellor, The Two Germanies, 412.
17. Rainer Karlsch, Allein Bezahlt? Die Reparationsleistungen der SBZ/DDR 1945–53, 1. Aufl. (Berlin, 1993), 177–9.
company.\(^\text{18}\) Having received less damage during the war, Wismar’s port was also favoured as a site for continued development. In 1948, the economic department of the Soviet Military Administration in Germany (SMAD) allocated to Wismar three million of the 5.2 million marks allotted for capital improvements to ports in that year. As expressed in a letter to the Minister of Land Mecklenburg (at that time the administrative region of Rostock and Wismar), the port was singled out as having the best prospects for expansion owing to its ‘geographical location’.\(^\text{19}\) Additionally, the SMAD economic office praised Wismar for being one of the first ports in the Soviet Zone to transport goods for the purpose of export, further supporting Soviet reparations in the region. Meanwhile, Rostock was plagued by war damage, which presented challenges to restarting port business there.

As production centres for armaments, the Ernst-Heinkel-Flugzeugwerke, Arado-Handels GmbH and Neptun-Werft made Rostock a prime target for the Royal Air Force, in addition to the trade and transit in the port (nearly 260,000 tonnes in 1944),\(^\text{20}\) which supported the Nazi economy and, thus, the war effort. As a result of Allied bombing, some 40 per cent of housing in the city centre was destroyed.\(^\text{21}\) The problem of housing port workers became a political and humanitarian issue in Rostock, as the eviction of residents in favour of workers was considered in response to the housing shortage.\(^\text{22}\) Albert Schulz, Rostock’s lord mayor from 1946-1949, was vocally opposed to a 1946 plan, ultimately left unrealized, that would have relocated 1,000 non-working families from the city.\(^\text{23}\) Although approximately 600 labourers were eventually secured for the port’s reconstruction, the initial work suffered from problems in the supply of materials.\(^\text{24}\) However, despite these challenges, the port of Rostock and the outer port at Warnemünde exported 222,000 tonnes of reparations goods in 1946, with imports making up less than one per cent of the total turnover of 376,000 tonnes, although it has been suggested that turnover may have been markedly higher that year.\(^\text{25}\) Under the direction of a Soviet-controlled company, Rostock’s port and the outer port operated primarily as export points for reparations goods, with combined annual turnovers increasing to between 1.3 million tonnes and almost 1.4 million tonnes from 1949–1952.\(^\text{26}\) However, the end of reparations saw a significant downturn in port business, and control of operations fully reverted to the GDR’s state-owned company on April 1, 1954 – three months after the official conclusion of reparations to the USSR but according to the original terms of the Soviet company’s lease agreement.\(^\text{27}\)

II

The early post-war examples from Wismar and Rostock show that the ports of the Soviet Zone needed to function politically and economically with deference to the occupying

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18. Collective work under the direction of Gerhard Buchführer, *Die Seewirtschaft der DDR Bd. 1: 1945–1960* (Berlin, 1962), 69.
19. LHAS 6.11–2 Nr. 819, ‘Oberst Michailow to the Ministerpräsident des Landes Mecklenburg, Höcker’, 6 October 1948.
20. Prignitz, ‘Der Rostocker Hafen’, 50.
21. Prignitz, ‘Der Rostocker Hafen’, 56–7.
22. Prignitz, ‘Der Rostocker Hafen’, 61–2.
23. Prignitz, ‘Der Rostocker Hafen’, 61–2.
24. Prignitz, ‘Der Rostocker Hafen’, 63.
25. Prignitz, ‘Der Rostocker Hafen’, 62–3.
power. However, these ports were equally impacted by the unfolding of events around the Cold War, especially in the trade between the Allied and Soviet Zones, known as ‘interzonal’ or, later, ‘intra-German’ trade. As was the case throughout the Cold War, events on the geopolitical level worked themselves out on the national and local level. Timothy Scott Brown likens space in the Cold War to a series of concentric circles, with the divided Germany at its centre. Above it were the European and global Cold War blocs and below it, the divided city of Berlin. As he states, ‘a fundamental feature of this arrangement is that an action in one of these circles must necessarily resonate in the others, so that physical locations do not function independently of each other but rather mirror each other’.28 Although Brown is commenting on the 1960s, this article argues that the trend appeared at the very start of the Cold War and that the implications of national and global decisions impacted localities outside Berlin. Any locality or geography representing a frontier in Germany was inevitably subject to the repercussions of higher-level decision-making. In the Soviet Zone, this dynamic became part of a deliberate strategy as evidenced by Stalin’s border politics with regards to the Western frontier and divisions within Berlin. This dynamic would have a significant impact on transport and trade in port cities on both sides of the East-West divide, following the process of economic bloc-building in the Cold War.

Hartmuth Brill has described economic bloc-building in Soviet controlled areas as a response to ‘Embargopolitik’, by which the USA and its Allies were able to restrict the delivery of certain goods into Soviet-controlled zones.29 In overcoming this embargo, the USSR developed trade strategies with non-aligned states to overcome shortages, focusing on the Soviet Zone in Germany for sourcing.30 In 1946, the transport and logistics of moving reparations and dismantling from the Soviet Zone to the Soviet Union came under direct USSR control with the establishment of the German-Russian Transport Company AG (Derutra), which operated most of the port at Rostock until 1954. The SMAD also played a role in building up the port under its control by the formation of a local port company, whose actions included the reconstruction of the port at Rostock and the building of new warehouse facilities for Derutra use.31 However, the ports of the Baltic coast only represented one transport possibility in and out of the Soviet Zone. In a report from August of 1948, Mecklenburg’s Office for Intra-/Export Trade reported that, despite the official moratorium on trade between the zones, ‘up to 60 trucks cross the border daily in both directions carrying goods of all kinds’.32 In this sense, the takeover and build-up of East German ports should not be seen as a necessary reaction to Western bloc-building, but a complementary strategy in the overall transport system of the Soviet Union in Germany.

26. Prignitz, ‘Der Rostocker Hafen’, 69-71, 69.
27. Prignitz, ‘Der Rostocker Hafen’, 74.
28. Timothy Scott Brown, West Germany and the Global Sixties: The Anti-Authoritarian Revolt 1962–1978 (Cambridge, 2013), 28.
29. Hartmuth Brill, Die Politik der Elbe: Hamburgische Ostpolitik in der Ära Sieveking (1953–1958): Hausarbeit zur wissenschaftlichen Prüfung für das Lehramt an Gymnasien (2014), 26.
30. Brill, Politik der Elbe, 27.
31. Prignitz, ‘Der Rostocker Hafen’, 66.
32. LHAS 6.11–2 Nr. 823, Siebert, ‘Bericht über die Tätigkeit der Abteilung Interzonend- und Aussenhandel für den Berichtsmonat August 1948’, 9 January 1948, fol. 19.
The years 1945–1949 begin to illustrate the constraints and opportunities that the GDR’s ports faced, but the future of sea transport in the GDR would only take shape after the currency reform of 1948, the establishment of the Democratic Republic in 1949 and the formalization of trade relations in the Eastern Bloc through Comecon. All of these events made sea transport through the West increasingly cost ineffective. But even before the problems of transit costs came to a head, local leadership was aware of the economic potential that its Baltic Sea coast represented. Thus, the Mecklenburg Ministry of Industry and Development released a nine-point plan for maritime redevelopment in the GDR in June 1950.33 Here, Erich Wächter, the Mecklenburg Minister for Industry and Development, made appeals to the special role that the people of the GDR had in developing maritime activity for the benefit of the Eastern Bloc, likening the GDR’s place in the bloc to Holland’s position next to Germany.34 The plan also made the point that, although the GDR could rely to a ‘certain extent’ on the ‘friendly’ Polish neighbours and their port of Szczecin, maritime development necessitated that the GDR have its own port.35 It should be noted here that Ulbricht had also written the Polish ambassador to the GDR on the use of the port at Szczecin in 1950,36 but the First Secretary kept options open, perhaps appreciating the reality of the GDR’s difficult position. Whether in trading with socialist ‘friends’ or capitalist ‘foes’, the territorial settlement of Germany after the Second World War would remain a mitigating factor for transport to the East and to the West.

The 1950 plan for maritime redevelopment was important for establishing a map of the political economy of the coast, which would have to be drawn from scratch. Each port was designated with a specific function and Minister Wächter went so far as to criticize the placement of the socialized Fishing Combine at Rostock instead of at the more suitable locale of Stralsund.37 The suitability of Rostock as a centre of maritime development was highlighted, as it possessed three major shipbuilding companies and a diesel motor engine company. The minister suggested adding to this a centralized port development company, the GDR ship classification society, the national shipping company, technical shipbuilding and scientific research institutes, as well as a trade press.38 The brief closed by reiterating that the entire coast of the GDR lay within ‘our’ Land Mecklenburg and that its role in the development of maritime activity represented an ‘enormous, unique and historic task’.39 It does not appear as though the plan was discussed further and Wächter vacated his post shortly after its publication. The plan was an early articulation of a clear development strategy for the GDR’s coast, but the nature of a possible overseas port in the GDR remained uncertain over the course of the next few years.

33. LHAS 6.11–14 Nr. 259, Erich Wächter, ‘Der Neuaufbau des Seeewesens der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik’, (Landesregierung Mecklenburg Ministerium für Industrie und Aufbau, Hauptabteilung Verkehr), 30 June 1950.
34. LHAS 6.11–14 Nr. 259, Wächter, 'Der Neuaufbau des Seeewesens', 1.
35. LHAS 6.11–14 Nr. 259, Wächter, 'Der Neuaufbau des Seeewesens', 3.
36. Sheldon Anderson, *A Cold War in the Soviet Bloc: Polish–East German Relations 1945–1962* (Boulder, CO, 2001), 191.
37. LHAS 6.11–14 Nr. 259, Wächter, ‘Der Neuaufbau des Seeewesens’, 3.
38. LHAS 6.11–14 Nr. 259, Wächter, ‘Der Neuaufbau des Seeewesens’, 3–4.
39. LHAS 6.11–14 Nr. 259, Wächter, 'Der Neuaufbau des Seeewesens', 6.
In 1952, the GDR made significant changes to the administrative structure of the Republic with the aim of radically socializing what remained of pre-war Eastern Germany. With the beginning of the period of ‘Building Up Socialism’, the geographic administration of the country was divided into districts (Bezirke), essentially dissolving the five existing states (Länder) and replacing them with 14 new regional administrations. The law of 23 July 1952 effecting this structural change was made in order to further centralize control in the GDR, but it also had the goal of directing local economic resources towards national priorities, as required. Furthermore, it has been argued that this reorganization was effective in shifting personal loyalties away from established regional geographies and towards the new districts. This shift would make possible what Jan Palmowski has called Rostock’s ‘invented traditions’, as the city grew to be defined largely by an association with maritime activity and culture.

Organizationally, the dissolution of the Länder meant that administration for the entire coastline was relocated to the district capital of Rostock, as opposed to the Land capital of Schwerin, which would become its own district administrative seat. From 1952 onwards, district leadership in Rostock played a key role in advocating for the port at Rostock, going so far as to directly challenge the central apparatus in Berlin. By 1952, the Ministerial Council of the GDR had planned for the development of the port at Rostock in conjunction with broader development plans. Unhappy with the lack of progress, district leadership in Rostock proposed that the Ministerial Council reject these plans and proceed according to Rostock District’s recommendations of 1956. This included abandoning the Politbüro’s 1955 decision to build a new overseas port for the GDR in the city of Greifswald, approximately 100 kilometres east of Rostock and less than 70 kilometres from the Polish border.

In general, there was some disconnect between the wish to increase turnover in the ports and what was possible (and cost effective) in any of the GDR’s existing facilities. Duplicated efforts and a lack of coordination seemed to plague developments, so that by April 1956, the Rostock District SED requested a formal recommendation be presented to the Politbüro

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40. Karl-Heinz Hajna, Länder, Bezirke, Länder: zur Territorialstruktur im Osten Deutschlands 1945–1990 (Frankfurt am Main; New York, 1995), 98.
41. Lerna Kuhl and Oliver Werner, "Bezirke" on Scale: Regional and Local Actors in East German "Democratic Centralism", Historical Social Research, 42 (2017), 245.
42. Siegfried Weitstruck, ‘Konferenz der Gesellschaft für Heimatgeschichte zum Thema “Der Beitrag der Heimat/Regionalgeschichte zur DDR–Geschichte 1945–1961” am 11./12.11.1986 in Dresden’, SAMPO–BArch DY27 Nr. 451. fo. III/17 in Jan Palmowski, ‘Regional Identities and the Limits of Democratic Centralism in the GDR’, Journal of Contemporary History, 41 (2006), 504.
43. Jan Palmowski, Inventing a Socialist Nation: Heimat and the Politics of Everyday Life in the GDR, 1945–1990 (Cambridge, UK; New York, 2009), 85.
44. LA Greifswald Rep. 200 2.1. Nr. 109, ‘Rat des Bezirkes Rostock to Ministerrat der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik: Ausbau des Hafens Rostock und die Mechanisierung der Häfen in Wismar und Stralsund’, 1 October 1956, fol. 22–23.
45. LA Greifswald Rep. 200 2.1. Nr. 109, ‘Bau eines Hochseehafens im Bezirk Rostock’, 6 March 1956 fol. 68–71.
including an investigation into the ‘sabotage’ of port development.46 A resolution followed from the District SED office that placed general blame for the lack of development and underutilization of port capacity on the central Ministry for Transportation, which was accused of incorrectly following through on the orders of the Politbüro by focusing efforts on the port at Wismar.47 The District SED leadership even stated that it ‘categorically’ opposed the actions of GDR Transport Minister Erwin Kramer in his efforts to direct grain shipments towards Wismar.48 In addition to assigning blame, the resolution also made concrete suggestions to improve goods turnover in the GDR ports, with a specific focus on Rostock. The fact that the district party was able to formally insert itself into the execution of port development plans illustrates a case of tension between the party and the state. The GDR has been described as a ‘party-state’ and, while the SED ultimately held authority within the GDR, it relied on the state apparatus for the implementation of its directives, resulting in what Mary Fulbrook has described as a ‘duality of structures’.49 In this instance, a ministry in the centralized-state structure was kept in check through party control. This might be expected from the ‘party-state’, but the interaction was also a demonstration of the power of local agency in a centralized command economy. In examining the agency of individual actors, one might also further understand the range of motivations behind the decision to locate the national overseas port at Rostock.

The drive to pursue the overseas port was also motivated by a unique tendency of foreign-trade planning in the GDR. Although the plan to increase turnover in GDR ports was conceived in conjunction with a planned increase in trade,50 the construction of an overseas port was designed to ensure some measure of economic independence.51 Historian Rainer Karlsch has categorized the development of Rostock’s port as part of a broader trend in the GDR towards autarky, stemming from Germany’s historical experience in two world wars, as well as Stalinist conceptions of national economy and the challenges that Cold War trade presented.52 Specifically, Karlsch connects the port at Rostock to the GDR’s *Störfreimachung* policy of the late 1950s, which was aimed at curbing Western imports.53 During this period, Karlsch asserted that ‘political considerations clearly took precedence over economic’, and planning for the overseas port at  

46. LA Greifswald Rep. 200 2.1. Nr. 109, ‘Beschluß des Büros der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschland, Bezirksleitung Rostock vom 5.4.56 auf der 3. Sitzung’ fol. 32.
47. LA Greifswald Rep. 200 2.1. Nr. 109, ‘Beschluß des Büros der Bezirksleitung Rostock der SED vom 12. April 1956 zur Erweiterung der Hafenanlagen im Bezirk Rostock’ fol. 37–39.
48. LA Greifswald Rep. 200 2.1. Nr. 109, ‘Beschluß des Büros der Bezirksleitung Rostock der SED vom 12. April 1956 zur Erweiterung der Hafenanlagen im Bezirk Rostock’, fol. 39.
49. Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship: Inside the GDR; 1949–1989* (Oxford, 1997), 43, 44.
50. Bundesarchiv (BArch) DC1/3103 Bd. 2, Zentrale Kommission für Staatliche Kontrolle Arbeitsgruppe Verkehrswesen, ‘Bericht von der Informationskontrolle über den Stand des Ausbaues der Seehäfen der DDR Rostock, Wismar und Stralsund’, 20 December 1956, 1.
51. LA Greifswald Rep. 200.2.1. Nr. 354, Der Präsident, Direktion des Seeverkehrs und der Hafenwirtschaft Rostock, ‘Hafenkonzeption für den Perspektivplanzeitraum 1971–1975’, May 12, 1970, fol. 5.
52. Rainer Karlsch, ‘Nationalist Socialist Autarky Projects and the Postwar Industrial Landscape’, in *The East German Economy 1945–2010: Falling Behind or Catching Up* (New York, 2013), 77, 85–9.
53. Karlsch, ‘Nationalist Socialist Autarky Projects’, 88–9.
Rostock was not without political overtones.\textsuperscript{54} Besides the Cold War with the West, relations between the GDR and its other central shipping partner, Poland, were less than ideal. The competition between Rostock and Szczecin was discussed at a meeting between Ulbricht and Polish United Worker’s Party Secretary, Władysław Gomułka, but no resolution was reached on the use of the Polish port as the primary shipping terminal for the GDR.\textsuperscript{55}

IV

With the GDR in need of overseas port facilities, the question still remained as to where to locate them. Part of the confusion on this question lay in a function of socialist planning, or what economist János Kornai has described as a ‘duplication of functional and regional vertical chains, supervising and overlapping each other’s activities in both party and state’.\textsuperscript{56} This was coupled with the process of ‘plan disaggregation’, which involved 360-degree feedback of initial directives, in this case the plan to increase turnover in the ports.\textsuperscript{57} The net effect, as Kornai stated, was that ‘thousands upon thousands of functionaries in the party apparatus, the state administration, the firm and cooperative managements, and the mass organizations negotiate, calculate, renegotiate, and recalculate before the millions of planning commands finally emerge at all levels’.\textsuperscript{58} In the case of port use in the GDR, no less than five different administrations were making recommendations that impacted port usage and building plans. By 1957, these included: the State Secretariat for Shipping, the Ministry of International and Intra-German Trade, the State Planning Commission, the Ministry of Transportation and the Central Commission for State Control (ZKK), with several functions duplicated at the district level. The Ministry of International and Intra-German trade seemed to have best captured the issue, stating in a 1957 resolution that GDR ports had simply not developed at pace with international trade.\textsuperscript{59} This ministry made a prescient point (and without political undertones) that the more the GDR traded with capitalist countries, the more large ships would be used. This was first and foremost a problem of the depth of the ports across the GDR, with only Wismar able to handle the size of the ships being used in cross-ocean trade.\textsuperscript{60}

Of course, those at the very top of the hierarchy in the GDR were also involved in the process, and the ultimate authority for the location of the port rested with First Secretary of the SED, Walter Ulbricht. Ulbricht had been informed of continuing developments on planning by the ZKK and his reaction to the ongoing discussions surrounding the ports at the state level was unequivocal.\textsuperscript{61} Writing to the Deputy Director of the ZKK on 30

\begin{enumerate}
\item Karlsch, ‘Nationalist Socialist Autarky Projects’, 88.
\item Anderson, \textit{A Cold War in the Soviet Bloc}, 191–2.
\item János Kornai, \textit{The Socialist System: The Political Economy of Communism} (Oxford, 2000), 99.
\item Kornai, \textit{The Socialist System}, 114.
\item Kornai, \textit{The Socialist System}, 114.
\item BArch DC1/3103 Bd. 2, Ministerium für Außenhandel u. Innerdeutschen Handel, ‘Beschluß zum Bericht über Auslastung der DDR–Häfen 1956’, 5.
\item BArch DC1/3103 Bd. 2, Ministerium für Außenhandel u. Innerdeutschen Handel, ‘Beschluß zum Bericht über Auslastung der DDR–Häfen 1956’, 5–6.
\item BArch DC1/3103 Bd. 2, ‘Ernst Wabra to Walter Ulbricht: Bericht von der Informationskontrolle über den Stand des Ausbaues der Seehäfen der GDR Rostock, Wismar und Stralsund’.
\end{enumerate}
July 1957, Ulbricht stated that it was ‘incomprehensible’ that a feasible plan for port usage was not being put forth by either the State Planning Commission or the State Secretariat for Shipping.62 Upon learning that Wismar was being considered as the prime location for an overseas port, Ulbricht denounced the idea to place the port ‘directly under the nose of West-German militarism and the English’.63 This letter closed by calling for a secret investigation of the matter and asking that the Deputy Director speak with Karl Mewis, First Secretary of the Rostock District SED.

Ulbricht’s conclusion was an example of decision-making in the party-state, as well as the importance of politics in the GDR. The dissolution of the Länder in the GDR followed a wholesale purge of the ranks of the SED in order to establish a politically reliable administration. This was in line with Stalinist party-politics across Eastern Europe in the late 1940s and early 1950s.64 As part of the first class of District Party Secretaries, Karl Mewis’ credentials were impeccable. He had shared in many of the same formative political experiences as Walter Ulbricht. This was significant for a party that was quickly being filled with new adherents to socialism, namely younger cadres. Only one third of the newly appointed District Party Secretaries could claim membership in some form of workers’ party before 1945.65 Accordingly, Ulbricht likely saw Mewis as a trustworthy ally, essentially deferring to him on the project of the overseas port. Mewis had also corresponded directly with Ulbricht on the matter of the ports, warning of the national security implications of Wismar and arguing for the development of Rostock.66 Although recommendations for a ZKK study of the issue cautioned against an overriding regional influence,67 a preference for Rostock was affirmed by a commission of the central government’s Economic Council, whose report became the basis for the siting of the overseas port.

In September 1957, a special commission of the Economic Council of the GDR released its study in favour of Rostock as the site for the deep-sea port. In reaching this decision, the commission weighed the existing ports of the GDR against each other to reach what it viewed as the most cost-effective solution to increasing national port usage through two building phases, to yield a projected total annual turnover of 6.2 million tonnes by 1960 and 11.2 million tonnes by 1965, thereby undercutting the reliance on foreign ports.68 The study precluded the building of a new port or major canal and evaluated the ports of Wismar, Rostock and Stralsund in light of the existing rail- and waterway networks.69 Thus, Rostock edged past a plan favouring Wismar because of limitations on rail capacity from Wismar, as

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62. BArch DC1/3103 Bd. 2, Walter Ulbricht ‘Letter to Stellvertreter des Vorsitzenden der Zentralen Kommission für Staatliche Kontrolle Genosse Ernst Wabra’, 30 July 1957.
63. BArch DC1/3103 Bd. 2, Walter Ulbricht, ‘Letter to Stellvertreter’, 30 July 1957.
64. Mario Niemann, Die Sekretäre der SED–Bezirksleitungen 1952–1989 (Paderborn, 2007), 55.
65. Niemann, Die Sekretäre, 71.
66. LA Greifswald Rep. 200 2.1. Nr. 107, ‘Karl Mewis to Walter Ulbricht’, 13 February 1956 fol. 15–17.
67. BArch DC1/3103 Bd. 1, ‘Kästner to Bevollmächtigten der Zentralen Kommission für Staatliche Kontrolle im Bezirk Rostock’, 2 August 1957.
68. LA Greifswald Rep. 200 2.1. Nr. 111, ‘Bericht der vom Wirtschaftsrat eingesetzten Kommission zur Untersuchung der Perspektive der Seehäfen der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik’, fol. 17.
69. LA Greifswald Rep. 200 2.1. Nr. 111, ‘Bericht der vom Wirtschaftsrat eingesetzten Kommission’, fol. 19.
well as the need for 50 per cent more steel and cement in Wismar, though the projected cost was only slightly higher than the Rostock option. This option would have also included further development at the Rostock port in the second building phase. Meanwhile, Stralsund represented less total investment, however Rostock would be quicker to reach capacity due to limitations on dredging capacity, thus saving around 200 million rubles in foreign payments by 1963 over Stralsund. These are the main economic factors that took Stralsund and Wismar out of consideration and they are indicative of the common issues of material scarcity and foreign exchange, with which planners in socialist states often had to reckon. Further limitations related to the geographic position of these ports were also problematic, however, such as the proximity of Wismar to Lübeck in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and potential ice in the bay leading to Stralsund, which could render the port unusable in some winters. While Stralsund was definitively out of the running, the challenges that Wismar presented were not wholly insurmountable. Rather, the city of Rostock had more to offer than the other options, according to the commission.

In fulfilling the political requirements that GDR planning in the late 1950s came to embody, the commission cited three other aspects of the city of Rostock in reaching its conclusions. Firstly, as a centre for industry and home to several firms, the city was identified by the commission as a place where ‘the influence of the working class is most strongly expressed’. This influence was a natural ideological concern for a socialist state, but it also suggested a robust organizational capacity in the city, as workers’ social and political engagement with the ‘SED-state’ was largely mediated through the workplace. Secondly, as a populous city, Rostock offered better amenities for the port, such as ‘sanitary, cultural, and athletic facilities’. Although the commission did not elaborate on this point, these facilities would have been important to those working in the port and also may have factored into the visibility that the city would garner on the national and world stage. Lastly, the commission explained that the city of Rostock was the most politically important city in the region and that the GDR’s naval forces there would stand to benefit from the overseas port. Why the port should be located in a political centre was not readily apparent, but in the context of a socialist state this may speak to the ability of local actors to negotiate the state and party apparatus with ease, as well as the

70. LA Greifswald Rep. 200 2.1. Nr. 111, ‘Bericht der vom Wirtschaftsrat eingesetzten Kommission’, fol. 20–21.
71. LA Greifswald Rep. 200 2.1. Nr. 111, ‘Bericht der vom Wirtschaftsrat eingesetzten Kommission’, fol. 25.
72. LA Greifswald Rep. 200 2.1. Nr. 111, ‘Bericht der vom Wirtschaftsrat eingesetzten Kommission’, fol. 25.
73. LA Greifswald Rep. 200 2.1. Nr. 111, ‘Bericht der vom Wirtschaftsrat eingesetzten Kommission’, fol. 26.
74. See Klaus Schroeder with Steffen Alisch, Der SED–Staat: Partei, Staat und Gesellschaft 1949–1990 (Munich, 1998), 515–20; and Mary Fulbrook, Anatomy of a Dictatorship: Inside the GDR 1949–1989 (New York, 1995) 43–5.
75. LA Greifswald Rep. 200 2.1. Nr. 111, ‘Bericht der vom Wirtschaftsrat eingesetzten Kommission’, fol. 26.
76. LA Greifswald Rep. 200 2.1. Nr. 111, ‘Bericht der vom Wirtschaftsrat eingesetzten Kommission’, fol. 26.
concentration of political control over a facility of national importance. It should also be noted that the study did not go into detail on the relationship between the overseas port and the GDR’s naval forces, but the mention of the topic is a subtle reminder that national security remained a factor in deciding the port’s location. In short, the site satisfied the internal political requirements of a socialist state, as well as the external political requirements that the socialist state had to consider within the context of the Cold War.

V

By 1957, the city of Rostock already represented a concentration of the GDR’s economic potential on the sea. As the location of major shipyards, ship motor works and fishing facilities, the city of Rostock had much to offer planners.77 As such, the siting of an overseas port in the city appears as a natural progression, cementing the city’s role as the centre of maritime life in the district. As the decision-making process demonstrates, however, it is not entirely clear why some capacities were not integrated into a more systematic infrastructure across the district. For example, the combined build-out of Wismar and Rostock represented a viable alternative to the GDR’s transport needs, and yet the commission favoured a larger investment in one location. Here, János Kornai offers some insights as to priorities in a socialist economy, notably the ‘priority of new installations’ and the ‘priority of big installations’.78 According to Kornai, leaders in the economic bureaucracy were motivated by power and prestige, amongst other factors.79 By exploiting many of the district’s capabilities in one location, the city of Rostock took on a functional scale whose prestige was much more visible than several smaller ports operating on the Baltic coast. Moreover, by locating the deep-sea port at Rostock, power over maritime activity was further concentrated in a single locale. As a new installation, the overseas port served the symbolic and political needs of a nation wishing to project modernity, progress and independence. As Kornai states, a new installation offers a ‘spectacular example’ of politically iterated economic goals.80 Furthermore, ‘construction fervour’ can be used as a political tool to boost morale in workers and create a national sense of belonging and achievement.81 In Rostock, this fervour got underway soon after the announcement of the new port’s construction.

Even before the release of the Economic Council’s study, Walter Ulbricht announced a campaign for the ‘expansion of the Rostock port to an overseas port’, at the Rostock District Sportfest early in July 1957.82 The district leader of the Freie Deutsche Jugend (FDJ), the SED’s mass youth organization, asked that the project be declared a ‘Bau der Jugend’ (Youth Construction Project) to the consternation of a ZKK representative, who

77. LA Greifswald Rep. 200 2.1. Nr.111, ‘Bericht der vom Wirtschaftsrat eingesetzten Kommission’, fol. 26.
78. Kornai, The Socialist System, 174, 176.
79. Kornai, The Socialist System, 119.
80. Kornai, The Socialist System, 174.
81. Kornai, The Socialist System, 174.
82. BArch DC1/3103 Bd. 1, Beauftragter der ZKK im VEB Seehafen Rostock, ‘Vermerk’, 21 August 1957, 1; No date is given for the announcement, however the approximate date of Ulbricht’s attendance at the Sportfest is reported in ‘Walter Ulbricht’, Der Spiegel, 17 July 1957, https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-41758030.html (accessed 1 February 2021).
disagreed with the framing of the port-turnover issue by the district, and correctly identified the complexities of building the port in comparison to the abilities of the FDJ. Nevertheless, the collection of building materials for the port became an important national propaganda project for GDR youth. One of the first tasks in turning Rostock into a deep-sea port was the repair and expansion of the eastern breakwater, which required some 100,000 tonnes of fieldstone. The port newsdesk of the *Ostsee Zeitung* reported that by January 1958, stones had come in from as far away as Magdeburg. Other examples of the youth response to the fieldstone campaign were useful as political rhetoric in encouraging attendees of a 1958 Rostock District Assembly in their work. In addition to the fieldstone campaign, a ground-breaking ceremony was held in October 1957 – even before preliminary plans were officially accepted by the GDR’s Economic Council in January 1958. With the cooperation of the National Front of the GDR, the building of the port and accompanying canal was declared a ‘National Development Project’, giving it special priority and prestige, as well as access to donations of voluntary labour and other resources. This declaration further reflected another aspect of prioritization in socialist economies, whereby a highly centralized authority can better manage a few, select tasks efficiently.

The priority given to the project undoubtedly helped secure the port’s speedy completion in April 1960, just over two years from the finalization of building plans. Although the initial build of the port was completed in a timely manner, it was not without problems. A new breakwater was completed and the harbour channel dredged to accommodate larger vessels, together with a new cargo-dock facility, however elements of the oil terminal were initially of ‘very bad quality’ and had to be reworked. Total goods turnover in the first full year of operations in 1961 was 1.8 million tonnes as opposed to the planned 2.25 million tonnes. It was reported that the port was still not well connected to Berlin via autobahn by 1966, while a direct railway connection from the port to the Berlin railway line was only completed in 1964. Further to connection problems, the building of a canal from the port inland came to a halt in 1962, due to higher than expected costs. In 1966, the FRG intelligence service reported that the port was...
operating under capacity in oil and break bulk cargo turnover. Furthermore, turnover times remained a problem as the port lacked the necessary labour, which partly explains the high employment rate of women in the port. Despite these problems (or perhaps not fully aware of them), the Hamburg press closely followed port development in the GDR, and expressed concerns over the low rates that could be offered in comparison to FRG ports, as well as possible competition with Hamburg’s transit trade from the GDR and Czechoslovakia. These concerns were not wholly unfounded, as the GDR’s average annual transit trade through the port of Hamburg did decline by more than eight per cent in the five-year period 1961–1965, following Rostock’s opening, compared to the average annual transit trade during the previous five-year period. Although it is unclear the extent to which Rostock’s operations contributed to this decline, it can be understood in the context of a nearly 30 per cent growth in the GDR’s total international trade by value from 1961–1965. However, according to the FRG’s intelligence service, the only area in which the port at Rostock represented a real threat to Hamburg or Lübeck by 1966 was in the transport of pulverized coal. In the years after the opening, turnover increased in Rostock to over five million tonnes in 1965, but by September of that year it was decided that the second major phase of port expansion would be cancelled, most likely due to its high cost.

VI

In terms of the political economy of the GDR, the decision to turn Rostock into an overseas port was a success. West German intelligence estimated that the cumulative turnover in the port from 1960 to August 1965 saved the GDR 268 million East German marks, not accounting for capital costs, against the same amount of goods (17.8 million tonnes) if shipped through Hamburg. The port was also a symbolic success for the

93. BArch B206/1433, Bundesnachrichtendienst, ‘Bericht über den Überseehafen Rostock’, 6 September 1966.
94. Prignitz and Schreiber, Der Hafen Rostock, 128–31; BArch B206/1433 Bundesnachrichtendienst, ‘Bericht über den Überseehafen Rostock’, 6 September 1966.
95. ‘Der Hamburger Hafen muß konkurrieren können’, Hamburger Abendblatt, 20 December 1957; ‘Rostocks Ausbau wird vorangetrieben’, Hamburger Abendblatt, 11 October 1961; ‘Hamburg trockengelegt’, Hamburger Abendblatt, 14 August 1958.
96. For 1956–1958: Statistisches Jahrbuch 1959 Freie und Hansestadt Hamburg (Statistisches Landesamt, 1959), 175; for 1959–1962: Statistisches Jahrbuch 1963 Freie und Hansestadt Hamburg (1963), 208; for 1963–1966: Statistisches Jahrbuch 1966/67 Freie und Hansestadt Hamburg (Statistisches Landesamt, 1967), 206.
97. Staatliches Zentralverwaltung für Statistik, Statistisches Jahrbuch 1969 der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (Berlin, 1969), 298.
98. BArch B206/1433, Bundesnachrichtendienst, ‘Bericht über den Überseehafen Rostock’, 6 September 1966.
99. Staatliches Zentralverwaltung für Statistik, Statistisches Jahrbuch 1966 der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (Berlin, 1966), 345; Prignitz and Schreiber, Der Hafen Rostock, 128–32.
100. BArch B206/1433, Bundesnachrichtendienst, ‘Bericht über den Überseehafen Rostock’, 6 September 1966.
region and the GDR, both domestically and globally. Rostock became host to the international Baltic Sea Week, whose purpose was to ‘show the Scandinavian countries and all the peoples of Europe that, next to the aggressive, imperialistic West German state there is the peace-loving state of the German Democratic Republic, which wishes for peaceful trade relations with all peoples’, although, generally, contact with the rest of the world was carefully monitored. But even as the politics of the Cold War created opportunities for the city, the cost associated with developing the port was seemingly too high to offset the growing cost of trade with the USSR. Ultimately, the high cost of rail transit with the USSR through Poland would be addressed by a locomotive-ferry port, installed on the island of Rügen, as opposed to earlier plans that had indicated Rostock as the site for such a development.

The context of the Cold War helped turn Rostock from a small regional port into the GDR’s most important overseas port. The geography of the Soviet Occupied Zone, socialist economics and international relations all aligned to make the port a unique product of the German Democratic Republic during the Cold War – and yet, motivations underlying the project are not entirely unique. It is important to consider the development of the port at Rostock as part of a shared post-1945 and Cold War legacy across both Germanies. Though it is true that the Cold War did bring the FRG and the GDR into competing economic blocs, one should not overestimate the coordination within the socialist and capitalist camps. As the GDR had to contend with the trade policies of Poland, so too did the FRG have to navigate its position in a bloc of formerly bitter enemies. These politics played out as the port of Hamburg, formerly Germany’s centrally-located, undisputed centre of shipping, suddenly found itself on the north-eastern edge of capitalist Europe. Although Hamburg had more potential capacity than Rostock and decades (if not centuries) of global shipping experience, distance to the FRG’s industrial centre and political entreats from Germany’s former foes opened the possibility that ports in Belgium and the Netherlands would be used at the expense of German shipping. The USA’s Cold War strategy ultimately relied on rebuilding the FRG, however, and it was argued that this would have to include its ports. The eventual return of the port of Hamburg to its leadership position within Germany, much like the case in Rostock, was supplemented by the lobbying efforts of local actors to central decision-makers.

101. LA Greifswald IV/4/07/640, Kommission der Stadtleitung, ‘Maßnahmenplan zur Verschönerung der Stadt Rostock in Vorbereitung der “Ostsee–Woche”’, 1 August 1958, fol. 7; see Cammin, Die Deutsche Seereederei, 178–80.
102. Prignitz and Schreiber, Der Hafen Rostock, 132.
103. See Wolfgang Klietz, Ostseeähren im Kalten Krieg (Berlin, 2012); Prignitz and Schreiber, Der Hafen Rostock, 132.
104. See, for example, J. J. Oyevaar, ‘A Quartette of Great Ports: Amsterdam, Antwerp, Ghent, Rotterdam’, Transport and Communications Review, United Nations Dept. of Economic Affairs, Transport and Communications Division, 2, no. 2 (June 1949), 3–15.
105. Lucius DuBignon Clay, The Papers of General Lucius D. Clay: Germany, 1945–1949 (Bloomington, IN, 1974), 346–9; John Gimbel, The American Occupation of Germany: Politics and the Military, 1945–1949 (Stanford, CA, 1968), 14.
106. A summary of the local concerns and wishes for the federal government can be found in Hamburg im Schatten der Bundesrepublik: Denkschrift des Senats der Freien und Hansestadt Hamburg (Hamburg, 1951).
As a socialist port, the overseas port at Rostock was the product of some of the system-specific factors that influenced decision-making in socialist economies, such as material scarcity, trade with competing economic systems, and the tendency to favour projects that enhanced power and prestige. As a Cold War project, the location of an overseas port at Rostock is evidence of a shared geopolitical context, in which national security issues often loomed in the background of the decision-making process, even if they were not always an explicit part of the deliberations. Finally, as a German port, the city of Rostock illustrates the common challenges that German division imposed on both sides of the intra-German border, as local actors sought ways to adjust to a political geography that was suddenly out of sync with the historical development of hinterland connections. Given Rostock’s recent success as one of Germany’s largest Baltic seaports, it would be difficult to imagine that it was once conceived out of the particular needs of a comparatively short chapter in German maritime history.

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