



Volume 9. Two Germanies, 1961-1989

Shortages Complicate Christmas Shopping in East Germany (December 21, 1980)

As this West Berlin journalist reports, continuing supply bottlenecks in the planned economy made Christmas shopping in the GDR a nerve-wracking experience. Widespread shortages belied Communist functionaries' proclamations of success.

Christmas Shopping in the GDR

What is the availability of consumer goods for the GDR population this Christmas season? Central Committee Secretary [Werner] Jarowinsky and Minister [Gerhard] Briksa, the two highest ranking East Berlin functionaries for trade and supply, examined this question in early December in Mecklenburg. They visited shops and department stores, learned about the availability of goods and discussed current supply questions with salespeople and shoppers alike. Over the past few weeks, high-ranking functionaries in other GDR districts have shown a similarly high level of interest in the supply question "on the ground."

Since the Polish crisis¹, the SED leadership has evidently taken the supply problem very seriously. After all, it knows all too well that a stable supply situation and a high standard of living have a decisive influence on the internal stability of the GDR and even serve as a kind of "protective shield" against the "Polish bacillus." For it is apparent that the economic situation, individual prosperity, and possessions are determining the thoughts and actions of people in the socialist German state to a growing extent. The "socialist lifestyle," in contrast, seems to be fading further and further into the background.

Nervousness Instead of Merriment

The *Norddeutsche Zeitung*, which is published in Rostock, even fears that the "race for status" and possessions is having an increasingly negative effect on communal life in socialist society. "It is especially obvious in the weeks just before Christmas: many people's thoughts are all too fixated on material standards, which need to be surpassed time and again; and in this otherwise wonderful holiday season, more things are being exchanged than thoughts," the newspaper complained recently. It is not only friendliness, per se, but also altruism and cooperation that are

¹ Reference to the Polish unrest that led to the creation of the independent trade union Solidarity – trans.

withering away. Someone is deemed a helpful partner only if he can “get hold of something” for someone else. The newspaper appealed to GDR citizens, asking them not to storm the stores “so doggedly or with elbows flying,” and it called for an end to “the race for Christmas presents.” The upcoming holiday should make people “merry” and not “nervous.”

Nice words, but ones that certainly don’t go to the heart of the problem, since GDR citizens race from store to store mostly because of supply shortages. Not without reason did Central Committee Secretary Jarowinsky state during his “professional visit” in Mecklenburg that greater effort is needed to improve the availability of goods (and sales conditions).

The SED Politburo sees the situation the same way. Even though it was reported at last week’s meeting of the Central Committee that continued progress is being made in supplying the population with new, high-quality consumer goods, the Politburo still warned factories to produce consumer goods at a level commensurate with demand, to reach “a markedly higher scientific-technical standard for these products,” and to pay greater attention to “1,000 little things” and to “ensuring the necessary availability of spare parts.” For despite considerable increases in production, there has still been “no success in stabilizing supply in important areas.”

The Politburo’s Demands

There are serious reasons for the Politburo’s call for factories to produce “at a level commensurate with demand.” For although the economic plan for this year was fulfilled and the scheduled production of goods was achieved on a value basis, a number of factories had delivery backlogs for certain products, often popular ones. For instance, in early December in Magdeburg, ten companies had delivery shortfalls of more than five million Marks, while in the district of Dresden, goods with a total value of 25 million Marks failed to be delivered to stores as required by contract.

The situation is similar in the other districts. The missing goods are offset by other goods that are “delivered ahead of schedule.” As the daily *Sächsische Zeitung* made clear, however, these goods can’t make up for the numerous contractual shortfalls, because “someone who needs a pair of pants won’t find much consolation in the fact that – since he can’t get them – he can have two jackets instead.” Jackets, the paper noted, aren’t the same as pants. The problem is made worse by the fact that quite a few factories are producing more goods in the higher price range, because it is more lucrative for them; therefore, fewer products in the lower and mid-range price categories are making their way into stores.

This has caused this year’s Christmas supply to be greatly restricted. Functionaries concede that there are “disgruntled customers.” In letters to the media, GDR citizens criticize the fact that there is ample reporting on plans that have been met and exceeded but too little concern over which demands have been satisfied. “After all, I don’t want to buy what happens to be available at the moment, but what I like and what I need,” wrote one reader to the *Norddeutsche Zeitung*.

The paper warned the factories against producing according to the maxim: "Everything will be bought anyway." This practice serves no one, the article said, and in fact does harm.

The level of public displeasure is in fact greater than what is expressed in the media. When you talk to GDR citizens these days, you often hear opinions like the following (from a working mother in a district capital on the Oder River): "The Poles aren't standing in line here anymore, but the lines are still getting longer and longer. Whatever you want to buy is either unavailable or much too expensive: you're constantly running from store to store. And if no one knows you, then you don't get anything at all. Everything that's scarce is sold under the table. Where's this going to lead?"

Two young female college students learned just how selling things "under the table" works. In a self-service store on Leuschnerplatz in Leipzig, they discovered a whole freezer filled with frozen peaches, strawberries, and currants. Overjoyed, they of course helped themselves. But, as the two outraged students wrote to the East Berlin [satirical] magazine *Eulenspiegel*, their joy was short-lived, since the cashier took the rare delicacies away, explaining that the contents of the freezer had already been sold.

Waiting for the "Special Sale"

The people of the GDR always have to be ready to jump if they want to get their hands on special products or something presently in short supply, and even that doesn't always help, as another example from *Eulenspiegel* shows: In the Centrum department store in Erfurt, a line of people formed for no apparent reason in front of an empty stand that had sold dishes on multiple occasions. The line got longer and longer, although no one knew if anything would be sold – and if so, then what – since the staff offered no information. When cartons were finally brought in and the "special sale" began, the people in line found out what they had been waiting for: The packages contained one large glass plate and six small dessert plates, imported from Hungary. Anyone who didn't need dessert plates had waited for naught.

GDR citizens can tell dozens of similar stories about such shopping experiences, which of course create bad blood. Working people in particular complain that they are disadvantaged when it comes to shopping; "special sales" often take place during working hours and afterwards "nothing decent" is to be had. There have been repeated protests in various large factories as a result. According to reports from Rostock, in late November dockworkers apparently even refused to load food destined for Poland. Over the past few weeks, factory shops have organized large-scale "special sales" for Christmas, apparently to appease the workers.

Criticism of High Export Levels

In light of the supply shortages, which, according to GDR citizens, exist for handkerchiefs and men's socks, as well as towels, underwear, linens, outerwear, dishes, and high-quality industrial

products, and even for gingerbread, chocolate Santa Clauses, and – as was the case last year – candles, the GDR population continues to criticize the high export levels. Recently, the media has responded to this criticism repeatedly, and has stressed that supply cannot be improved by reducing exports. The media maintains that even more exports are necessary to cover the costs of urgently needed deliveries of raw materials, certain foods and luxury foodstuffs, and other goods that cannot be produced in the GDR.

It is indeed true that the GDR cannot solve its supply problem by limiting exports. What is needed is the production of far more – and better – goods, both for export and for domestic consumption, with greater attention being paid to demand. Accordingly, the economic plan for 1981, which the *Volkskammer* passed on Wednesday, provides for considerable growth rates. The production of industrial goods is supposed to increase by almost six percent, and for certain factories and categories of goods the planned growth rates are in the double digits. The plan also emphasizes the task of “ensuring supply in all price groups,” so that supply better corresponds to the demands of the population. Of course, despite all its efforts, the GDR is still far away from having a supply that is truly “commensurate with demand.”

Source: Michael Mara, “Christmas Shopping in the DDR” [“Weihnachtseinkäufe in der DDR”], *Tagesspiegel*, December 21, 1980.

Translation: Allison Brown