

# The Causes of Emigration: Report from a Central Committee Brigade on Security Issues (May 24, 1961)

## Abstract

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At the beginning of the 1960s, the exodus from the GDR to West Germany continued unabated. Issued a few months before the erection of the Berlin Wall, this May 1961 report by the Central Committee Brigade on Security Issues placed particular emphasis on the influence of Western contacts. The report did concede, however, that economic difficulties, bureaucratism, and arbitrariness in the granting of travel permits had a negative impact on living conditions in the GDR. Additionally, the report mentioned that *Republikflucht* was also motivated by a spirit of adventure and personal problems.

## Source

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### Goal of the deployment of the brigade:

Improving the public educational work of the German People's Police in the district of Halle in connection with the fight against *Republikflucht*, especially among skilled workers, young people, doctors, and teachers. [...]

The brigade worked as an independent working group in the complete brigade [*Gesamtbrigade*] of the Central Committee, which was under the authority of the Division for State and Legal Issues. [...]

### Causes for, reasons behind, and abetting factors in *Republikflucht* and recruitment methods

The brigade and the German People's Police in Halle thoroughly examined a series of flights from the republic, from the workplace to the place of residence. The process revealed a great many causes for, reasons behind, and abetting factors in *Republikflucht* and recruitment methods, which are closely related and work together.

All cases showed the most diverse links and contact with relatives, acquaintances, and escapees in West Germany and the influence of trips and visits to the West. With many people who committed *Republikflucht*, the flight was encouraged by doubts, uncertainties about the outlook of the development in Germany, combined with a lack of belief in the correctness of the policies of the party and the government. Not least, the intensified ideological-political diversions of the enemy, and the enemy's direct and indirect influence played an important role here. In the first few months of the year, this intensified activity was seen in Halle in the form of leaflets, flyers, graffiti, controlled rumors, incitement, and the defamation of the party and the government and of functionaries of the party and the government. [...]

It is a fact that a large portion of all strata of the population watch and listen to Western television and radio programs in order to inform themselves about the situation.

Many young people maintain direct and indirect ties to Western radio stations, film clubs, jazz clubs, and so on. This activity plays a vital role in reinforcing vacillation, uncertainty, disbelief.

A portion of the citizens who committed *Republikflucht* listened to the agitation relating to the proposals on the conclusion of a treaty to solve the West Berlin question, that this would "close the borders to West

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Germany, sever ties to relatives, deepen the division . . .” etc.

In connection with the growing nuclear armament of the Bundeswehr and the intensification of the situation in Germany, a number of citizens have committed *Republikflucht* out of fear of conflicts, and they believe that they would feel safer in West Germany.

Experience has shown that every time the enemy takes measures to intensify the situation, there is a rise in *Republikflucht*.

A not insignificant role is played by ideological influences under the impression and the exploitation of the current economic situation here. This has given rise, among the most varied strata of the population, to “idealized notions” about the situation in West Germany, and they believe that life there is “better, easier, freer.” If you want to travel abroad, you need neither a passport nor foreign currency.

Many citizens who travel to West Germany or who receive visitors from the West see a contradiction between our accounts of the situation and development of West Germany and their own, superficial view, which has been formed under the impression and influence of the current economic situation. This also finds expression in arguments like “nobody in West Germany wants war and speaks of war.”

The channels and connections through which these influences penetrate are still being inadequately uncovered and insufficiently targeted. That applies both to the offensive ideological-political work and to the operative activity and defense by the organs of the state.

The recruitment methods and the appeals to leave the republic are very diverse. In this context, measures by the Bonn government, such as the generous issuance of the “Refugee ID C” to farmers, craftsmen, and tradesmen, play a role. In addition, in 1960 numerous legal regulations were passed, for example the 13th amendment to the Equalization of Burdens Law, which stipulates that all those who flee the republic will be eligible for the subsidies for household goods. Loans on favorable terms are granted to doctors, other members of the intelligentsia, craftsmen, tradesmen and others, so that people who flee the republic can “gain a foothold more quickly,” so to speak. [...]

As for organized recruitment, there is the added fact that West Berlin has increasingly emerged as the hub of recruitment. In 95% of cases of *Republikflucht*, West Berlin is the chosen path.

Through the Lemmer ministry and other agencies, conferences, congresses, exhibitions, and revanchists’ meetings are organized in West Berlin, with the goal of engaging in inflammatory agitation against the GDR and establishing contact with citizens. No small portion of the escapees from the district [of Halle], especially young people, participated in such events or spent time in West Berlin. [...]

In many instances it was also noted that individuals who committed *Republikflucht* and then returned to the GDR for a visit, sometimes with a car, to look up their acquaintances and even their old workplaces, contributed to additional cases of *Republikflucht* by glorifying the West.

On numerous occasions, *Republikflucht* was also prompted by the influence of returnees and new arrivals. The chief method here is the glorification of the West. [...]

When it comes to the development of German-German tourist traffic, one must bear in mind that numerous GDR citizens whose family members left illegally have a particularly strong desire to visit [them in West Germany], and that conversely, those who committed *Republikflucht* are trying to obtain residence permits. In keeping with the decision of the Politburo in 1957, the majority of these applications have been turned down. In no small number of cases, the bureaucratic handling of these problems adds to the disgruntlement. For example, certain members of the intelligentsia are given travel permits to West Germany or residence permits without exception, while these are denied to members of

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other social strata or are granted only with difficulty. Many of these citizens are saying: "Are we second-class citizens? Why aren't our applications accepted, and why are such distinctions being made?" The rejection of such applications often leads to *Republikflucht*.

*Republikflucht* is also being abetted by existing shortcomings and deficiencies in the production sector and in the social-human aspects [of the workplace]. For example

- difficulties in the production process
- deficiencies in planning, non-continuous production process
- waiting periods – reduction in wages
- constant changes in construction and technology
- shuffling of workers, etc.
- use of skilled workers outside of their specialty.

Many members of the technical intelligentsia and workers blame these deficiencies and shortcomings for personal discontent, wage issues, overwork.

This discontent is intensified through the heartless, bureaucratic behavior [of officials], and [their] disregard for personal difficulties. The resulting personal discontent and difficulties nourish a disbelief in the correctness of the policies of the party and the government. [...]

Not infrequently, fear of punishment prompts *Republikflucht*. In these cases, the expected punishment typically would not have been severe. The brigade reviewed 17 cases and found that only 2 involved serious crimes and transgressions. For the most part, it is young people or citizens who have committed a punishable offense for the first time and who do not yet have real confidence in our state organs and in the socialist legal system.

A spirit of adventure and a craving for change is often the cause of *Republikflucht* among young people. Here, great influence is exerted by the pulp fiction that is smuggled in, by Western radio stations, by contacts with film and jazz clubs, Radio Luxembourg and the like, and by existing cliques of young people who pursue a certain "hobby."

Oftentimes this spirit of adventure is also nourished by comments from older colleagues, who say: "When I was your age, I ventured out to see the world."

Three young people from the secondary school Barnstädt/Querfurt repeatedly attempted to leave the GDR in order to become cowboys in America.

In Hettstedt, four young people who fled the republic had had postal communications with jazz clubs beforehand, and subsequently committed *Republikflucht* after their groups were "broken up."

No small influence on *Republikflucht* is exerted by personal and social problems, as for example

- marital strife
- housing difficulties
- moral transgressions
- material difficulties. [...]

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The present account of the causes and circumstances of *Republikflucht* and of recruitment methods makes clear that the security agencies alone are unable to deal with this problem. The brigade deployment in the district of Halle has helped to create greater clarity in this area among party, state, and economic organs and mass organizations.

Source: BArch P, DO 1/11/18, Bl. 25–26/44–51; reprinted in Dierk Hoffman, Karl-Heinz Schmidt, and Peter Skyba, eds., *Die DDR vor dem Mauerbau: Dokumente zur Geschichte des anderen deutschen Staates, 1949–1961*. Munich: Piper, 1993, pp. 384–89.

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