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Final Report on the Research Project "The Audience's Choice: The State Organization of Cinema and the Film Preferences of Cinemagoers in the GDR, 1949-1990"

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FINAL REPORT ON THE RESEARCH PROJECT

*The Audience's Choice: The State Organization of Cinema and the Film Preferences
of Cinemagoers in the GDR, 1949-1990*

Funding period: April 1, 2021 – March 31, 2025

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FINAL REPORT

1 General Information

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2 Summary

German Summary

Obwohl die SED-Elite das Kino in der DDR als politische Kulturinstitution etablieren wollte, funktionierte es letztlich kaum anders als das Kino in der Bundesrepublik. Das durchgeführte Forschungsprojekt basiert auf einer breiten empirischen Basis: Umfangreiche Aktenbestände zum DDR-Kino wurden ausgewertet und erstmals jährliche Kinocharts erstellt.

Die SED-Elite im Politbüro und im Ministerium für Kultur setzte den Film in der DDR gezielt als Instrument zur politischen Erziehung der Ostdeutschen ein. Zu diesem Zweck wurden die Filmproduktion, der Filmverleih und die Kinos verstaatlicht und ein komplexes zentralistisch-hierarchisches Steuerungssystem aufgebaut. Alle wichtigen filmpolitischen und filmwirtschaftlichen Funktionen wurden mit SED-loyalem Personal besetzt und von der

Staatssicherheit kontrolliert. Die Filme mussten dem übergeordneten Ziel der politischen Erziehung entsprechen, weshalb Unterhaltungsfilme aus dem Westen nur in Ausnahmefällen zugelassen wurden. Um eine bevorzugte Programmierung politisch erwünschter Filme zu erreichen, wurden die Verleih- und Eintrittspreise der Filme differenziert.

Der Versuch, das Kino als politische Kulturinstitution zu etablieren, scheiterte letztlich am ostdeutschen Publikum. Die Mehrheit ignorierte die politisch erwünschten Filme, auch die der DEFA, und entschied sich für die wenigen Unterhaltungsfilme aus dem Westen, die auch das westdeutsche Publikum begeisterten. Die Mitarbeiter und Mitarbeiterinnen der Filmbetriebe wie der Verleiher, die Bezirksfilmdirektionen und Kinos richteten die Kopienzahl pro Film an der zu erwartenden Publikumsnachfrage aus und zeigten die Filme in den Kinos so oft, wie zahlende Zuschauer kamen. Um politischem Druck zu entgehen, meldeten sie die Besucherzahlen nur selektiv an das Ministerium für Kultur, indem sie Informationen zurückhielten oder manipulierten.

Das Forschungsprojekt erweitert die Möglichkeiten film- und kinogeschichtlicher Forschung, indem es die nachhaltige Prägung des Kinos im Kontext von Filmpolitik, Filmwirtschaft und Kinopublikum analysiert. Es bietet dazu innovative Instrumente wie die jährlichen Kinocharts der DDR von 1952 bis 1989 und methodisches Wissen, wie der Erfolg von Filmen erhoben und länderübergreifend verglichen werden kann. Nicht zuletzt regt das im Forschungsprojekt entstandene Buch (Garncarz 2026) zum Nachdenken über autokratische Staaten an, die oft weit weniger effizient funktionieren, als es den Anschein hat.

English Summary

Although the SED elite wanted to establish cinema in the GDR as a political cultural institution, it ultimately functioned much like the cinema in the Federal Republic of Germany. The research project is based on a broad empirical foundation: Extensive archives on cinema in the GDR were evaluated and annual ticket sales charts were compiled for the first time.

The SED elite in the Politburo and the Ministry of Culture deliberately used film in the GDR as an instrument for the political education of East Germans. To this end, film production, distribution, and cinemas were nationalized, and a complex, centralized, hierarchical system of control was established. All important functions in film policy and the film industry were filled with personnel loyal to the SED and controlled by the Stasi. Films had to conform to the overarching goal of political education, so Western entertainment films were allowed only in exceptional cases. In order to achieve preferential programming of politically desirable films, distribution and admission prices for films were differentiated.

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The logo of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), consisting of the letters 'DFG' in a bold, blue, sans-serif font.

The attempt to establish cinema as a political cultural institution ultimately failed because of East German audiences. The majority ignored politically desirable films, including those produced by DEFA, and opted for the few entertainment films from the West that appealed to West German audiences. Employees of film companies such as distributors, district film offices, and cinemas based the number of prints per film on expected audience demand and showed films in cinemas as often as paying audiences showed up. To avoid political pressure, they selectively reported attendance figures to the Ministry of Culture by withholding or manipulating information.

The research project expands the possibilities of film and cinema history research by analysing the lasting impact of cinema in the context of film policy, the film industry, and cinema audiences. It offers innovative tools, such as the GDR's annual ticket sales charts from 1952 to 1989, and methodological knowledge on how to measure and compare the success of films across countries. Finally, the book resulting from the research project (Garncarz 2026) encourages reflection on autocratic states, which often function far less efficiently than they appear.

3 Progress Report

The research project has produced two main results: a) a book presenting the research results and a discussion of the methods, and b) annual cinema ticket sales charts for the GDR (Garncarz 2026). While the research findings provide a wide range of starting points for further research beyond the GDR, the annual admission rankings form an empirical basis for further studies on cinema in the GDR.

The research perspective changed and expanded significantly between the first and second phases of the project (see proposals for phases 1 and 2). In the first phase of the project, the initial question focused on the creation of annual cinema ticket sales charts and the interpretation of the film choices and preferences of East German cinemagoers. In order to validate a cinema sample that would determine the success of all films shown in East German cinemas with East German audiences, it was necessary to examine the GDR film files in the Federal Archives. It became clear that this would also make it possible to systematically reconstruct the organization of GDR cinema in a way that goes beyond existing knowledge. This interest drove the second phase of the project. While the cinema ticket sales charts showed a clear

preference for Western entertainment films, the organization of the cinema was aimed at political and ideological education. This fundamental contradiction was the source of the project's innovative potential. Although power was concentrated in the hands of the SED, audiences and cinema employees had a lasting influence on the institution of cinema.

Research Results I: The Book on Cinema in the GDR

In the following, I will give an overview of the research that has been done, but due to space limitations, I cannot go into detail. Therefore, I refer repeatedly to the central publication of the research project (Garncarz 2026).

The first part of the book describes the centralized organization and control of cinema, which has been insufficiently analyzed in the research literature. Berghahn (2005), for example, does not use primary sources and provides only a cursory overview of the organization of cinema in the GDR based on research literature, limiting the scope of GDR cinema to the DEFA. Jordan (2013) offers an impressive encyclopedic knowledge of the institutions and companies of GDR cinema far beyond DEFA, based on a wide range of sources, but is unable to show how it actually functioned.

Based on some 250,000 pages of GDR files, I analyzed the function that the SED elite assigned to the cinema and how they organized it to achieve this goal. To this end, I read files from the Politburo, the Central Committee of the SED, the Stasi, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Finance, the State Planning Commission, Progress Film Distribution, DEFA Foreign Trade, the DEFA dubbing studio, the DEFA feature film studio, the district film offices ("Bezirksfilmdirektionen"), the district councils ("Kreisfilmstellen"), the cinemas and many other institutions. The files are located in the Federal Archives in Berlin and in various state archives. Many of these files have apparently never been used for research, including the files of the State Security Service (Stasi), which have hardly been evaluated beyond the DEFA research (Geiss 1997).

The Politburo determined the functions and organization of the cinema, while the Ministry of Culture acted as the executive arm of the Politburo (Chapter 1.1). In essence, the cinema was instrumentalized as an institution for the political education of citizens that would contribute to the formation of 'socialist personalities' (Chapter 1.2). The center of the GDR film industry was not DEFA (the focus of DEFA research), but the distribution company Progress, which financed DEFA and all other film companies (Chapter 1.3). Financing came from ticket sales and, increasingly, from the state budget. All important companies were nationalized and all important positions were filled with SED loyalists. All companies were under the

control of the SED's grassroots organizations, and all senior officials – from the minister of culture to the directors of the district film offices – were systematically monitored by the Stasi.

In order to educate East Germans to become 'socialist personalities', the SED elite relied on both a radical political-ideological selection of films (Chapter 3.1; Stott 2012) and targeted advertising ("Propaganda") (Chapter 3.2). By staggering distribution fees and differentiating ticket prices, incentives were created for both distributors and cinemagoers to favor politically ideological films in their programming or at the box office (Chapter 3.3). The more politically valuable a film was considered, the lower the film rental and admission fees. Conversely, the less a film contributed to the education of the audience, the higher the rental and ticket prices were. Given this radical, centralized, and hierarchical control by the SED elite, one might think that it was extremely effective. This is not the case.

In the second part of the book, I analyze viewers' film preferences (Chapters 4-6). For this purpose, I develop the concepts of 'popularity' and 'preference' (Chapter 4.1). I show statistically that audience preferences can be measured using the charts. I also show how to create cinema ticket sales charts after the fact when there is not enough data on the number of people who saw the movies. The success of a film is measured using a POPSTAT formula adapted to the conditions of a socialist central planning economy (Chapter 4.2; Sedgwick 2000) and a representative sample of cinemas based on film advertisements in the daily press (Chapter 4.3). Thus, for the years 1952 to 1989, annual cinema-going rankings were compiled that reflected the preferences of East German audiences. This was not possible for 1950 and 1951 due to available sources.

East German viewers were free to choose among the films on offer and made their decisions primarily on the basis of word of mouth among friends and their own experiences with comparable films (Chapter 5.1). The East German cinema audience underwent fundamental quantitative and demographic changes during the 40 years of the GDR, as explained in chapter 5.2. This change has had a significant impact on the films that audiences choose to watch. But it was not only the cinemagoers who had a choice, but also the cinema employees. They did everything they could to satisfy audience demand by circumventing the power of the Politburo and the Ministry of Culture (Chapter 5.3).

It had to be clarified how it was possible for companies in the film distribution chain, such as Progress, district film offices and cinemas, to assert themselves against the directives of the political leadership. Essentially, the political authorities (Ministry of Culture, Central Committee and Politburo of the SED) received only very selective reports on actual film practices (Chapter 2.3). The reports focused primarily on the success of DEFA films, but only

fragmentarily on the audience's enthusiasm for entertainment films from the West. The reason for this was that lower-level employees rightly feared draconian punishment by the Politburo (such as loss of their jobs and imprisonment by the Stasi).

The cinema ticket sales charts, which represent the choices of East German audiences, clearly show that the films with which the SED elite wanted to educate its citizens to become 'socialist personalities' were largely shunned. Instead, East German cinemagoers overwhelmingly opted for the few entertainment films from the West (Chapter 6.1). The choices of East German viewers were largely similar to those of West German viewers (Chapter 6.2). (The working hypothesis of the first application, that the preferences of East German viewers had become more similar to those of West German viewers, was falsified.) During the 40 years of the GDR, the preferences of East German audiences shifted from German-language films, especially those from West Germany and Austria, to Hollywood films. This development ran parallel to that of West German cinema attendance (Chapter 6.3; Garncarz 2013).

The most surprising result of my research is that the centralized power structure of the SED elite, with its Politburo dominated by the party secretary, was unable to assert its interests despite a variety of strategies. Not only did audiences choose other, politically undesirable films, but the majority of GDR cinema employees also sided with the audiences (Chapter 5.3). They served their interests by basing the number of prints to be produced on anticipated demand and by showing the films as often as there was a paying audience.

In the third part of the book, I raise fundamental questions and attempt to answer them from a theoretical perspective (Chapter 7). I analyze how the demands of two interdependent parties – the SED elite and the audience – gave rise to a cinema that was not planned by either side (chapter 7.1). I also show why East German audiences primarily chose films from Western countries of production (chapter 7.2). I can statistically prove that Western films were preferred by East German audiences because they were generally more entertaining and culturally appropriate (Roose 2010). Finally, I offer an explanation for why the preferences of the two German audiences changed in parallel (Chapter 7.3). This is based on the fact that the value shift described by Inglehart (1990) preceded the change in film preferences in both German states and that the nature of the value shift determined the change in certain film groups (cf. for East Germany: Gensicke 1992, for West Germany: Klages 1984). Thus, a shift in value groups from duty and acceptance values to self-actualization values leads to a preference shift from German-language films to Hollywood films.

In the appendix of the book, I discuss various methods used to analyze GDR cinema, some of which I developed myself. These include the Utility Index, the POPSTAT method, the

POPMatch method, and the *POPForm* method (Appendices 1-4). The methodological innovation potential of the book lies in the further development and adaptation of the POPSTAT method to the conditions of a centrally planned economy, in the development of a method for the quantitative comparison of the preferences of two audience groups, and in the development of a method for calculating the quantitative demand for films in a market. All of these methods can easily be used for further research.

The Utility Index makes it possible to analyze the demand for films from specific production countries or of a specific genre within a country over a longer period of time and to compare it between two countries (Appendix 1). The POPSTAT method is used to retrospectively collect and calculate the success of a film and thus to produce ticket sales charts when sufficient data are not available (Appendix 2; Sedgwick 2000). I have adapted this method to the conditions of a centrally planned economy in order to optimize it. The core of the adjustment is that the unequal demand for films of certain film groups (films produced in socialist countries had, on average, significantly fewer viewers per screening than films produced in Western countries) is compensated for by the introduction of correction factors, thus improving the agreement with the selectively reported audience figures. I developed the *POPMatch* method to quantitatively measure the degree of agreement in film demand between two cinema audiences (East and West Germany) (Appendix 3). In doing so, I took into account that the film offerings in both countries are very different. Finally, I developed the *POPForm* formula to measure film demand even under restrictive conditions such as those in the GDR, regardless of whether films are profitable or not (Appendix 4).

Relevance of the Research

Based on my basic research on cinema in the GDR, in principle any cinema in the world can be analyzed in a similar way. The focus is not only on the further development of the necessary methods, such as POPSTAT and *POPMatch*, but above all on the combination of economic and institutional aspects with the systematic study of cinemagoers' preferences. While previous research on cinema in different countries has tended to focus on individual aspects, the study of cinema in the GDR is the first to show how all these aspects can be profitably linked.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that my research is relevant beyond the field of cinema. I was able to show on a broad empirical basis that a dictatorship like the GDR does not work the way its rulers imagined it would. In order to understand the power of the ruled over the rulers, it is worth looking for a comparable empirical basis in areas other than film and for

other dictatorships. Traditional historiography, based on the written records of rulers, is not sufficient for a realistic understanding of dictatorships.

Research Results II: The Research Data

As part of the research project, 38 ticket sales charts were compiled for the years 1952 to 1989, ranking films according to the demand of East German audiences (Appendix 5). The lists contain between 200 and 1,300 rankings. The number of films listed increases from year to year, as films produced under socialism could be shown indefinitely.

The data are based on a non-probabilistic sample that is representative of cinemas in the GDR (chapter 4.3). Movie ticket sales were compiled and calculated using a modified POPSTAT methodology (Appendix 2). The POPSTAT indices were calculated for all films and then converted into audience figures (see chapter 4.2 for the method). The validity of the data could be verified using the cinema attendance data, which is selectively available for individual years and was compiled by the film distributor Progress on the basis of reports from the district film offices and is stored in the Federal Archives.

The annual film admission rankings for the GDR are also of great value for further research beyond the objectives of this research project. The top 30 films from 1952 to 1989 are printed in Appendix 5 of my book. The goal is to make all this data available in a processed, digital form for future research via the Marburg repository [media/rep/ \(media/rep/::Startseite\)](#).

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A complete bibliography can be found in my book; only the titles mentioned above are listed here.

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Garncarz, Joseph (2026): *Sehnsucht nach Vergnügen: Das Kino der DDR zwischen Kontrolle und Freiheit* [Longing for Pleasure: Cinema in the GDR between Control and Freedom]. Köln: Halem.

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Sedgwick, John (2000): *Popular Filmgoing in 1930s Britain: A Choice of Pleasures*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.

4 Published Project Results

4.1 Category A – Articles in peer-reviewed journals, contributions to peer-reviewed conferences or to anthology volumes, and book publications

Garncarz, Joseph (2026): *Sehnsucht nach Vergnügen: Das Kino der DDR zwischen Kontrolle und Freiheit*. Köln: Halem.

Garncarz, Joseph (2024): „Measuring and Interpreting Film Preferences in Autocratic States“. In: Daniela Treveri Gennari, Lies Van de Vijver & Pierluigi Ercole (eds.): *The Palgrave Handbook of Comparative New Cinema Histories*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 281-306.

Garncarz, Joseph (2022): „Ein Votum für Filme aus dem Westen: Das Kino der DDR und sein Publikum, 1978-1987“. In: Marcus Plaul, Anna-Rosa Haumann & Kathleen Kröger (eds.): *Kino*

in der DDR: Perspektiven auf ein alltagsgeschichtliches Phänomen. Baden-Baden: Nomos, pp. 89-120.

4.2 Category B – Any other form of published results

not applicable

4.3 Patents (applied for and granted)

not applicable

5 Further information on the project, qualifications and outlook

The information foreseen for this section concerns internal aspects of the project and is not included in the public version.

5.1 Doctoral researchers involved

not applicable