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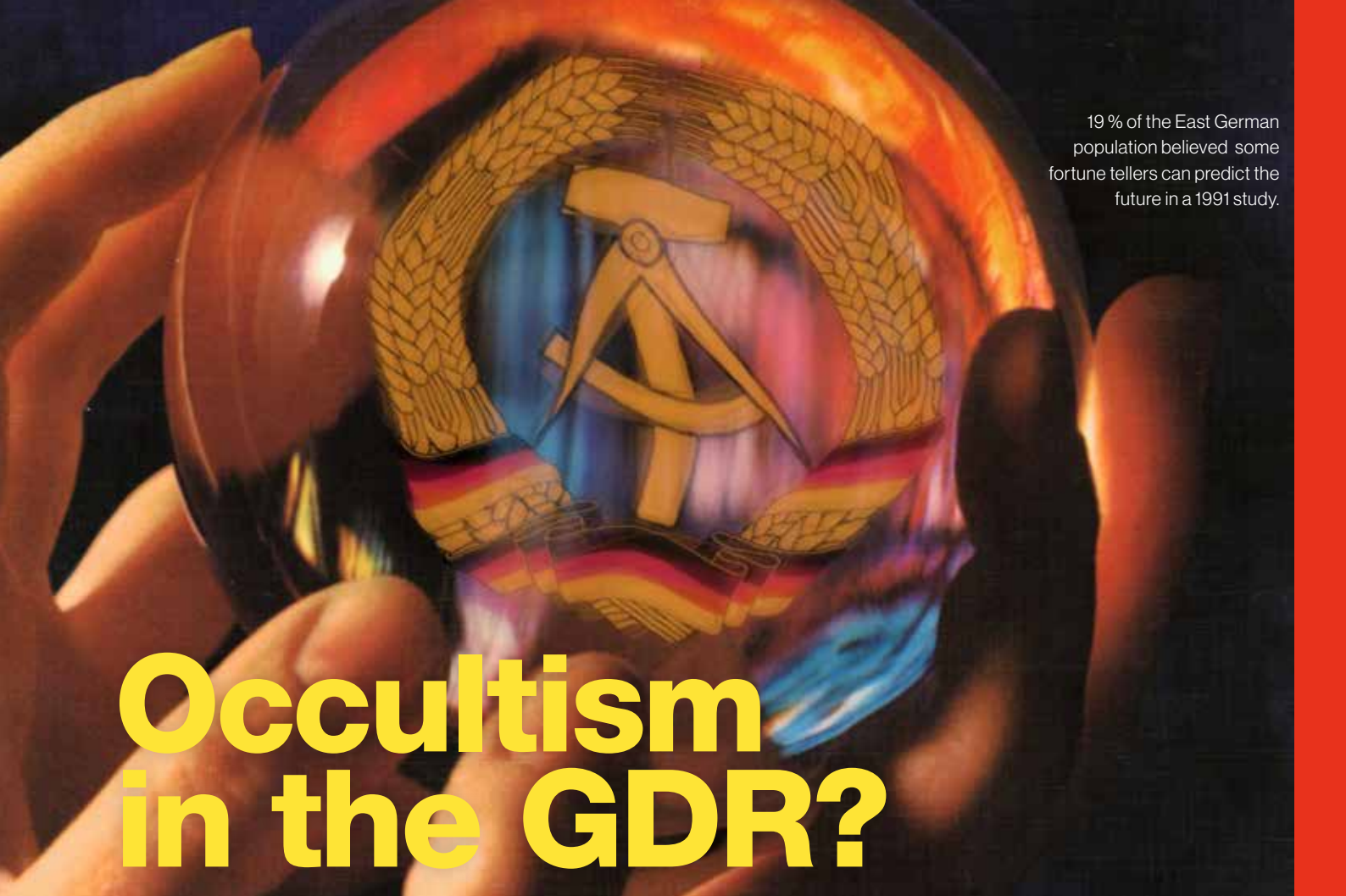


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A close-up photograph of a hand holding a crystal ball. Inside the crystal ball, a hammer and sickle symbol is visible, surrounded by a golden wreath. The background is dark and out of focus.

19 % of the East German population believed some fortune tellers can predict the future in a 1991 study.

Occultism in the GDR?

PHOTO: MICHAEL SCHETSCHKE / INSTITUT FÜR GRENZGEBIETE DER PSYCHOLOGIE UND PSYCHOHYGIENE (IGPP)

THE PARANORMAL AS HETERODOXY OF SCIENTIFIC WORLDVIEW

abstract

The article summarizes the main findings of a socio-historical study devoted to the question of the political and social handling of "paranormal," "parapsychological" or "occult" knowledge, experiences, and practices in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The "scientific worldview" derived from Marxism-Leninism and propagated in the GDR was essentially a scientific conception of reality. Against this background, all occult or paranormal topics were rigorously rejected in the public discourse of the GDR. The clear direction of the public discourse was accompanied by an institutionally supported struggle against everything that was considered "irrational." These discursive and institutional measures had a considerable impact on the population of the GDR. In the final years of the GDR, only a few people were still secretly dealing with paranormal topics. Overall, the findings show a largely successful marginalization of deviant practices and belief systems in a society characterized by a stringent order of social reality. However, compared to traditional Christian beliefs, which were severely repressed by the state's secularization program, paranormal beliefs proved to be somewhat more resistant.

KEYWORDS: German Democratic Republic (GDR), socialism, scientism, superstition, occultism, parapsychology

by **Andreas Anton & Ina Schmied-Knittel**

Marxism-Leninism was the theoretical and practical fundament of political ideology in the GDR (and other socialist countries). It was based on the combination and integration of ideological, economic, and political principles with a universal approach to explanation, which determined both unambiguously and fundamentally what was to be considered true and false. In building up socialism, a fundamental goal of the GDR leadership was to establish a society with a scientific worldview in which all forms of "superstition," "irrationalism" and "mysticism" – as it was talked about in the official language – was to be eroded. This primarily referred to church membership, religious practice, and religious belief, although the process of secularization (envisaged and planned by the state and party leadership) ultimately incorporated all (in the broadest sense) esoteric, psychic, alternative, paranormal, magical, and occult ideas and practices. In the public discourse of the GDR, topics such as astrology, parapsychology, and occultism were generally regarded as backward superstition. Moreover, this was to be categorically forsworn in the socialist society of the GDR.

But how successful was this agenda? Except for the public dis-

PHOTO: THE GERMAN FEDERAL ARCHIVE



World clock on Alexanderplatz in winter 1969.

PHOTO: THE GERMAN FEDERAL ARCHIVE



Series production of microelectronic started in 1974/75 at Erfurt, VEB Mikroelektronik.

crediting of these topics, virtually nothing is known about their relevance in the everyday world of the GDR society. While several studies have been conducted on the role of churches in the GDR, the role and significance of the paranormal is yet to be systematically investigated. So, what did GDR citizens think about telepathy, psychic dreams, premonitions, hauntings and spirits, parapsychology, astrology, alternative medicine, or UFOs? Was the population's engagement in paranormal phenomena and magical practices – notwithstanding official proclamations – wholly eliminated, or did they continue to exist at least in a rudimentary or clandestine level? Furthermore, what were the consequences for those individuals who engaged in topics that deviated from the dominant *Weltanschauung* or even had experiences themselves that were contrary to the worldview? Moreover, what was the government's position? Were the state leadership and security agencies (*das Ministerium für Staatssicherheit* (MfS)) interested in these topics? Was it dangerous for people to engage in them? In other words, was there an “occult underground” in the shadow of the scientific worldview?

THESE QUESTIONS FORMED the background of a research project entitled “In the Shadow of Scientism. On Dealing with Heterodox Knowledge, Experiences, and Practices in the GDR”.¹ The aim of the research was to investigate the relevance of the paranormal in the GDR in terms of social history, sociology of knowledge and discourse analysis. A large variety of different forms of beliefs, experiences and practices are generally considered to belong to this field of research. However, what they have in common is that the ontological state of the phenomena associated with this field is generally controversial from a scientific point of view. They are not easily distinguishable from other alternative religious complexes. Demarcations are possible only in detail; emic names such as esotericism, New Age, occultism, parapsychology, and magic are in circulation. Regardless of

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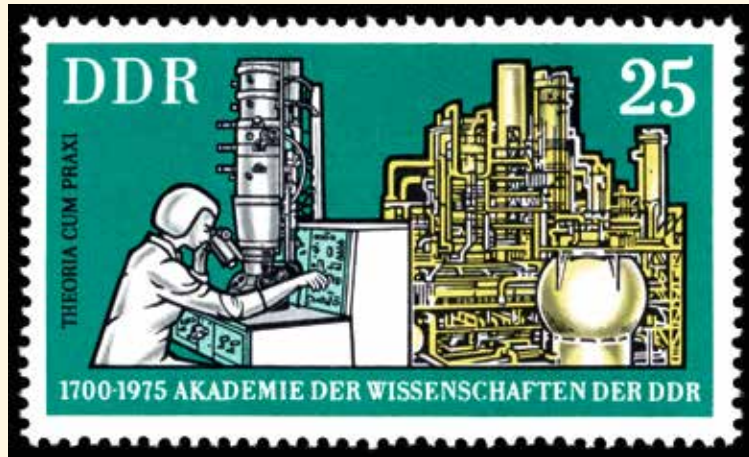
its historical and social dimensions, “occultism” is often used as an umbrella term for the paranormal and superstitious ideas and practices we are interested in here. For centuries it was used to designate mysterious powers and supernatural properties (healing powers, magnetism, the effects of the stars).²

We want to follow a proposal by Hans Bender³ and define the occult or the paranormal as a collective term for different areas of alleged or natural phenomena and related parapsychological and parapsychical activities that are located outside generally accepted scientific experiences such as telepathy, clairvoyance, ghost phenomena, psychokinesis and haunting, as well as astrology, UFOs and miracle healing. Bender also characterized the concept of the “uniformity of the occult.”⁴ We agree with this and refer to the fact that these phenomena are reported in all historical ages and across different cultures. That the occult does play a role in history, as the spiritualist and esoteric traditions in Great Britain,

France, Germany and the USA in the 19th and 20th centuries show, have long been the research subject of historical and cultural studies.⁵ The occult had a wider mass appeal in the past, but still today the “paranormal” is an integral part of everyday and popular culture – not only in fictional formats such as feature movies, series or novels.⁶ Surveys show that quite a few people have experienced extrasensory phenomena, and

age, level of education, social status and ethnicity do not seem to play a significant role.⁷ Indeed, there are also indications that such experiences took place in the population of the GDR, as demonstrated, for example, by near-death experiences.⁸ This is significant for our research question, and it belongs to the core assumptions that – based on the anthropological constant of the paranormal – such experiences (or at least the interest in these topics) also played a role in socialist East Germany.

For the systematic reconstruction of the (presumed) paranormal field⁹ in the GDR, three research dimensions were specified: (1) the framing of the issues in public discourse, (2) the question



Stamp "275 Years of the Academy of Sciences, Berlin" from 1975. The scientific worldview was praised in the GDR.

of concrete, institutionally determined forms of the way that the state addressed the paranormal (e.g., in the form of laws and sanctions), and (3) the prevalence and relevance of paranormal experiences, beliefs and practices in the lifeworld of the GDR population. The research questions were followed up by a variety of empirical data and methods (qualitative interviews, textbooks, encyclopedias, publishers' programs and movies), as well as historical material.¹⁰ Around 1000 pages of archival documents and more than 300 published sources, including around 90 scholarly articles, 30 books, 140 news articles and four TV broadcasts were collected – plus around 32 hours of audio material from 23 interviews.¹¹

The scientific determination of reality in the GDR

The question of how to deal with the paranormal seems to be of particular interest in a society which, according to its self-understanding, was fully oriented towards progress, rationality, this world¹² and science. One of the supporting ideological principles in the GDR was the so-called scientific worldview (*wissenschaftliche Weltanschauung*) as part of Marxism-Leninism. This particular understanding of science was seen as a (better, the only) method of explaining all phenomena in the world. As can be read in a programmatic paper, the scientific worldview enables humans to understand the "objective general rules according to which all things and phenomena operate" and thereby providing an overview of the "apparently confusing, inconsistent phenomena of life."¹³ In the GDR, this scientific worldview alone was regarded as the "only appropriate instrument for explaining the world, but also as an individual guideline and a source of meaning."¹⁴ Thus, not only was there an ambition to understand politics and economics as "scientifically founded"; it was also regarded as being generally possible to "scientifically determine the position of human beings in this world, and the meaning of their lives."¹⁵

Because of this (over-)emphasis on science, the scientific worldview propagated in the GDR can be characterized as *sci-*



The Academy Library, the Grimm dictionary section in 1952. Literature on paranormal topics was often kept in special restricted areas.

entism. As Thomas Schmidt-Lux convincingly demonstrates, scientism became "an integral leading idea of a government body and party organs, as well as in the educational system" with the founding of the GDR.¹⁶ It was an essential element of the socialist concept of education and, to that extent, was therefore also an institutional concept. It was disseminated through schools and universities, so-called workers' and farmers' faculties (*Arbeiter- und Bauernfakultäten*¹⁷), and other educational institutions. In addition, the *Urania*, a scientific association (founded in Berlin in the 19th century), which aimed to bring scientific knowledge from natural science, technology, medicine, and social science, closer to the public, was of great importance. Presentations and papers should show "that nature is based on principles and dialectics and that miracles do not happen, but that the world is knowable and we can influence it, so we are not dependent on 'higher beings.'"¹⁸ After all, the task should be "to fight superstition, unscientific beliefs and mysticism."¹⁹ On this occasion, the "non-value and the harmfulness of unscientific conceptions of an unscientific worldview – in whatever form (superstition, mysticism, astrology, Kurpfuscherei, fatalism, idealism)" have to be emphasized with the aim of "making the population more and more immune to the existing phenomena."²⁰

IT WOULD BE BEYOND the limits of this article to go into the details of the institutional embedding of this particular program of scientism. However, at this point, it is essential to underline that the ideological essence of scientism colored all spheres of public discourse from the beginning to the end of the GDR. All forms of knowledge, experiences and practices related to the paranormal or occult topics (in the official discourse of the GDR often summarized as "superstition") were rigorously rejected, and their circulation systematically suppressed. The ultimate aim was a society free from superstition and irrationalism. In other words, scientism was based on the assumption that (according to the well-known saying) "between heaven and earth," there should be precisely nothing.

The paranormal in the public discourse of the GDR

Which concrete arguments were used to justify the resistance against the paranormal or against superstition in the public discourse of the GDR? We will show the impetus of the public discourse with some examples in a moment. However, before that, we want to make a few notes about the GDR media system's specific political and ideological framework. The political discourse of the GDR was determined by a far-reaching system of control and censorship. Almost the entire media system was directly connected to the government, making it possible to control the media on all levels. The established system of governmental control over public opinion created an "ordered public sphere."²¹ Within this ordered public sphere, contradictions, criticism, dissenting, or alternative opinions were barely tolerated, if at all, so the public discourse was in line with the ideological imperatives, with no exception.

This context also characterises the discourse on paranormal phenomena, occultism, parapsychology, and related topics. Thus, initially, it is not surprising that there were almost no sources of information about the paranormal in the GDR. Non-fiction and other books, TV and radio broadcasts, or public lectures were very rare. In terms of content, the few existing documents are characterized by a very high degree of uniformity, in line with the structural logic outlined above. We initially illustrate this with some examples from newspaper articles, in which the content of the articles is already often straightforward from the headlines: "Modern superstition in the guise of science. Parapsychology – the latest fashion in irrationalism," "Bourgeois ideology in the sign of crisis – What is and what does irrationalism want today?," "FRG: Witches are booming." The list could go on forever. The articles are also dismissive. The arguments vary only slightly in content and over time so that, in conclusion, it is possible to perceive a uniform pattern of interpretation regarding the paranormal for the entire existence of the GDR. According to this pattern of interpretation, *everything* that belongs to the paranormal, the supernatural or the occult in the broadest sense, can be indiscriminately counted as superstition. It is false, irrational, unscientific or pseudoscientific and is therefore contrary to the scientific worldview of Marxism-Leninism. Also, superstitious beliefs represent elements of a bourgeois, revanchist, and dangerous ideology, have an emotional and personal connection to fascism, and are regarded as a phenomenon of crisis and the collapse of capitalism in Western societies.

A concise example can be found in *Einheit. Journal for Theory and Practice of Scientific Socialism* of the SED. In a 1975 article entitled "PSI in bourgeois ideology," the pattern of interpretation outlined above can be found in the typical form.²² The author claims that there is a structural relationship between capitalism

and the "circulation and propagating of parapsychological ideas by the mass media of capitalist countries," when he states: "In fact, there is a close correlation between the increasing crisis phenomena of capitalism and the growth of irrational mysticism in a variety of forms."²³ In the end, according to a brief paraphrase, parapsychology, spiritualism and occultism, along with pornography and Hollywood, are instruments of imperialist manipulation that obscure the actual conditions and serve the interests of the powerful. A pseudo-science (in the West) is presented as degenerated and in contrast with the comprehensive Marxist-Leninist view of science, "based on a profound scientific worldview." Not only is this the only valid worldview; it also protects against symptoms of decline as observed in capitalism: "With the development of a socialist society, the basis for occult ideas has been eliminated in the socialist states; there is no longer any place for superstition in natural and spiritual science."²⁴

An article from *Neues Deutschland* in 1981 entitled "The Crisis and the Darkening of Minds" presents almost identical arguments. The cause of the spread of superstition in Western societies, it is argued, is attributable to a general crisis in the capitalist system, which is on the edge of collapse. Due to the imminent collapse of capitalist social systems, social orders are breaking down, living conditions are becoming complex, and future perspectives are dark. This instability engenders anxiety, and from this anxiety stems "a hope for miracles and at the same time the will to believe, which is necessary in

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order to accept all kinds of absurdities as forms of support and protection."²⁵ Further, it is said: "From the point of view of the dominating system of exploitation and its ideological defense, a growing superstition is seen as positive. Those who lose themselves in the jungle of magical ideas are lost for revolutionary thoughts and actions. From this thicket, there is no longer a view through to the laws of social development. It acts as a barrier to progress. It causes distancing from reality, political abstinence, isolation, stupefaction. Thus, irrationalism is promoted in the present capitalist world on various levels of intellectual aspiration."²⁶

OTHER FORMS OF DISCUSSION of superstition in the media discourse of the GDR, such as books, journals, and TV or radio broadcasts, tend to follow this structure of interpretation and argumentation almost universally. However, an inevitable shift can be observed regarding the chronological development of the discourse, and two phases can be identified: The "enlightenment phase" includes the period from the foundation of the GDR until around the mid-1960s. In this phase, the discourse on superstition tended to be inward looking, focusing on combating the "survival" of superstition in the own population. In other words, it was a question of eliminating the historical remnants of superstitious ideas and magical practices which, in the under-

standing of the party and state leadership, would interfere with the establishment of socialism in the young GDR. In this context, alternative medical practices, in particular, played a role.

As far as the second phase is concerned, the discourse on superstition from around the mid-1960s onwards was characterized by an increasing political functionalization of paranormal topics (along the lines of the articles cited above.) The focus was no longer on superstitious ideas among the own population – these were considered to have been mostly overcome. From now on, superstition, mysticism and irrationalism were regarded above all as characteristics of Western capitalist societies and were the source of an externally directed political-ideological critique – primarily of the immediate “class enemy,” West Germany. The enlightened, progressive society of the GDR (and other socialist countries) was contrasted with the supposed irrationalism of Western capitalist societies. In other words, it was a matter of establishing the GDR as a “better,” “more rational” and “more enlightened” country. The enlightened program against superstition in its population became an ideological weapon in the political struggle of the systems. In line with its resolutely ideological direction, this second phase can be described as the “propaganda phase.”

Observation and punishment

The apparent impetus of the public discourse was connected with an institutionally supported defense strategy against the propagated dangers of superstition. This process was realized with considerable effort, particularly during the enlightenment phase. A law adopted mainly from the NS era prohibited fortune telling and astrology and imposed heavy fines and imprisonment for non-compliance. It provided the legal basis for surveillance and sanctioning measures by police authorities and State Security for several spiritualist and astrological groups and individuals.

An exceptional case about a female fortune teller from Thuringia demonstrates the harshness with which this was often done.²⁷ In the 1950s, this fortune teller had been reading cards for people. Since, according to the police and the *Ministry for State Security* (MfS), she had advised several people to leave the GDR, she was sentenced to twelve years in prison for “boycott agitation.”²⁸ The relevant document from the trial in August 1956 states: “The 53-year-old accused had been earning her living since 1945 by reading cards for money. She had a large circle of visitors and often saw several people a day. A brother of the accused living in West Berlin, who was opposed to the conditions in the GDR and wanted the unity of Germany in the Western sense, persuaded her to advise her visitors to leave the GDR by reading their cards. The accused complied with this request. [...] Based on a certain opposition to the conditions for workers and farmers, she took advantage of the wavering attitude of her clients, who were caught up in superstition, and induced them to dissertate from the republic.”²⁹

Such methods resulted in a high level of persecution, which helped occult or superstitious practices to disappear successively among the GDR population (quite a few fled to West Germany). The, in some cases, drastic actions against fortune tellers, spiritualists, astrologers, or psychics must also be seen in the context of the radical political reorganization programs of the state lead-

ership at the beginning of the GDR. In this early enlightenment phase in particular, there was a huge intervention in economics, society and culture in order to develop socialism, and any deviating behavior was heavily criminalized and sanctioned.

SUCH SOCIAL AND POLITICAL conditions also provided virtually no opportunities for the association or institutionalization of paranormal belief systems and forms of practice – neither in the official nor in the unofficial culture of the GDR. Thus, clubs, societies, or interest groups in the area of the paranormal, such as those that had emerged in West Germany and still exist today, were unthinkable in the GDR.³⁰

The state’s anti-superstition approach ultimately also manifested itself in the form of various instruments for controlling, monitoring, and censoring information. These included the so-called “printing authorization procedures” which, in the GDR, regulated the publication of books and other printed materials in accordance with strict directives. What can also be mentioned in this context was the safekeeping of relevant Western literature on paranormal topics in special restricted areas of public libraries (the so-called “poison cabinet”) and the strict regulations and controls imposed by the customs authority on the import of literature. All this systematically and successfully blocked the circulation of topics and information that did not conform to the official interpretive scheme.

Occult underground?

The described interventions had a clear impact on the lives of the people. Over time, occult topics and practices became well hidden, and the body of knowledge disappeared more and more from the consciousness of society. By the end of the 1960s at the latest, it was hardly possible to speak of a substantial “occult underground” or an organized “scene” in the GDR, although individual interests and marginal forms of practice did take hold clandestinely despite (or perhaps precisely because of) the strongly negative position of the dominant ideology.

Thus, the empirical findings of our study show that – if we look deeply enough – certain occult practices and individual practitioners can be found throughout the entire GDR period: Dowsers in allotment gardens and agricultural cooperatives, fortune telling and palmistry in almost every small and large city, Ouija boards and seances among young people, UFO observations, private yoga classes, and much more. Of course, in the GDR, all these niches and subcultures existed in isolated cases, and there was also a specific interest in the paranormal. Nevertheless, it must not be forgotten that the number of these beliefs and practices was anything but high and always represented only single cases. Moreover, concerning other forms of dissident activities that existed in the GDR (such as the punk scene or the peace and eco movement), the topic of the “paranormal” represents a highly marginal heterodoxy that had no real cultural resonance.

Overall, it becomes clear that the party and the state leadership did indeed do everything in their power to prevent superstition and the paranormal and, in doing so, had a substantial impact on the everyday lifeworld of the people of the GDR. How-

ever, it can be concluded that the state leadership could replace the paranormal as a social field and transform it into a controllable heterodox and marginal phenomenon, similar to what happened to the church and religion in the GDR. At the same time, there are signs of resistance and persistence.

The persistence of the occult?

For example, the results of a representative survey conducted immediately after the reunification of Germany are interesting (Terwey 1992). The primary data of the study refer to 1991. The subject of the survey was the situation of faith and church in a unified Germany. In addition to items on classical Christian beliefs, the study's questionnaire also included questions on paranormal beliefs. A central finding was that while there are significant differences in traditional beliefs and church memberships between the East and West German populations, when it comes to paranormal phenomena the differences are much less. Even on the fundamental question of belief in God, East and West Germans differ significantly. While 57.9 percent in West Germany agree with the statement "I believe in God and have always believed in Him," the figure for East Germany is only 19.4 percent. The differences are even more pronounced regarding membership of a religious community or church: only 10.6 percent of the respondents in Western Germany said they did not belong to any religious community, while the figure was 64.7 percent in Eastern Germany. Initially, this corresponds to expectations about the effect of the secularization imposed by the state in the GDR.³¹

The following table shows the approval ratings for traditional content of the Christian faith in the West German and East German populations. The percentages indicate the summed values for the response options "Yes, definitely" and "Yes, probably." As expected, the approval ratings in Eastern Germany are significantly lower than in Western Germany.³²

Christian faith in West and East German populations (approval ratings, i.e. Yes, <i>definitely</i> , and Yes, <i>probably</i>)		
	West	East
Do you believe in life after death?	44.4%	12.2%
Do you believe in the devil?	20.1%	5.7%
Do you believe in heaven?	35.0%	17.4%
Do you believe in hell?	20.3%	5.7%
Do you believe in miracles?	51.2%	34.9%

However, the comparatively high approval ratings for the possibility of miracles among East Germans are remarkable. Terwey notes: "51.2% in the West tend to believe in miracles, compared to 34.9% in the East. Further calculations show that 26.4 percent of atheists from the new federal states accept miracles as at least probable (old federal states: 32.8 percent). Could it also be that in the former GDR, there is a comparatively high proportion of the population which, detached from central Christian ideas, believes in supernatural phenomena?"³³

When studying the survey results related to paranormal phe-

nomena in the following table, only minor differences can be seen in the belief in paranormal phenomena between West and East Germans. For some items, such as faith healers have supernatural powers, an even higher consensus was found in the East German population than in the West German population. The values given are the combined figures for the response options "Definitely true" and "Probably true."

Belief in paranormal phenomena in West and East German populations (approval ratings, i.e. <i>Definitely true</i> , and <i>Probably true</i>)		
	West	East
Lucky charms sometimes do bring luck	27.0%	29.6%
Some fortune tellers can predict the future	27.9%	19.0%
Some faith healers really have supernatural powers	32.5%	33.7%
A person's zodiac sign will influence their life	27.8%	20.5%

It is astonishing that despite the very different ways of dealing with the subject area of the paranormal in the FRG and the GDR, there are hardly any differences in the imaginability of related phenomena between West and East Germans. This seems all the more surprising since the differences in classical religious beliefs are, as expected, high. Both paranormal and religious beliefs were considered outdated superstition in terms of the scientific worldview promoted in the GDR and were to be overcome in the course of a secularization systematically promoted by the state. However, the presented findings raise the question of why the secularization program led to clear effects in religious beliefs, although not to paranormal beliefs and ideas.

The secularization promoted by the state in the GDR continues to affect the religiosity of the East German population to this day. Thus, the statistical values related to religious beliefs and church membership have remained virtually unchanged. In West Germany, 11% of the population in 1991 and 18% of the population in 2012 did not belong to any religious community. In East Germany, 65% (1991) and 68% (2012), respectively. East Germans in the GDR were "de-churched" and have not returned to the churches in the reunified Germany.³⁴ Although the West German population is converging with the East German population, it can be expected that the East-West differences in religious affiliation will continue in the coming decades and will converge only slowly, if at all. Thus, the anti-religious or anti-church education of the GDR has been shown to have a lasting effect on religious belief in the East German population.

Interestingly, the findings from 1991, according to which the differences in belief in paranormal phenomena between East and West German populations were relatively small, were also confirmed in later surveys. Thus, for example, a representative survey from 2000 on the imaginability of paranormal

phenomena such as ghostly apparitions, telepathy, divination dreams or even UFO sightings, shows that there were relatively minor differences between the East and West (in contrast to the significant differences about religiosity). For example, in West Germany, 16 percent of the respondents believed that psychokinesis exists; in East Germany, 15 percent. The following table lists the results.³⁵

Belief in paranormal phenomena in West and East German populations (year 2000)		
	West	East
Psychokinesis	16%	15%
UFO	25%	25%
Telepathy	51%	40%
Precognition	57%	47%
Extrasensory perceptions in connection with death and crises	74%	68%

There were also very few differences between East and West Germans in direct paranormal experiences. For example, 76 percent of the West German respondents stated they had had one (or more) paranormal experiences; in the East, the proportion was 73 percent. For individual types of experience, the results were as follows.

Own paranormal experiences in West and East German populations (year 2000)		
	West	East
Déjà vu	52%	46.5%
Meaningful Coincidence	41.6%	35.2%
Prophetic Dream	38.5%	39.2%
Precognition	20.6%	22.2%
Mysterious Appearance	18.4%	15.3%
Haunting/Poltergeist	13.7%	13.9%
UFO	2.9%	3.1%

Overall, the East-West origin had *no significant influence* on the occurrence of exceptional experiences.³⁶ It should be emphasized that a large part of the reported experiences had occurred already in GDR times. This means that even though paranormal phenomena were treated in a highly disrespectful manner in public and scientific discourses in the GDR, this had no noticeable influence on the occurrence of such individual borderline experiences. This also applies to the phenomenon of near-death experiences, i.e. reports of extraordinary states of consciousness from people who found themselves in life-threatening situations. In an all-German population survey in the mid-1990s, just as many East Germans as West Germans stated that they had already had near-death experiences. Again, in the vast majority of cases, the experiences of East Germans had taken place before the reunification of Germany.³⁷

Conclusion: Heterodoxy without infrastructure

Altogether, the example of the paranormal documents a widely successful marginalization of deviant practices and belief systems in the GDR. Institutional and discursive settings contributed to the fact that paranormal forms of knowledge, experience and practice had little social resonance and relevance and became more or less meaningless with time. Of course, this does not mean that the paranormal did not exist at all (anymore) in the GDR. However, it existed only in *individual* belief systems, some singular magical practices, and in a very few paranormal experiences that were incompatible with the dominating definition of reality. This kind of dissent was, in a sense, a heterodoxy without infrastructure. This is referring to the almost total lack of opportunities for the institutionalization, socialization, communication, publication or commercialization of paranormal topics, both within and outside of this heterodox field, thereby leaving it with minimal potential to make a social impact. To borrow a metaphor: In the end, practically no occult plant was able to grow in the considerable shadow of scientism.

The process of cultural repression of the paranormal in the GDR, coupled with structural conditions that ensured that the few existing ways of dealing with relevant topics could leave almost no historical trace, can therefore hardly be reconstructed retrospectively and is in danger of disappearing entirely historically. The methodological consequences of this are sobering: societies with a strict definition of reality are not only able to exclude undesirable bodies of knowledge from their present; they can also make them invisible for the future through processes of systematic marginalization.

Nevertheless: That the marginalization of the paranormal on a collective level does not automatically lead to its total disappearance on an individual level is remarkable and might be read as an indication of the anthropological constant of the paranormal – even in the GDR. Although they were no longer socially relevant, at least some people had such extraordinary experiences. (You do not necessarily have to believe in it, yet you can have such an experience.) Whether and what socially accepted patterns of interpretation society has in place for them is another question.

Also, it is quite possible that, after all, the “level” of heterodoxy was considered too insignificant for a “real threat to socialism”. In other words, the paranormal (particularly during the final phase of the GDR) had very little domestic political relevance and was also uninteresting from an economic perspective (for example, as an exchange value for Western currency). This could also explain why at least something from the paranormal field could survive before the state controlled and sanctioned every activity. The paranormal and its actors definitely did not play a role in the political opposition that finally led to the fall of the SED government. ✖

Andreas Anton and Ina Schmied-Knittel are both PhD in Social Sciences and researchers at the Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Mental Hygiene, Freiburg, Germany

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- 1 The project was funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and conducted at the Freiburg Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Psychohygiene (IGPP) in 2014–2017.
- 2 See Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy. Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2012).
- 3 Hans Bender (1907–1991), parapsychologist and the founder of the Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Psychohygiene (IGPP). See Hans Bender, *Parapsychologie: Ihre Probleme und Ergebnisse* [Parapsychology: Its Problems and Results], (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1976).
- 4 Hans Bender, “Zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Parapsychologie [On the Origins of Parapsychology],” in *Parapsychologie. Entwicklung, Ergebnisse, Probleme*, ed. Hans Bender (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1971), 1.
- 5 For example: Corinna Treitel, *A Science for the Soul. Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Univ. Press, 2004).
- 6 See Annette Hill, *Paranormal Media. Audiences, Spirits and Magic in Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2011).
- 7 Ina Schmied-Knittel and Michael Schetsche, “Psi-Report Deutschland. Eine representative Bevölkerungsumfrage zu außergewöhnlichen Erfahrungen. [Psi Report Germany. A Representative Survey on Extraordinary Experiences],” in *Alltägliche Wunder* [Everyday Miracles], eds. Eberhard Bauer and Michael Schetsche (Würzburg: Ergon, 2003), 13–38.
- 8 Hubert Knoblauch, Ina Schmied, and Bernt Schnettler, “Different Kinds of Near-Death Experiences: A Report on a Survey of Near-Death Experiences in Germany,” *Journal of Near-Death Studies* 20 (2001), 15–29.
- 9 We do not necessarily assume here a kind of social field in Bourdieu’s sense, but an empirically identifiable field with content-related similarities and structural overlaps with the fields of science and religion.
- 10 For example: Federal archives, Stasi Records archive (BStU), Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR (SAPMO), Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History Potsdam, IGPP archive.
- 11 The empirical results of the study were presented in detail in a dissertation: Andreas Anton, *Das Paranormale im Sozialismus. Zum Umgang mit heterodoxen Wissensbeständen, Erfahrungen und Praktiken in der DDR* [The Paranormal in Socialism: About Heterodox Knowledge, Experiences and Praxis in the GDR] (Berlin: Logos, 2018).
- 12 In contrast to spiritism and many esoteric groups, which of course also emphasize “progress” and “science” as points of reference to describe their main features as religions that are suitable for modernity.
- 13 Georg Klaus, Alfred Kosing and Götz Redlow, *Der dialektische Materialismus – die Weltanschauung des Sozialismus* [Dialectical Materialism – Worldview of Socialism] (Berlin: Dietz, 1959).
- 14 Thomas Schmidt-Lux, *Wissenschaft als Religion. Szientismus im ostdeutschen Säkularisierungsprozess* [Science as Religion: Scientism in the East German Secularization Process] (Würzburg: Ergon, 2008), 20.
- 15 Matthäus Klein and Götz Redlow, *Warum eine wissenschaftliche Weltanschauung? ABC des Marxismus-Leninismus* [Why a Scientific Worldview? ABC of Marxism-Leninism] (Berlin: Dietz, 1973), 29.
- 16 Thomas Schmidt-Lux, “Das helle Licht der Wissenschaft. Die Urania, der organisierte Szientismus und die ostdeutsche Säkularisierung“ [The Bright Light of Science. Urania, Organized Scientism and East German Secularization]. *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 34 (2008), 41–72.
- 17 Normally, even in the GDR, an *Abitur* was a prerequisite for university studies. Until the early 1960s, a university entrance qualification could also be obtained at one of the so-called workers’ and farmers’ faculties. These institutions were – as their name suggests – primarily intended for the children of workers and farmers to facilitate their access to higher education.
- 18 “1955. Sitzung des Sekretariats vom 21. Dezember 1954“, SAPMO-BArch, DY11/146.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 “Plan zur Verbesserung der ideologischen Arbeit vom 23. Dezember 1955“, SAPMO-BArch, DY11/150.
- 21 Stefan Wolle, *Die heile Welt der Diktatur. Alltag und Herrschaft in der DDR 1971–1989* [The Ideal World of Dictatorship. Everyday Life and Governance in the GDR] (Berlin: Ch. Links, 1998), 135.
- 22 Helmut Waltz, “PSI in der bürgerlichen Ideologie” [PSI in the Bourgeois Ideology], *Einheit. Zeitschrift für Theorie und Praxis des wissenschaftlichen Sozialismus* 6 (1975), 569.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Günter Kertzsch, “Die Krise und die Verdunklung der Köpfe” [The Crisis and the Occultation of Minds], *Neues Deutschland*, 4 July, 1981, 9.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Baldur Haase, *Die Kartenlegerin von Suhl: “Ich bin bei der Stasi gefangen...”* (1955/56) [The Fortune Teller from Suhl, Thuringia: “I have been caught by the Stasi...” 1955/56] (Erfurt: W. Wellendorf, 1998).
- 28 Ibid, 9.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 See Ina Schmied-Knittel, Andreas Anton, and Michael Schetsche, “Institutionalisierung ausgeschlossen... Zum Umgang mit paranormalen Wissensbeständen, Erfahrungen und Praktiken in der DDR“ [Institutionalization Impossible ... Dealing with Paranormal Knowledge, Experiences and Practices in the GDR],“ in *Occultism in the Shell. Institutionalizations of Parapsychology in the 20th Century in International Comparison*, ed. Anna Lux and Sylvia Paletschek (Oldenburg: De Gruyter, 2016), 225–244.
- 31 Michael Terwey, “Zur aktuellen Situation von Glauben und Kirche im vereinigten Deutschland.” [On the Current Situation of Faith and Church in Unified Germany]. *ZA Information* 30 (1992), 59–79.
- 32 The data in the following tables are taken from Terwey 1992.
- 33 Ibid, 66.
- 34 Datenreport 2016: Ein Sozialbericht für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung. [Data Report 2016. A Social Report for the Federal Republic of Germany. Federal Agency for Civic Education], 379.
- 35 The data in the following tables are taken from Ina Schmied-Knittel and Michael Schetsche, “Psi-Report Deutschland. Eine representative Bevölkerungsumfrage zu außergewöhnlichen Erfahrungen. [Psi Report Germany. A Representative Survey on Extraordinary Experiences],” in *Alltägliche Wunder* [Everyday miracles], ed. Eberhard Bauer and Michael Schetsche (Würzburg: Ergon, 2003), 13–38.
- 36 Ibid, 28.
- 37 Ina Schmied-Knittel, Hubert Knoblauch, and Bernt Schnettler, “Todesnäheerfahrungen in Ost- und Westdeutschland. Eine empirische Untersuchung [Near-Death Experiences in East and West Germany. An Empirical Exploration],” in *Todesnähe. Wissenschaftliche Zugänge zu einem außergewöhnlichen Phänomen* [Near-Death. Scientific Approaches to an Extraordinary Phenomenon], ed. Hubert Knoblauch and Hans-Georg Soeffner (Konstanz: UVK), 217–250.