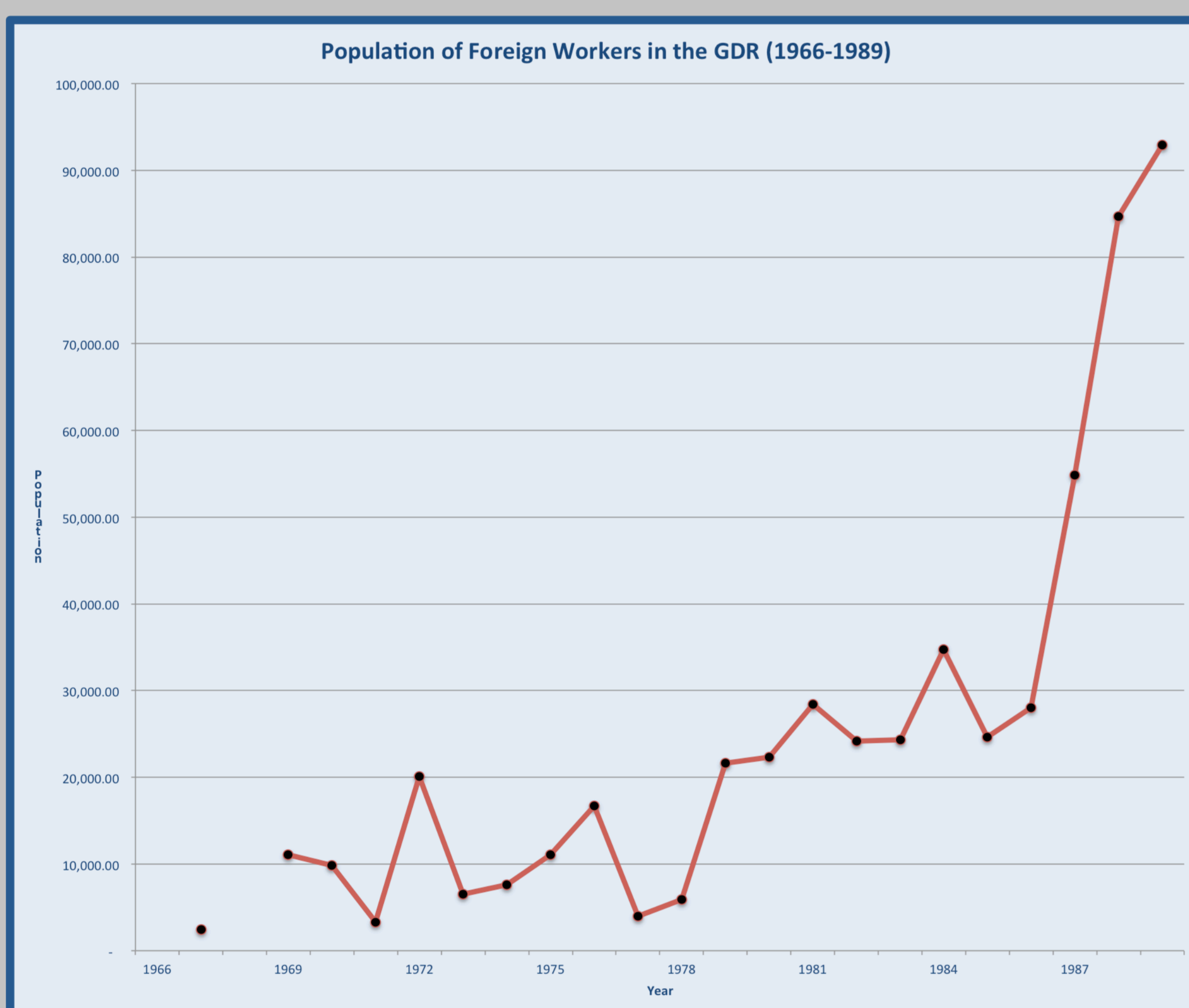


Behind the Berlin Wall: African Workers, Cold Warriors and the State

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Introduction

Although it existed for a mere forty years (1949-1989), the German Democratic Republic (GDR) has been the subject of extensive scholarship. Recently work has revisited the socialist state and its relations with the Third World, as means to reevaluate the Cold War as an international conflict, moving away from the traditional bipolar framework. This project addresses this trend, considering the GDR's initial struggles as a lens through which its *Afrikanpolitik*, and in particular a contract labor program, can be viewed from a different perspective. The research conducted has the potential to challenge orthodox understandings of Cold War era power relations between the global north and south, on a state-state and state-individual basis.



Ulrich, Damian; Henry Tone Mac Con. "Guests of the socialist nation? Foreign students and workers in the GDR, 1949-1990." PhD diss., University College London 2005, 224.

Methodology

The research consisted of the following:

- 1) A broad set of sources were identified and analyzed, which addressed diverse themes, such as the nature of daily life within a socialist state, the origins of GDR's *Afrikanpolitik*, and treatment of foreign workers within the GDR.
- 2) These readings were subsequently summarized and categorized by their respective themes, to permit an integrated analysis and development of a common set of conclusions.



Zahli, Jonathan. "Scarcity and Resentment: Economic Sources of Xenophobia in the GDR, 1975-1989." *Central European History* 40 (2007): 683-720. doi: 10.1017/S0008918907001082, 711.



Conclusion

This research does not overlook the negative impacts of Cold War conflict in the Third World. Rather, it examines an angle of GDR foreign policy and its materialization in the form of foreign labor as a way of challenging common assumptions of Cold War era power dynamics. By deconstructing the motivations and context of GDR's *Afrikanpolitik*, it can no longer be assumed that the state unwaveringly exerted unyielding power over vulnerable states and individuals, but that in some cases African states and individuals were truly able to pursue autonomous action. Furthermore, whereas this project mainly focused upon context, future studies would benefit from focused analysis through case studies and consultation of primary sources. This research has suggested that Cold War era relationships between the Third World and the West were not as clear cut as the dominance of one party over the other, forcing a reevaluating of the conflicts' supposed duality entirely. Further research within this area is essential to deepen these preliminary conclusions and contribute towards a reevaluation of the Cold War, above all in shifting attention off a relentless focus on the Moscow-Washington axis.



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Results

In the decades following the division of postwar Germany, the GDR was faced with three key challenges:

- ◆ achieving international recognition as a sovereign political entity
- ◆ securing regime legitimacy internally and projecting an image of political stability
- ◆ addressing pressing economic issues, most significantly the chronic labor shortage

These three aims were signal characteristics of the GDR's early years and notably shaped the nature of its foreign policy.

The GDR pursued its *Afrikanpolitik* within the context of these difficulties, as relations with countries in the 'Global South' could positively contribute towards their abrogation. After early struggles to receive recognition from African states, largely as a result of obstacles placed by West Germany, the GDR's *Afrikanpolitik* materialized fully in the 1970s when it began to be recognized as a legitimate political entity. This strengthened its political authority and external legitimacy, as the GDR offered key military and economic aid, assuming a role within the eastern bloc as the leading benefactor of formerly colonized nations.

Central to this foreign policy were labor agreements in which young African men and women travelled to the GDR to receive vocational training and subsequently work in East German industry. The importance of such programs to the GDR's *Afrikanpolitik* can be reflected in how the foreign workers were able to shape their lives within the country to support their individual ambitions. As recollected through primary sources from the time, the workers participated in East German society in ways that challenge stereotypical perceptions of both the nature of Cold War era foreign relations and the realities of life within socialist states. The workers exercised their power to make their experiences meaningful through means such as recreation clubs, and maintaining social ties not only with fellow foreigners, but GDR citizens alike. Such actions ascertain that their lives were not consistently under state surveillance and control, but they instead were paradoxically able to maintain distance from state power, even when they challenged it.



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