# Pushing Wine in a “Bierland”: The Case of East Germany

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The Taproom is a monthly series that explores the rich history of all things beer. It is curated by **Pavla Šimková**.

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In some way or another, all modern states establish alcohol policies. One important question in any study of these systems is whether or not the type of drink makes any difference. Most histories on this subject have focused on extreme and well-known examples of state alcohol policy in the recent past, especially the implementation of national prohibition in 1920s America, or the anti-alcoholism battles of the young Soviet Union. There is, however, another uniquely interesting yet little-explored case study of conflict between government control of drinking habits and the weight of cultural and social tradition: the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

Starting in the late 1950s and continuing at least until the change of power between Walter Ulbricht and Erich Honecker in 1971, the leadership in East Germany attempted to produce a top-down shift in the population’s habits of alcohol consumption. One strategy involved encouraging people to forego beer and liquor in favor of wine, an illogical policy with insurmountable challenges stemming from both cultural and material conditions in the GDR. The total failure of this campaign is, therefore, unsurprising. More intriguing, however, is why the East German leadership sought to make this change and why they saw it as beneficial in the first place.

In lieu of any clear statement, I posit that the actions of the GDR’s leadership can be traced back to an unexplained yet clearly expressed view that wine was a more “refined” beverage suited to the socialist goal of democratizing the benefits of “high culture.” For this reason, the regime out-rightly promoted wine over liquor, and more surprisingly over beer, which was cheaper, easier to produce domestically, had a lower

alcohol content, and had the benefit of an already existing infrastructure. The environmental conditions in East Germany also suited beer production perfectly, making the country a veritable *Bierland*.

The GDR's attempt to curb liquor and beer consumption by pushing wine ended in extraordinary failure. Liquor consumption continued to rise steadily until East Germany ranked as the world leader in per capita sales of distilled spirits. GDR citizens also achieved the highest per capita levels of beer consumption in the world by 1989 despite the fact that the state-run breweries earmarked their best beer for export and trade fairs; while internal reports showed more than three-quarters of the domestic supply sometimes failing to meet basic quality standards. Even so, the regime went to great lengths to push this wine-centered drinking culture.

The first signs of a concerted pro-wine effort appear in the late 1950s. The attitudes expressed by the leadership during this period are encapsulated succinctly in the records of a conference held by the State Beverage Office. The office's leading official began a speech in front of an audience of restaurant managers with these words: "Valued conference attendees! Valued comrade minister! I begin my contribution to this discussion with the motto: €˜drink with distinction—turn to wine!'" Conference participants discussed, among other wine-friendly topics, how best to increase production and imports of low-priced wine so that a serving would cost less than a glass of pilsner beer. This gathering represented just one aspect of a much larger inter-ministerial campaign to bring more wine to the people with the specific goal of reducing beer and liquor consumption. Yet the leadership's attitude towards beer and wine not only seemed to lack

any underlying logic but ignored the geographical and geopolitical constraints on East Germany's wine supply. That is not even to mention the persistence of cultural patterns that made popular habits of consumption difficult to change artificially. For many, if not most, GDR citizens, beer represented not just a preferred beverage but also a key element in sociability, hospitality, recreation, and even nutrition.

It is these very issues that the GDR's Institute of Market Research pointed to when trying to explain why East Germans drank so much more beer than wine. The first explanation was simple, price. East Germany had only a few small areas suited to viticulture, which made it more difficult and expensive to produce wine. Wine cost significantly more than beer, and even more unsettling, it cost more than domestically produced *Schnaps*. Moreover, when Germany split after World War Two, the East lost access to the nation's most abundant wine-producing regions clustered in the Upper Rhine region. Thus, most of the GDR's wine had to be imported from Romania and Bulgaria, which often could not produce the required quantities. This drove prices up even further. The second reason essentially boiled down to a form of ecological determinism. In one of its reports the institute stated: "Obviously, historically developed consumer habits play the most important role in present levels of consumption. The German territories, as a result of their climatic conditions, are not suited to the cultivation of sufficient quantities of wine in the same was as, for example, France or Italy. As a result, the triumph (*Siegeszug*) of beer in the territory of today's GDR was particularly favored."

Why, then, attempt this seemingly Sisyphean task? It would appear that the GDR's leaders identified wine as the beverage of "culture" (*Kultur*) —by which they meant "high culture." They did not stand alone in this judgement but it is quite remarkable that in all of the discussion surrounding the government's push for a more wine-friendly society, there appears no explanation of why that would be a positive change. Could it be that this entire program, significant state resources, and a campaign of advertising aimed at shifting the people's patterns of consumption, emerged from an unchallenged assumption that wine was "fancier" than beer or liquor? Certainly, the socialist system predicated itself on a desire to make the "luxuries" of capitalist economies available to everyone, but that does not explain an explicit attempt to artificially stimulate demand for such products.

Or perhaps the impulse to promote wine stemmed from the state's negative perceptions of its two main rivals, beer and distilled spirits. Liquor ranked high on the leadership's list of undesirable consumer goods, alongside tobacco. In the case of spirits,

one could make the argument that wine contained less alcohol and therefore was potentially less harmful. With beer, however, there seems to be no plausible explanation beyond the simplistic notion that wine was a drink of cultured distinction and beer the beverage of the common masses.

What we do know is that despite recognizing the population's attachment to beer, government officials nevertheless went to great lengths to drive a persuasive campaign to stall or reverse the trend toward rising demand for beer. Considering the resources that were available, this was purely wishful thinking. The regime also actively sought to stimulate the average East German's desire for wine, rather than just satisfy existing demand (which certainly did exist). But since substituting wine for beer and/or liquor would not reliably lower alcohol consumption, increase state revenues, or improve the Party's popularity, we are left with few logically compelling explanations for these actions. The top official in East Germany's beverage market claimed that those who drank with "distinction" would "turn to wine," and that idea, alone, may have been the driving force behind this attempt to change "their Germany" into a *Weinland*.