On 20 January 1950 the Central Committee of the SED pledged to build a Sportforum in the city of Leipzig. The Sportforum would consist of a College for Physical Culture, numerous indoor and outdoor athletic facilities, swim and hockey stadiums, and a Zentralstadion (Central Stadium) that would seat 100,000 people, making it the largest stadium in East or West Germany and one of the largest in the world. On 6 April 1950 work began as workers and volunteers cleared war rubble from the fields. Builders used some of the war rubble in the construction of the Zentralstadion, which gave Party leaders a perfect metaphor for building socialism out of the ruins of fascism. Construction workers and volunteers completed the Zentralstadion, the crowning achievement of the Sportforum, in a burst of productivity between March 1955 and August 1956, when local and national SED leaders inaugurated it as the site of East Germany’s Second Gymnastics and Sports Festival.\footnote{Stadtarchiv Leipzig, Stadtverordnetenversammlung und Rat der Stadt Leipzig (hereafter StVuR) (1) 10763, “Denkschrift über die Errichtung des Grossstadions und der Deutschen Hochschule für Körperkultur auf dem Gelände der Frankfurter Wiesen,” Bl. 15–17.}

The most highly celebrated elements of the stadium project were the countless voluntary work actions (freiwillige Arbeitseinsätze) completed by ordinary East German citizens in response to state campaigns to encourage their participation. According to some estimates, citizens completed more than 500,000 voluntary work hours at the Zentralstadion.\footnote{Sportmuseum Leipzig, Turnfest Archiv (hereafter SML-TSF-A), AOrgbDTSF II-1956, 9/1, “Unsere Bildreportage vom Leipziger Stadionbau/Nr. 59: Eine halbe Million Aufbaustunden überschritten,” Vorwärts, 2 July 1956.} Radio reports, posters, newsreels, and newspapers repeatedly praised the efforts of voluntary workers. Neues Deutschland, the national newspaper, issued a progress report complete with pictures for each of the more than sixty weeks of the stadium construction project.\footnote{An almost complete set of the Vorwärts clippings, collected by the organizers of the 1956 Gymnastics and Sports Festival, can be found in SML-TSF-A, AOrgbDTSF II-1956, 9/1.} The SED used the “voluntary work actions” to portray the building of the
Zentralstadion—and by extension the building of socialism in East Germany—as a joint effort of state initiative and grassroots participation. A book celebrating the completion of the stadium proclaimed, “Through these voluntary unpaid contributions, citizens demonstrated how they worked collectively to fulfill the resolutions of the state.”

Such “voluntary unpaid” work had an inherently ambiguous nature. Citizens ostensibly “volunteered,” yet their work was highly structured and often somewhat compulsory. The state took a direct role in organizing and encouraging voluntary work, calculated and documented such work, and celebrated it as a political act. Party leaders saw volunteering for projects such as the Zentralstadion and myriads of other projects outside the world of sports as integral to proper socialist citizenship. Voluntarism was a “social contribution” that all citizens should make, and the state promoted voluntarism not only to save money, but also as an ideological strategy to encourage the participation of citizens in the “building of socialism.”

A study of how voluntarism functioned on a day-to-day basis thus illuminates much about state-society relations and everyday socialist culture in the 1950s. The government expected voluntary work from its citizens, and it learned to appeal to citizens’ individual and communal self-interest, sense of local pride, and respect for historical tradition to encourage their voluntary work. Most citizens understood the benefits that fulfilling the state’s expectations could bring, and they duly performed voluntary work on state-sponsored construction projects. Citizens also learned to track and report construction and maintenance work on their own club facilities as voluntary work actions. Even fifteen years after German reunification, some citizens still used the state’s terminology of voluntarism in oral history interviews.

This chapter argues that most citizens who performed voluntary work on sports facilities did so for individual and community reasons or due to necessity, not out of a desire to contribute to socialism. Furthermore, they often disassociated their work from government encouragement and instead experienced significant local, club, and individual pride in their voluntary accomplishments. Thus, an analysis of state-sponsored voluntary work, like the BAV Sports Medal, reveals the limits of the

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