This chapter explores the public memory of 17 June 1953 as encapsulated in DEFA films, contextualising the discussion in terms of the political impact of the uprising on the DEFA studios. Kurt Maetzig’s officially-sanctioned representation of 1953, 
*Schlösser und Katen*, is contrasted with other films from the era in which overt references to the uprising are conspicuously absent. Yet, as films such as Herwig Kipping’s *Das Land hinter dem Regenbogen* suggest, 1953 exerts its influence on these and later films as a shadow memory that pervaded public consciousness up to and beyond 1989.

As more research is done on the arts in the GDR, a somewhat surprising conclusion must be drawn: namely, that periodisation in this historiography differs radically for different art forms. Histories of the GDR’s intelligentsia have traditionally revolved around the key focal points that impacted on authors and playwrights in the state – the Hungarian uprising of 1956, the Bitterfeld Way, the Prague Spring of 1968, and the extradition of Wolf Biermann in 1976. While these events clearly affected intellectuals and artists across East German society, it is nevertheless curious that other crackdowns are practically invisible in this model. In the Kahlschlag (‘clear cutting’) exercised against the film industry after the Eleventh Plenum in 1965, for example, a dozen films – almost an entire year’s production – were banned post-production at great financial, as well as artistic sacrifice, to be screened only in 1989.\(^1\)

This essay proposes to address one such lacuna by looking at the relationship between East German filmmaking and an event largely ignored in film historical research, namely the popular uprising of 17 June 1953. It begins by looking at how the radical energies and insights expressed in the uprising influenced the organisation of creative work at the East German state film studios, the *Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft*, or DEFA. In an effort to evaluate the influence of these energies and insights on the style and content of films, it then contrasts the one officially-sanctioned filmic representation of the 1953 uprising, Kurt Maetzig’s *Schlösser und Katen* (1957), with other
films made in the mid- to late-1950s. Finally, it looks at references to the 1953 uprising in films made during the brief uncensored florescence of filmmaking that occurred in East Germany in 1989 and 1990, in an effort to assess the broader proposition that these events formed both a haunting memory of a path not taken, and a shadow side of the GDR’s foundation myths.

Post-Cold War access to new archival sources has allowed historians to re-evaluate the events of June 1953. It is now generally agreed that the uprising was not restricted to Berlin, but rather extended across the entire country, with parallel protests arising elsewhere in the Eastern Bloc as well; likewise, what was long characterised as a ‘workers’ rebellion’ in the most narrow sense is now thought to have extended across class lines and included political, as well as economic demands. Nevertheless, for many, der 17. Juni is still imbued with the musty overtones of Cold War refrains. At the time, East German official rhetoric was quickly mobilised to dismiss and exploit the uprising as a Western attempt to destabilise and take over the GDR. Of all taboo topics, 17 June was perhaps the most successfully suppressed. In West Germany the event was just as quickly codified and celebrated as the central symbol of communist repression by the Adenauer administration. Once relations were established between the two Germanies in 1971, however, the memory of the uprising was increasingly ignored in the face of realpolitik.

As historian Charles Maier remarks, ‘1953 came to seem distant and irrelevant. But from the perspective of 1989 […] we can see that it had represented an alternative world’. It is this paper’s contention that this alternative world, this path not taken, became an unacknowledged national repository of repressed memories, hopes and fears. As Maier notes, ‘the East German state was built on the memory of 1953, which set the limits to change as well as revealing the limits of consensus.’ June 1953, in short, became the repressed dark underside, or shadow side of official GDR foundation myths.

17 June 1953 – Day X
The nature of the unrest on 17 June 1953 – in particular, whether it was an Arbeiteraufstand (a workers’ rebellion) or a Volksaufstand (a popular uprising) – has long been a subject of debate. Most familiar are the protests of workers against production quota increases that took place from 15-17 June at the showpiece construction site on