

# Thessaloniki International Fair and the East – West conflict

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**Abstract.** This study aims to highlight the economic and industrial fairs as a medium in the East – West conflict. In addition of the commercial importance of a trade fair, the study will focus on its political significance. Specifically, the article has the goal of judging the cultural – political intentions of the German Democratic Republic towards Greece, but also the German – Germanic system competition in the context of its exhibition diplomacy. Point of reference is the Thessaloniki International Fair. Analyzing this issue, the study will provide information about the ideological – political importance of the East Berlin trade fair policy, specifically as part of a global strategy which had to promote East Germany and its interests in order to achieve a primary goal, that of international recognition.

**Keywords:** Thessaloniki International Fair, East – West conflict, German Democratic Republic, Federal Republic of Germany

## INTRODUCTION

Trade fairs from the first years of their organization were markets with importance beyond their borders. Since the mid-19th century, they have evolved in exhibitions that did not only serve the promotion of any products, from agricultural to industrial, to the market, but also the promotion of political culture and the confrontation of ideological systems.

Thus, during the Cold War the fairs played a double role: on the one hand they served economic interests through the promotion of companies and products and also had a political dimension and contributed to the competition of the two opposite Systems. [1]

The International Fair of Thessaloniki (TIF) was founded in 1925/26 with high expectations. The number of participating States grew by the mid-30's to 18 and continued in the coming years. Among these participations were the great Powers Germany (from 1936), Italy, Soviet Union, Japan. From 1951 – after a ten-year break due to the war and civil war – the TIF reflects the Cold War, in which the leading forces of the USA and USSR (as well as their own Federal Republic of Germany and German Democratic Republic) competed strongly with each other. At this point the specificity of the Eastern market, which was also an advantage, should be emphasized since it had a limited resonance in the West, while in Greece it found fertile ground because Greece also promoted the poor quality products of the East-German market that could not be promoted in the Western market. Under these circumstances the delegation of the GDR was more successful in the TIF than that of the Federal Republic of Germany. [2]

For the GDR, a state without diplomatic recognition (until 1973) by the Western coalition States, participation in international fairs and even with propagandistic success was a kind of alternative diplomacy. [3] In addition, East Berlin concentrated during the Cold War, on "capitalist" (non-communist) states, including Greece – despite their more general rejection. Thus, in the context of this policy and in the case of Greece, this reciprocal trade relationship functioned as a non-ideological lever, which resulted in reciprocal participations in the TIF and the Leipzig Trade Fair respectively. Obviously, and as will be shown in this study, the leadership of the GDR attempted to use these contacts through the TIF in the direction of international recognition. [4]

### **TIF and the policy of the GDR**

It should be emphasized that the Cold War could ultimately be won at the social level and not by military means. Thus, the exploitation of policy, the political presence abroad, the policy of creating image, cultural penetration, public image, representation at foreign policy level and, in quite simple terms, those procedures which promote abroad the ideal image of a state and its political and ideological system, were factors that during the East-West competition were at the heart of the interest. [5]

This concerned both rival German states. Thus, West Germany tried, against the backdrop of the Cold War and the German-Germanic competition, to have a strong presence at PR level regarding exhibitions abroad and especially in the sense of promoting a flawless image of the state abroad. [6]

In regards to the central question of this study, whether factors such as these could contribute to the promotion of the political messages of a state, I will concentrate and present the East German policy towards Greece but also towards the other German state, West Germany, in relation to the International Fair of Thessaloniki.

For East Germany the TIF was one of the largest exhibitions among Western countries and a model of its kind. [7] The reasons imposed on Germans for their participation in TIF were economic-commercial, but above all political. The TIF offered the opportunity to view the East German products in the strategic very important Greek space in the best possible way, as well as the economic and political power of the state with the aim of highlighting it as the 5th industrial Power, with parallel expansion of the customer network. [8] It also gave the opportunity to develop relations with personalities of the country's public life and to exercise propaganda in the most legitimate way. This could awaken the interest of the Greeks and approach the goal of obtaining a stable partner in Greece, who might be interested in developing formal relations. [9]

In addition to the aforementioned, participation in the exhibition could enhance the participation in the Film festival -during the international periods- as both events were held at the same time in the same city and the combination was not only able to launch the promotion of the GDR to new heights [10] but, in fact, overshadow the parallel presence of West Germany. [11] For this reason, GDR tried -successfully according to Greek publications- to organize its own kiosks well and to present its exhibits in the best possible way. [12]

On the other hand, the opportunity was given of taking pictures during the exhibition, an activity that the GDR wished to extend to other areas of the country in order to strengthen bilateral cultural relations. [13] Particularly propagandistic was the use of commercials, which

primary promoted all areas of life in the GDR and also functioned as proof of technological progress. [14] In addition, it was extremely important for the GDR to send representatives of the Association "*Liga für Völkerfreundschaft*". However, the Association was not an official participant and served the purposes of public information at the exhibition. Its pavilion was the core distributor of printed propaganda material for the GDR, such as 'DDR-Revue'. [15] It should be noted that the shipment to Greece of 100 issues of 'DDR-Revue' on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the GDR in 1959 was characterized by the commercial delegation of the GDR as semi-legal propaganda. [16]

Consequently, the participation of the GDR in the TIF was connected with the participation of Greece in the Leipzig Trade Fair -for the first time after the war, in 1956. [17]

Of particular interest are the preparations before the start of the event, which were not limited to the organization of the exhibits, but were, also, of a political nature. The Association "*Gesellschaft für kulturelle Verbindungen mit dem Ausland*" gave instructions for shaping the contacts the delegates ought to make during their visit to Greece, [18] meetings were organized by the East German Chamber of Commerce, which focused on Greek political issues [19] and a person was sent to Greece in order to make the first contacts and organize the overall work. [20] Meanwhile, the team's program, which included contacts with journalists and a major press conference, was defined by the participation of around 40 journalists aiming at the best possible promotion. [21]

However, the activities of the GDR in all sectors were often interrupted by interventions of West Germany. Participation in the TIF was no exception. A perfect example is the press conference regarding participation in the exhibition in 1964. The GDR was scheduled to give the interview at 12:00 and West Germany at 19:00. At the last minute the latter changed the time to 12:00 for the presentation, which led to the journalists being initially shared between both events. [22]

The first participation of the GDR in the TIF dates back to 1954 and continued during the subsequent years as well. Since then there were participations in 1958, 1960, from 1964 to 1966, 1969 and 1970 and during the 80's in 1987 and 1989. [23]

In 1957 the Soviet Union also abstained from the event, although in the previous year it was the focus of the exhibition along with Eastern Germany. [24] In 1959 the abstinence of East Germany was the result of the case of the Greek ship "Martha", [25] while for 1961 and 1962 they were scheduled to participate, but they eventually withdrew their participation. The reasons of abstinence in 1961 are not known, in 1962, however, abstinence was due to reasons of "discrimination" from the Greek side. The management of the exhibition did not accept the analytical name 'Deutsche Demokratische Republik' and its translation in Greek, English and French, but intended to name the mission of the GDR as the 'East German Chamber of Commerce' (in Greek and French), using in German only the abbreviation DDR. The people responsible for the mission considered that this treatment was contrary to their basic principles and suggested that their country abstains from the event. It should be noted here that the hardening of the Greek attitude was the result of West German pressures, which were particularly pronounced during the period in question, due to Greece's connection with the EEC. At that time, the trade delegation undertook the obligation to inform the directors of the Fair, as well as the other socialist countries, which were expected to take part, namely Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria and the Soviet Union. The decision for the abstinence was taken in defiance of the risk of Greek 'retaliation', that is to say, by defying the possibility that Athens would withdraw its participation from the Leipzig Fair for 1963,

which, although expected, was not at all desired by the German side. [26] However nowadays, this decision is not a surprise. Already during the preparation period, since February 1962, the authorities in the GDR analyzed in a particularly extensive report the most important issues concerning the participation in the TIF. Among them was the importance of participation in the commercial, social and political level, the role of the promotion, the companies and the types of products that would be promoted, but particular importance was given to the objectives, one of which was clear and very common. It was necessary to clarify the separation from the other German state. The full name of the state and the use of the flag were extremely important, However, the Greek authorities did not want to allow them as well. [27]

This uncompromising stance of the GDR kept the state away from the event the following year, although the work schedule towards Greece for 1963 included the issue of the TIF, for which, in fact, the mission of a representative was planned, in order to make efforts to reach people of the Greek scientific and cultural life. [28] However, in 1964 and 1965 the GDR successfully participated in the TIF, since, despite the new ban on the use of its flag, adopted a compromising stance. [29] This development was halted by the imposition of the junta in 1967, when the GDR withdrew its participation after the request of the Communist Party of Greece. [30] However, during the dictatorship two more participations were made, while after the diplomatic recognition of 1973, the importance of the fair for the GDR was reduced, since the political reasons, which had imposed it, ceased to exist.

Therefore, the next participation was set for 1987. It is clear, however, that the objectives and the orientation of the GDR had changed radically. Both the participation in 1987 and the following one in 1989 aimed at the development of bilateral trade and economic relations and the achievement of the financial interests of the GDR. [31]

## **Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to highlight the importance of a state's participation in international exhibitions with the aim not only of promoting trade and economic relations but of its respective political and cultural policies. The example used was that of the East German policy towards the Thessaloniki International Fair.

It is clear from what has been analyzed that the Thessaloniki International Fair served as a means for German-Germanic competition, which, at the same time, was a competition between the ideological systems of the East and the West. Through the analysis of the stance of the GDR regarding its participation in the TIF over time the relevant policy of East Germany was outlined and its objectives were identified, while its competition against West Germany became evident.

The confrontation between the two German states, which represent the two opposite ideological systems, is widely known and in recent years many scientific studies have appeared. Of particular importance, however, is the description of the policy of the two German states with regard to the fairs, a policy that enabled them through a kind of disguised propaganda to serve the ideological competition of the systems which they represented. [32]

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