Rezension
A Case Study of Censorship and Programmatic Reception in the GDR

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Unsere nicht öffentlichen Debatten sind vollkommen identisch mit unseren nicht veröffentlichten Debatten.¹

—Joachim Walther

As we approach the tenth anniversary of the unification of Germany, we face a desire to assess and re-assess what we have learned about the totalitarian state that was the German Democratic Republic. We can now view the period from 1949 until 1989 historically in terms of "divided Germany." Certainly, for historians, the topic of the GDR is a closed one—it can be assessed and re-assessed, but ultimately it is a finality. Literary scholars face a somewhat different task. Because the state controlled the production of literature, many questions about its creation, publication and reception remained unanswered. The study of the former East Germany and the question of the place that GDR literature will have in literary history continues. When one ponders what to do with "the GDR," it becomes evident that the final chapter has not yet been written on what place GDR literature will take in "history" or in university curricula.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the unification of Germany, several leading scholarly journals conducted studies about the future of GDR studies within German studies.² The future was apparently very bright, for several years later interest in the former GDR and the challenges that its literature and history present to scholars has not waned.³ In 1993, Marc Silverman argued: "The challenge and the task for those involved in GDR studies is to problematize its culture, history, and politics in order to interrogate the assumptions we brought and continue to bring to our work."⁴ Also in 1993, Thomas Fox suggested ways to deal with the paradigm shifts

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that GDR literature and its scholars were experiencing. In 1997, Brigitte Rossbacher and Lisabeth Hock concluded that "context shapes the meaning of the text." The opening up of archives, the greater availability of texts, as well as the greater willingness of writers to speak about their experiences, provide ordinary writers with access to a wealth of information previously hidden. Hence, Silberman wrote in 1998 of the possibility of "rewriting the literary history of the GDR." This article seeks to contribute to the re-examination of GDR literature by examining the details of literary production in the GDR. The primary focus will be on the ways that censorship and programmed reception influenced the context of literature produced there and thereby informed our understanding of GDR literary history.

1. Introduction

Under the official rubric of Kulturpolitik (cultural policy), the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) in the GDR successfully managed to establish a type of normative aesthetics for literary and artistic production. This type of structure goes beyond censorship, a term that itself was taboo, and becomes a type of systematic control, whereby "restrictive aesthetic codes, communicated normatively through the discourses of 'socialist realism' and official 'cultural policy,' functioned to legislate value and social identity as a total discursive system." In order to exercise control over literary production in the GDR, cultural functionaries established a strict licensing and permissions procedure which all writers had to follow in order to ensure publication of their works. Through this Druckgenehmigungsverfahren, cultural politicians created a system that allowed them to steer the direction that literary production would take and guaranteed that the socialist point of view would be represented. Moreover, these procedures made it possible for the State to coordinate, control, and license all aspects of literary production. The production of literature became part of the planned economy whereby the State was able to guide the thoughts of its readers/citizens. In addition to promoting an incapacitated reading public, guided "public" reviews of texts or programmed reception informed readers on the appropriate interpretation of a given text.

Despite all efforts to control discourse, critical texts repeatedly slipped through cracks in the system and afforded readers a glimpse at some sort of "truth"; this happened according to Patricia Herminghouse because of the "strategic location of writers outside the sphere of mass media, such as television and the press, where content and language were known to be subject to more direct party control." Thus, despite restrictions, the literature produced in the GDR before 1989 did create an arena where critical discourse was possible. Documentary evidence has since revealed that writers who actively engaged in critical discourse often became targets for the

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Stasi. As an extension of the State institutions of power, Stasi surveillance could serve to hinder this critical discourse. Yet Klaus Michael has successfully argued that the clandestine activities of the Stasi also helped to foster this critical discourse. If we examine the intersection of cultural policies and literary production, we can view GDR literature as a system composed of a complex web of interlocking structures. It was precisely the magnitude and complexity of the institutions of power that made the situation of literary production in the GDR unique. Through an analysis of the documentary information that abounds in the Druckgenehmigungsverfahren (authorization to print) and Stasi files, we can investigate simultaneously the hierarchical structure of censoring processes and their interlocking nature. Because of the complexity of the process, I opt to name it Rezension, a term that combines Zensur and Rezension.

This essay will focus on the production history of three texts by the former GDR writer Günter Kunert (*1929), a case study that illustrates the way that official and unofficial censoring procedures influenced the publication of Kunert's texts. Kunert serves as an excellent case study of censoring practices because of his unusual position in GDR literary history. Unlike many of his East German contemporaries, Kunert managed to exert a great deal of control over the direction his literary career would follow. Early on, he established a gainful working relationship with the West German Hanser publishing house. While a majority of the GDR writers turned over the rights to their publications to East German publishing houses as a show of solidarity with the newly developing socialist state, Kunert retained ownership of the rights to his texts. The Aufbau Verlag obtained the rights only to those texts published in the GDR and other East Bloc countries. This business decision prevented the state from interfering with the publication of Kunert's texts in the West. Although such publications were subject officially to scrutiny and the acceptance of royalties from the West violated GDR law, Kunert never paid any fines for his Western publications, was never arrested, and was generally granted permission to travel. Because Kunert received treatment not accorded other GDR writers, his case cannot be considered representative for all literary production in the GDR. I will argue, however, that the information available in Kunert's files does indeed provide us with some insight into the institutions of power that guided the censoring processes in the GDR and in turn influenced GDR literary history.

2. Censorship and Reception in the GDR

Before we turn to an interpretation of the Kunert documents, it is insightful to examine the censorship organs as they existed when Kunert...
was attempting to publish his texts. The hierarchical structure of pervasive control mechanisms extended from the SED Central Committee and the Ministry of Culture to the individual publishing houses. The censoring process itself was programmatic, following a set series of steps. Authors worked in close cooperation with an editor or Lektor from within the publishing house, whose job was to read the submitted manuscript for any problematic representations or taboo topics. The Lektor worked directly with the author in a cooperative effort. In order to receive the Druckgenehmigung, each submitted manuscript underwent a series of reviews or Gutachten. At least one internal and one external reader were asked to offer an opinion on the appropriateness of the text for the public and make a recommendation for publication. The ultimate distribution of the Druckgenehmigung rested with the Hauptverwaltung Verlage und Buchhandel (HV Verlage) under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and therefore tied directly to the ruling party. While the HV Verlage typically acted as the last instance of power, particularly critical texts were sometimes referred to the SED Central Committee for final approval.\(^{19}\) Often, an additional yet separate (albeit often parallel) review took place under the auspices of the Stasi. As politics and cultural policy often clashed, we can speak of a mixture of official and unofficial procedures at work. Indeed, the activities of inoffizielle Mitarbeiter (IM) and cultural functionaries often overlapped: Many IMs held positions as Lektor, Gutachter, or editors within the publishing houses. As Hans Buchheim remarked early on, within totalitarian societies, the secret police infiltrates the “gesamte Gefüge des öffentlichen Lebens.”\(^{19}\)

In the period from 1949 through the 1960s, GDR literary theory took a prescriptive approach, following Georg Lukács’s interest in a direct relationship between GDR literature and the literary heritage (Erbe) passed on from the German classical and realist periods. Once Lukács fell from favor after his participation in the Hungarian uprisings in 1956, however, Walter Ulbricht began to promote the idea of a socialist cultural revolution. The construction of the Berlin Wall (1961) is but one example of Ulbricht’s attempts to isolate the GDR economically, socially, and culturally. In order to achieve these goals for literary production, three separate organizations (Abteilung Literatur und Buchwesen; Vereinigung Volkseigener Betriebe (VVB) Verlage und Druckerei; Verlagskontor) served as watchdogs over the content of literature. The founding of HV Verlage in 1963 superceded the work of these three organizations. In the mid-1960s, the prescriptive approach was abandoned for a more descriptive one that supported the dialogue between reader and writer, viewing literature as a dynamic communicative exchange. Perhaps the publication of Christa Wolf’s Nachdenken über Christa T. (1969) best illustrates the fact that the writers and the state no longer shared the same perception about the role of literature. Moreover, the censoring mechanisms under Ulbricht focused on the writers’ adher—

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herence to socialist realism in an effort to control the publication of critical texts. However, as time went on, writers struggled to break out of the confines of such terminology, experimenting both with language and with form. Thus, concepts such as “socialist realism” and “critical” changed over time, often in response to the kinds of texts that writers were submitting for publication. In addition, while negotiation constantly occurred as the borders of censorship were regularly redefined, many critical authors did suffer at the hands of Ulbricht’s regime.\(^{20}\)

The onset of the Honecker era promised liberalization. In December 1971 Erich Honecker proclaimed: “Wenn man von den festen Positionen des Sozialismus ausgeht, kann es meines Erachtens auf dem Gebiet von Kunst und Literatur keine Tabus geben. Das betrifft sowohl die Fragen der inhaltlichen Gestaltung als auch des Stils.”\(^{21}\) While this statement appeared to relax the restrictions imposed on writers, a new period of ideological crisis for GDR writers occurred. The minor qualification “von den festen Positionen des Sozialismus” was open to interpretation and made it possible for editors, outside readers or even Party members to suppress particular texts.\(^{22}\)

Throughout the 1970s, then, writers’ approach to literature became much more radical as texts struggled to articulate the conflict between authority and society. A decisive break with the previous tendency of literary theory to provide a legitimating function for authority occurred. As theorists moved away from Lukácsian aesthetics and toward the integration of non-Marxist theories, a subsequent review of censorship mechanisms was necessary, particularly once it was ascertained that the old mechanisms for managing conflict were not working. It was at this point that the censorship process also became more fluid.\(^{23}\) Whenever writers submitted texts, a certain amount of negotiation took place as to whether the text would reach an audience. As writers presented increasingly critical manuscripts to the censors, they were “testing the limits” at any specific historical juncture. The ultimate publication of such critical texts thus resulted in a shift in the censor’s evaluation criteria.

The GDR’s decision to expatriate Wolf Biermann in 1976 reinforced the divide between the writers and authority. Once the original twelve signatories decided to submit their letter of protest to the West German media, all semblance of trust between the writers and the State dissolved. Many established writers (including Kunert) opted to leave the GDR; thus, the literary landscape changed drastically. Moreover, a younger generation of writers emerged, characterized best by Uwe Kolbe’s term Hineingehorene, meaning those born into the GDR. This younger generation embraced a variety of literary discourses, challenging the State’s pre-conceived notions of literature. Colin Grant has argued that such diversification of literary forms arose “as diverse articulations of disillusionment with the socialist
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placed on the historical position of literature in society precisely because this view only allowed literature to embrace one function. 24 In turning away from prescriptive aesthetics, Schlenstedt allowed for literature to assume a variety of functions that would change. This, in turn, led to Schlenstedt's argument in 1979 that the social function of literature in the GDR had changed since the 1950s. As new generations of writers entered the literary scene, the communicative intent and function of literature were altered. 25 

The actual practice which publishing houses and the HV Verlage employed stands in sharp contrast to the theoretical application of reception theories. Planning was the essential factor governing the publication of literary texts. 26 Of the 78 publishing houses in the GDR, 75 percent were state controlled or state related. The Aufbau Verlag, which published the majority of Kunert's texts, was under the auspices of the Kultur bund der DDR. It published on average 450 titles per year. 27 Moreover, a central warehouse in Leipzig controlled the distribution of books. In addition, the official reception of a text was often guided. Official criticism in the form of book reviews appeared in party-sponsored organs such as Sinn und Form, Neue deutsche Literatur, Weimarer Beiträge, Sonntag, and Neues Deutschland. The way in which these "official" criticisms were constructed was often an issue that HV Verlage addressed before granting the Druckgenehmigung.

3. Günter Kunert: A Case Study

In order to illustrate these various ways that censorship and programed reception were employed, I have chosen the Druckgenehmigungen for three of Günter Kunert's texts: Ortsangaben (1971); Unterwegs nach Utopia (1980); Die befleckte Empfängnis (1989). These texts represent three different historical periods. Characteristic for the final years of Ulbricht's regime were strong repressive measures against writers. Following the publication of Die Drahtarme (1965) in the West, fellow writers and political functionaries attacked Wolf Biermann at the eleventh plenary session of the SED Central Committee (December). Similarly, in 1969, Christa Wolf and Reiner Kunze were openly criticized at the VI. Schriftstellerkongreß (28-30 May 1969) for their respective publications, Nachdenken über Christa T. and Sensible Wege. Surprisingly, Kunert's Ortsangaben received the authorization to print relatively easily. By the time Kunert submitted the manuscript for Unterwegs nach Utopia, the promised openness had been surpassed by tight controls against writers following the Biermann affair. As one of the twelve original signatories, the Schriftstellerverband sanctioned Kunert. It is no surprise that he had difficulty publishing texts in the GDR. Furthermore, Kunert's continued practice of publishing in the West only contributed to the ill feelings towards him in the GDR. By the late 1980s, Kunert had been gone from the GDR for almost a decade. The GDR
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As his Lektor at Aufbau Verlag, Günter Schubert was able to develop a working relationship with Kunert, and was thus well versed in the themes and motifs of Kunert’s œuvre. Because of his position at the publishing house, Schubert was very concerned that the manuscript receive an authorization to print, for the goal of any publishing house, even in a socialist society, is to publish and sell books. In Schubert’s internal review of the manuscript, there is a more positive tone. In this way, Schubert is able to put a positive spin on some elements that Neubert considered negative:

Das vorliegende Manuskript ist in enger Zusammenarbeit mit dem Autor zusammengestellt und redigiert worden. Dabei konnten einige Mängel beseitigt und die ideologische Substanz verbessert werden.

Das Gutachten Werner Neuberts bewertet diesen Band in wichtigen künstlerischen und politischen Relationen. Seinen kritischen Einwänden, die einzelne Textstellen betreffen, kann jedoch nicht in jedem Fall zugestimmt werden.

Not only does Schubert address Neubert’s critique, but also he points out the extent to which Neubert’s assessment was inappropriate. In any case, this text received the Druckgenehmigung without incident. The documents in this file do not present a complete picture of the processes at work. Additional information available in Kunert’s Stasi files casts a decidedly different light on the way that these power structures operated in the GDR. Through reading his Stasi-files, Kunert learned that Lektioren from Aufbau Verlag had reported on his activities, his plans, his political convictions, and his spouse. Indeed, both Werner Neubert and Günter Schubert were operatives of the Stasi. It is possible that Neubert’s role as outside reader was a calculation on the part of the publisher to have a “safe” evaluator; even if Neubert’s identity as a Stasi IM was not known, he was a major party ideologue in the cultural sphere. The fact that he would suggest publication despite reservations was a plus from the publisher’s point of view. In other words, a careful Lektor using calculations that might not be transparent at first glance often guided the choice of outside evaluator. Thus, the manner in which Neubert ponders Kunert’s appropriateness for the GDR in the aforementioned manuscript review actually grew out of a larger political context.

Unterwegs nach Utopia

Not all of Kunert’s texts had such an easy time going through the authorization process. Indeed, the Druckgenehmigung for Kunert’s poetry

had witnessed the exodus of numerous writers; those who remained had grown increasingly critical of the system (Wolf, Müller, and Braun) and the younger generation had turned towards forms that are more experimental. Moreover, at the X. Schriftstellerkongreß (November 1987) Christoph Hein and Günter de Bruyn openly criticized the existing censorship practices and called for their removal. This made the timing for another GDR publication of Kunert ideal.

Ortsangaben

Documents contained in the permissions’ file for Günter Kunert’s Ortsangaben (1971) illustrate the licensing procedure. The first page of the file indicates the plan year, information about the edition, size of the printing, and format for the proposed manuscript. Aufbau Verlag submitted the manuscript on 8 October 1970, and the authorization to print was granted on 16 October 1970—the review process extended over a period of eight days. Further, a fee of fifty marks was paid to the Gutachter.

A second page notes the paper required for the desired printing. Additional information contained in this file includes a few handwritten notes and copies of the Gutachten. The information in these reviews serves several functions. First and foremost they perform the function of literary review, addressing the aesthetic quality of the texts. Secondly, they have a political function, commenting on the acceptability of the point of view expressed for the socialist reading public. Thirdly, they provide historical background information on the author and his works in general, as well as situate the text under discussion within the context of GDR literature.

Werner Neubert, an influential party ideologue, served as the external reviewer. Ideally, the external reviewer fulfills an objective role; Neubert’s job is to evaluate the manuscript, but he has no personal stake in its publication. The manuscript Ortsangaben contains prose texts that highlight Kunert’s love of travel and the historical significance of various localities. Neubert emphasizes the antifascist and humanist tendencies present in the work, elements that GDR writers were supposed to strive for. Coupled with this praise are Neubert’s reservations about the overly fatalistic tone of the volume: “Bei einer solchen eindeutig humanistisch-antifaschistischen Zielsetzung ist dennoch nicht zu übersehen, daß der Autor wie auch in seiner vorangegangenen neueren Lyrik und Prosa (‘Der ungebete Gast’, ‘Kramen in Fächern’) einen bestimmten kontempativen Fatalismus anhält.”

Here, Neubert places this particular manuscript into the larger context of Kunert’s most recent works. Yet, the critical tone of Neubert’s remarks clearly indicates that there is an element of Kunert’s writing which Neubert opposes. He does concede that the manuscript merits publication:

Die vorliegenden Arbeiten Kunerts sind sprachlich gute Prosa; sie zeugen von scharfem Beobachtungssinn und erfüllen den Anspruch an humanistische
volvement in the publication of Ortsangaben, the Stasi had considerable influence over the publication of Unterwegs nach Utopia. Kunert discovered an internal review of the West German edition of the text that categorized Kunert as an enemy of socialism. This type of defamation could have had disastrous personal effects for Kunert, including the possibility of a prison sentence. Fortunately, Kunert emigrated to the West before any serious repercussions took place. This increased interest by the Stasi is understandable because of the tighter repression following the Biermann affair. Later Kunert addressed these issues openly, publishing in 1993 a rebuttal to the Stasi review of his text.

**Die befreite Empfängnis**

The final document of interest to us is the Druckgenehmigung for Kunert’s poetry volume Die befreite Empfängnis, a collection that the GDR wanted to publish in 1988, long after Kunert had left the GDR. This was perhaps an attempt by cultural policy makers to reclaim Kunert for the GDR. Because ten years had passed since Kunert had submitted something for publication, the internal review by the Lektor Dr. Giesecke reads as a brief literary history. The reviewer makes note of Kunert’s accomplishments, indicating that his texts have appeared in the Federal Republic since 1963. Indeed, while the reviewer notes that Kunert resides in the West, there is a decided emphasis on the value of his texts for GDR literary history: “Kunert’s Name gehört in die DDR-Literatur der 50er, 60er und 70er Jahre wie beispielsweise der von Bobrowski, Arendt oder Maurer. Kunert hat das Spektrum unserer Literatur mitgeprägt und bereichert und darüber hinaus die deutschsprachige Literatur der Gegenwart, zu deren bedeutendsten Vertretern er zu rechnen ist.” This reviewer refers to Kunert’s steadfast adherence to antifascism as the tradition on which a renewed relationship could be based. In recommending publication, the reviewer remarks: “Die Auswahl bietet die besten und interessantesten Gedichte Günter Kunerts seit 1980.”

Silvia and Dieter Schlenstedt, two of the best-known GDR literary scholars and often vocal critics, wrote the external review and immediately addressed the issue of the place of the former GDR author in GDR literary history. While they stressed the need for such authors to continue to have a voice in the GDR, noting that such writers’ messages are still relevant, they conceded that Kunert would probably never return. The review leaves the impression that the Schlenstedts were working very hard to give compelling reasons to publish Kunert in the GDR again, going so far as to explain his reasons for leaving: “Im Fall Kunerts regiert eine Enttäuschung gegenüber früher geglaubten Versprechen und geteilten Hoffnungen...” Throughout their ten-page review of the volume, the Schlenstedts strive to highlight both how and why Kunert’s poems are relevant to the GDR.
An additional page from February 1988 accompanies this file and indicates that at least three more readers evaluated the manuscript and recommended publication. The words "Erteilung der Druckgenehmigung" are circled with a handwritten "Ja" next to them, accompanied by two handwritten notes from Klaus Höpcke. As head of the HV Verlag, Höpcke had the ultimate authority to deny the Druckgenehmigung. His involvement in this case indicates just how important Kurnt was to the GDR. The text was published in 1989, a few short months before the GDR began to dissolve.

4. Conclusion

Reconstructing the historical context of censorship cannot be separated from the question of the status of the textual evidence; that is, the censorship institutions were themselves censored, subject to control and supervision of the State. Indeed, the Gutachten are also highly mediated texts in their own right. They afford us a glimpse at the way the bureaucracies functioned in the GDR. The recently available documentary evidence, such as that discussed here, enriches our understanding of the control mechanisms in the GDR precisely because it permits us to trace the history of a text—in a way, we are privy to the "story behind the story."

These documents thus help us to re-contextualize GDR literary history. In his 1998 analysis, Silberman criticized the tendency toward categorizing literary history into broad periods in the GDR that were predominantly "measured by decades or political hiatuses and changes in regime (e.g., 1945, 1961, 1971), by party congresses and meetings of the Writers' Union, or by generational cohorts of 15 years duration." Within these subdivisions scholars have talked of thaws in the political climate, increased resistance to reform and criticism, the advent of new generations of writers. Silberman suggests that the "task of the literary historian is to analyze how writings and readings managed the tensions they formulated and produced." It is precisely this issue that the documents address, highlighting the tensions that individual texts formulated, which can then be studied against the backdrop of the larger historical context. In his attempt to rewrite GDR literary history, Silberman correctly cautions that we have a newly gained hindsight that alters our relationship to texts. It is my contention that this new insight is also a new insight that helps us to historicize and contextualize GDR literature better. Yet I am by no means advocating the abandonment of aesthetic criteria for the interpretation and evaluation of literature. My purpose is to provide an alternate explanation of the structures that guided literary production so that the unintended reader may have a better understanding of the context from which a given text arose.

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1Joachim Walther, "Gleisbau," Geist und Macht: Writers and the State in the GDR, eds. Axel Goodbody and Dennis Tate (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992) 4.
3The continued existence of GDR Bulletin and German Monitor, as well as the annual New Hampshire Symposium, attest to the continued scholarly interest in the GDR.
15I would like to thank Dorothea Wierling for suggesting this term during a discussion of this topic at the New Hampshire symposium in 1994.
17Other respected authors were not so lucky. Stefan Heym also retained the rights to his Western publications, but he was fined for accepting royalties.
18Erich Loest referred to this highest level of censorship as the "fourth censor" in Der vierte Zensor (Köln: Edition Deutschland Archiv, 1984).
20See for example the documentary evidence about repressions following the 1965 Ple-


22 Joachim Walther has illustrated how the strength and numbers of the Stasi also grew in the period from 1963 to 1976. See Walther, Sicherungsbereich Literatur: Schriftsteller und Staat sicherheit in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (Berlin: Christoph Links, 1996).


24 Colin B. Grant, Literary Communication from Consensus to Rupture: Practice and Theory in Honecker’s GDR (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995) 79.


26 Manfred Naumann, Gesellschaft—Literatur—Lesen. Literaturrezeption in theore

27 Ibid. 36.

28 Ibid. 36.

29 Ibid. 35.

sichtspunkten von gesellschaftlichen Institutionen selektiert, propagiert, bewertet wurden . . .” (Naumann 90-91).

31 Naumann 350.

32 Grant 33-34.

33 Dieter Schlenstedt, “Das Werk als Rezeptionsvorgabe und Probleme seiner Anei
gnung,” in Gesellschaft—Literatur—Lesen 363.


37 Between 1949 and 1990 all of the GDR publishing houses published 215,000 titles, 4 million books, with an average printing of 25,000. For more details see Wolfgang Emmerich, Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR, erweiterte Neuauflage (Leipzig: Gustav Kiepenheuer, 1998) 49.

38 The paper was an expensive commodity in the GDR due to the lack of trees, and its distribution was strictly regulated.


40 IM “Köhler” and IM “Richard” respectively.

41 Name of the citizen has been deleted to protect privacy.