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The Two Souls of East German Socialism

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Throughout the history of the German Democratic Republic, its leaders faced opposition from dissenters who believed that a socialist system needed to have democratic rights. The arguments they made — often at great personal cost — still resonate today.

Rather little is known about intellectual life in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), or East Germany. Popular culture most often associates it with the secret police known as the “Stasi” — as in the award-winning 2006 feature film *The Lives of Others*, which centers on a member of the secret police tasked with keeping tabs on critical intellectuals. Over the course of the film, he undergoes a highly unrealistic transformation and develops sympathies for the objects of his observations, whom he eventually protects from state repression.

In spite of all the justified criticism of the movie’s plot, director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck still managed to accurately illustrate one thing: the existence of two groups who understand themselves to be on the political left, but are nevertheless resolutely opposed to one another.

On one side was the GDR’s state socialist apparatus, willing to enforce its claim to exclusive authority over socialism even by means of repression — until the whole system eventually had little to do with what left-wing intellectuals and artists had imagined socialism to be in the first place. Those intellectuals and artists were, for their part, attempting to outsmart the state, whether in their fight against censorship, or by means of conspiratorial discussions about literature, Western culture, or oppositional left-wing theorists.

These critical thinkers espoused a democratic form of socialism throughout the years of the GDR. Although the variety of socialism against which they argued has been history for more than three decades, there is still much to discover in their intellectual legacy.

The Road Home

Many German communists returned to Germany from exile after the end of the war. Since a capitalist system had been established in the three occupied zones that became West Germany, with many old Nazis restored to high offices and functions, many expatriates were (initially) drawn to the Soviet-occupied zone, where the Socialist Unity Party (SED) proclaimed that all the [antifascist forces](#) would now jointly establish the first socialist state on German soil. The GDR was officially founded in 1949.

The Cold War began shortly after. West and East grew more hostile toward each other. People suspected of collaborating with the other side were targeted. In the 1950s, the West German authorities harassed and detained thousands of communists; sometimes old Nazi judges presided over their trials. In East Germany, the SED directed political agitation against the West, and its officials suspected many citizens of espionage.

Those who attracted particular attention were [exiled communists](#) who had lived in the United States

or Mexico rather than the Soviet Union during Hitler's time. They hadn't faced the danger of being arrested by Stalin's secret police in Moscow's infamous Hotel Lux; instead, they had experienced Western liberties and democracy. Among them were people like [Ernst Bloch](#), Anna Seghers, and [Bertolt Brecht](#).

The omnipotent head of the SED, Walter Ulbricht, cast a baleful eye over such figures. Ulbricht had spent his exile in the very same Hotel Lux, and now sought to apply the political style of the Stalinists in the USSR to his own state. The leadership in Moscow protected Ulbricht, although his leading position was threatened after Stalin's death in 1953.

[On July 17, 1953](#), workers across the GDR took to the streets to protest against the SED's policies. Soviet tanks soon quelled the uprising, while the GDR's intellectuals remained silent. Three years later, those intellectuals in turn revolted, but found themselves abandoned by the East German workers.

Ulbricht Against the Thaw

Opposition to Ulbricht came in particular from intellectuals who had lived in Western exile, but also from those who had spent the Nazi period in Germany as part of the resistance. They demanded greater democracy and the end of repression.

Stalin's successor Nikita Khrushchev had initiated a thaw at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in February 1956, where he delivered a secret speech denouncing Stalin, whose details soon leaked out to the public. Khrushchev did not question the entire system, focusing on the excesses of Stalin's cult of personality, his dogmatism, and — in part — the Great Terror of the 1930s. Nevertheless, in the eastern bloc, Khrushchev's speech appeared to mark the end of an era, and it was greeted with widespread relief.

Intellectuals from Budapest to Warsaw and Berlin hoped that "de-Stalinization" would facilitate a freer exchange of opinions about the goals of communism. Walter Ulbricht did not stand to benefit from such an opening, and he adopted a defensive position. Reputable writers and scientists contributed to the discussion. Internationally renowned thinkers such as Bloch and Brecht demanded more debate about culture — but not the end of the GDR itself, or a nonsocialist system.

In the fall of 1956, uprisings against the governments in [Poland](#) and Hungary broke out. Moscow was now more concerned about the situation in Eastern Europe, and it became vital to avoid political tensions in the GDR. This was fortunate for Ulbricht, who was now firmly back in the saddle and began harshly prosecuting his critics. Along with politicians and functionaries from the secret police, intellectuals also featured on the hit list. While Ulbricht's government did not dare to go after internationally prominent faces, it targeted those in the "second row" to set an example.

The philosopher Wolfgang Harich and his peers had engaged in discussions about how the GDR could become a more livable society (and thus more attractive for Western workers). They wanted to abolish the secret police, end the SED's one-party rule, and establish freedom of speech and freedom of the press. For Ulbricht, this was a step too far.

The choreography of the "Harich Group" show trial, a Stasi fabrication, was so intricate that the detainees found themselves pitted against one another. The trial had the desired effect. Ulbricht had successfully disciplined those who came back from Western exile. They had either subordinated themselves to his agenda, fallen ill or died, or else been demoted to the status of low-level party functionaries and forcibly transferred to the provinces.

State Enemy Number One

Before the construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961, several critical intellectuals emigrated to the West, such as Ernst Bloch or the literary theorist Hans Mayer. After the Wall went up, the system now felt more secure. Most intellectuals still in the GDR welcomed the Wall as a necessary evil, allowing the SED to build socialism without hindrance from the West.

However, controversies about how democratic the GDR's socialism ought to be soon reemerged. The party functionary Robert Havemann, who had previously been loyal to the system, began to express critical views. Havemann was an internationally recognized scientist and professor at Berlin's Humboldt University.

In his lectures in the early 1960s, Havemann demanded greater scientific freedom and an end to political paternalism. The state wanted to enshrine its dogmatic Marxism-Leninism as the foundation of all scientific work, including the natural sciences. Havemann rejected any such move. His lectures grew increasingly popular among those in the know. At one point, crowds of up to one thousand people flocked to the lecture hall — and soon, agents of the Stasi joined them. It wasn't long before his professional career came to an end.

However, Ulbricht had a harder time going after Havemann than after Harich and his comrades a few years earlier. As well as being a scientist of international renown, Havemann had also been active in the anti-fascist resistance. A Nazi court had sentenced him to death for his resistance activities after he was arrested by the Gestapo. It was only through luck and personal connections that he managed to survive until liberation in 1945.

This backstory made it impossible for the SED to prosecute Havemann, as it would have been fatal for the party's public image. Instead, he was forced into isolation. Havemann soon became "state enemy number one." He voiced his opposition to authoritarian "actually existing socialism" in the Western media and called for a democratic form of socialism.

Rebel Music

The singer Wolf Biermann, another socialist dissenter, was a good friend of Havemann's. The East German authorities banned him from performing because he vented his frustration with the GDR's system in his songs. After a performance in West Germany in 1976, Biermann was refused reentry into the GDR.

Figures from the cultural scene in East Germany protested this move and declared their solidarity with Biermann. Many soon left the country for the West, such as the actor Armin Mueller-Stahl, formerly the star of [Das Unsichtbare Visier](#), the GDR's answer to the James Bond movies. (Mueller-Stahl went on to have a successful career in Hollywood, ironically including a role as a Soviet general supervising the occupation of the United States in the miniseries *Amerika*.)

A year after Biermann's expatriation, the sociologist Rudolf Bahro came to the fore with his book [The Alternative in Eastern Europe](#). Fredric Jameson once referred to this work as Bahro's "great East German Utopia." His text described the system of actually existing socialism as an underdeveloped socialism in its larval stage and demanded a cultural revolution.

In place of a "mega-machine," he called for a true socialism based on self-government and shorn of bureaucracy. The East German authorities arrested Bahro and put him on trial; soon after his conviction on charges of treason, he was deported to the West, where he became a leading Green activist.

Policing the Faith

Many other East German left-wingers saw their careers brought to an end because of ideological deviations, including figures like Anton Ackermann, Rudolf Herrnstadt, Paul Merker, Kurt Vieweg, Arne Benary, and Fritz Behrens. The list of ousted critics from within the SED's ranks is long, and the punishments they faced were sometimes more draconian than those directed against anti-communists. Why was this the case?

The original sin, so to speak, was the ban on political factions first adopted by the Bolsheviks in 1921, soon after their victory in the Russian civil war, and never revised. Democracy only existed on paper. The system was known as "democratic centralism." When the center decides something, the subordinates must execute it.

Another reason for the tough stance against left-wing dissidents lay in the origins of the GDR as a product of World War II. The country was in an unfortunate position, crushed between diktats from Moscow and competition with the West German state. Enormous efforts were put into the silencing of heterodox opinions. Teams of Stasi officers kept Robert Havemann under constant surveillance, even though he was already an old man who lived in isolation at his summer house.

Those who dared to deviate from the party line were treated like heretics from the Catholic Church, banned from the SED's organizations and sometimes incarcerated. Since the SED's philosophy of Marxism-Leninism also had a certain quasi-religious aspect, for many of those affected, exclusion from the party amounted to the loss of one life's mission. As a result, the disciplinary mechanism worked.

In the short term, this mechanism allowed for a stabilization of political rule; over the long run, however, it made the system rigid and bureaucratic. It is tragic to consider how many creative ideas the East German state missed out on in this way.

Ecosocialist Visions

Economically, the GDR made major progress in the 1960s with cybernetics, the expansion of the chemical industry, and attempts at a new economic system. Economists who wanted change to go further — such as Fritz Behrens, who envisioned a model similar to [Yugoslav workers' self-management](#) — were quickly rebuked.

After Erich Honecker replaced Walter Ulbricht in 1971, the line changed, with a greater emphasis on consumption and growth, financed by loans from the West. This provoked resistance from ecologically minded Marxists like Bahro, Harich, or Havemann, who anticipated much of today's post-growth discourse in their thinking.

Today, prominent figures like [Naomi Klein](#) or [Andreas Malm](#) rightly note the incompatibility of saving the climate with the capitalist compulsion for growth. But the dissidents of the GDR already knew this in the 1970s. They directed their criticisms not only against the West, but also against the SED's environmentally harmful economic policies.

These dissidents believed that the SED was following a Western growth model whose level the GDR could never attain anyway. They proposed instead building an ecological socialism that would strike a balance between humans and nature. Since the means of production were not in the hands of private individuals, such a society could emerge in the GDR, they believed — but not under capitalism, which was unable to do without growth.

Harich developed the utopia of a global "allocative communism," in which a world state would

precisely determine the needs of each respective population and distribute goods accordingly. In this way, one could avoid overproduction and eliminate the need for advertising. Climate-damaging foodstuffs and private automobiles could be eliminated.

Bahro's idea of ecosocialism, however, sought to emancipate people from the entire model of the contemporary mega-machine. Following a cultural revolution, a community of free people which would have nothing to do with "actually existing socialism" was supposed to develop. Havemann's vision of eco-utopia, in contrast, was primarily based on technology.

Lost Futures

Hardly anybody in East Germany bothered to read these ecological utopias. Most of the GDR's citizens were not interested in reducing their consumption. They marveled at West German TV commercials and the possibilities for consumption and travel available there.

The GDR experienced drastic environmental destruction in the 1980s: air pollution and dying lakes and forests, compounded by the impact of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986. In its aftermath, the East German population increasingly searched for answers to the ecological crisis in politics, but their government offered little more than kind words. They had turned a deaf ear to Bahro, Harich and Havemann, and ignored or hushed up the subject for much too long. Because of this, the newly forming East German opposition was able to claim a monopoly on environmentalism.

Left-wing dissidents within the GDR opposition found themselves in a minority position. Religious forces now amplified demands for peace, environmental protection, and human rights. During the popular uprising of 1989-90, socialist critics initially played a part — for example, at the mass demonstration of [November 4, 1989](#) on Berlin's Alexanderplatz. But most of the population was no longer interested in reforming socialism or in heeding warnings about the negative features of capitalism. The swift annexation of the GDR by West Germany came the following year.

What can today's Left learn from the history of the GDR and "actually existing socialism"? At least now we know what did not work. An authoritarian form of state socialism is not an attractive model for most people. Discussions about the possibility of a democratic socialist GDR revolve around the same questions: would such a system have been possible in East Germany to begin with? Would the population have gone along with it? If not, how could they have been convinced to do so without repression?

We also have to ask if the structure of international politics at the time would even have allowed for such an experiment. Would the capitalist West have immediately attempted to undermine such a state? A sober debate around such questions has only begun to take shape in recent years, carried forward by a new generation. The GDR's socialist opposition may have been unsuccessful, but its experience can still illuminate the struggles of the present.

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