

Leaving Socialism Behind: A Lesson from German History

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The well-known images of East Germans eagerly pouring into West Berlin on the night of November 9, 1989, have become symbols of the beginning of the end of the Cold War and, more specifically, evidence of the failure of Communist rule in the German Democratic Republic (GDR, or East Germany) and its socialist economic system. Yet that historic moment was only the final dramatic high point in the long history of dissatisfaction with living conditions in the eastern territory of Germany, first occupied by the Red Army during the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945 and, four years later, established as the GDR when, in Winston Churchill's words, the Iron Curtain fell across the continent.

Between the formal political division of Germany in 1949 and the final hardening of the border with the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, a constant population flow from east to west took place, a movement away from Soviet-style socialism and toward western capitalism. East Germans stopped voting with their feet only when the construction of the Wall in Berlin made it impossible to leave; outside the capital, prohibitive barriers already had stretched across the whole country. Nonetheless, many continued to try to escape, and hundreds lost their lives, shot by border guards in brave attempts to "flee the republic," as the crime was cynically designated. To state the obvious: there are no similar accounts of throngs of westerners clamoring to enter East Germany. Between 1950 and 1989, the GDR's population decreased from 18.4 million to 16.4 million, while that of West Germany (the Federal Republic of Germany, or FRG) grew from 50 million to 62 million.¹ This tally is an indisputable judgment on the failure of socialism. The GDR system was unable to provide sufficient grounds to convince its population to remain willingly. Only the Wall and the rifles of the border guards prevented East Germans from departing.

Several distinct, if interrelated, factors contributed to the economic limitations



of the GDR. As noted, it emerged from the Soviet Occupation Zone, and the Soviet Union's treatment of its defeated wartime adversary was harsh. Extensive manufacturing capacity was systematically dismantled and moved to the Soviet Union, further undermining an industrial base already reduced through wartime destruction, although this phenomenon declined by the early 1950s. In contrast, West Germany was benefitting from the very different American occupation and the positive effects of the Marshall Plan. While the West German economy profited from access to the world economy, East German trade remained largely constrained to the Soviet bloc. In addition, from 1949 to 1961, the population flight to the west disproportionately involved middle-class and relatively wealthy East Germans, who took with them skill sets and amplifying capital flight. Each of these elements on its own arguably put East German economic performance at a relative disadvantage.

Yet in addition to these distinct factors, the primary difference between East German underperformance and the West German "economic miracle" involved the antithetical organization of the countries' economic systems and the philosophical assumptions underpinning them. Jaap Sleifer writes:

The difference between the two systems may be characterized by the structure of ownership and the degree of centralization in decision-making. West Germany, as a capitalist country, mainly relies on private and individual ownership and control of the business enterprise, whereas in East Germany, as a socialist country, state enterprises were predominant. Regarding the degree of centralization, capitalism provides wide areas of discretion for freedom of individual choice, which leads to decentralization of economic decisions, whereas socialism shows a more centralized approach towards economic decisions.²

The comparative performance of the East and West German economies therefore provides a nearly textbook case of the difference between socialist and capitalist economic paradigms. To be sure, other factors played a role, such as the countries' differing treatments by occupation forces and the ongoing migration from east to west. Yet each of these two potentially mitigating circumstances was also simultaneously symptomatic of the opposed economic systems: the East German economy was disadvantaged precisely because the Soviet Union imposed its model of socialist planning, while the brain drain (and capital drain) to the west was a function of and response to the effects of the socialist model. In contrast to the imposition of the Soviet model—a derivative of the Marxist ideological



legacy—in the GDR, the FRG benefited from the free-market vision of thinkers such as Walter Eucken and Ludwig Erhard, who steered it toward its successful model of a social market economy: i.e., a capitalist economy tempered by a social safety net and restrictions on monopolies.

As a result, the contrast between East and West German economic performance became a set piece in representations of the Cold War. In 1960, Bellikoth Raghunath Shenoy, a prominent classical economist from India, provided a journalistic account of his visit to the city, not yet divided by the wall, which includes these trenchant observations:

The main thoroughfares of West Berlin are nearly jammed with prosperous looking automobile traffic, the German make of cars, big and small, being much in evidence. Buses and trams dominate the thoroughfares in East Berlin; other automobiles, generally old and small cars, are in much smaller numbers than in West Berlin. One notices cars parked in front of workers' quarters in West Berlin. The phenomenon of workers owning cars, which West Berlin shares with the U.S.A. and many parts of Europe, is unknown in East Berlin. In contrast with what one sees in West Berlin, the buildings here are generally grey from neglect, the furnishings lack in brightness and quality, and the roads and pavements are shabby, somewhat as in our [Indian] cities.³

This description pertains to differences in productivity, consumer culture, and standards of living, but Shenoy also proceeds from these economic data points to more subjective and qualitative evaluations of the culture:

Visiting East Berlin gives the impression of visiting a prison camp. The people do not seem to feel free. In striking contrast with the cordiality of West Berliners, they show an unwillingness to talk to strangers, generally taking shelter behind the plea that they do not understand English. At frequent intervals one comes across on the pavements uniformed police and military strutting along. Apart from the white armed traffic police and the police in the routine patrol cars, uniformed men are rarely seen on West Berlin roads.⁴

Evidently more is at stake than contrasting consumer cultures or access to privately owned cars. East Berlin is, in Shenoy's view, symptomatic of a repressive society in which the inhabitants fear authority and shy away from contact with



outsiders lest they draw attention to themselves. Hence his conclusion:

The main explanation lies in the divergent political systems. The people being the same, there is no difference in talent, technological skill and aspirations of the residents of the two parts of the city. In West Berlin efforts are spontaneous and self-directed by free men, under the urge to go ahead. In East Berlin effort is centrally directed by Communist planners. . . . The contrast in prosperity is convincing proof of the superiority of the forces of freedom over centralized planning.⁵

Today it is especially important to remember both objective economic differences between the two Germanies and these subjective experiences: i.e., the dynamic excitement Shenoy felt in the west as opposed to the timidity of the east. Preserving these insights is vital because of current attempts to idealize socialism retrospectively by pointing to allegedly positive aspects of the East German performance. While socialist-era statistics are notoriously unreliable, it is likely that East German standards of living were in fact consistently the highest in the Eastern bloc: i.e., better than in the other satellite states and certainly superior to the Soviet Union. Yet that comparative claim hardly proves the success of GDR socialism, since the difference reflects a historic pattern: Germany long had been wealthier than its eastern neighbors. GDR standards of living also reflected the political pressure on East German leadership to attempt to keep up with the standard of living in the west, of which the East German population was well aware. This constant comparison with the Federal Republic is one unique feature of East German socialism; Poland never had to compete with a West Poland, or Hungary with a West Hungary. Yet artificially propping up the standard of living in East Germany contributed to the indebtedness of the state and its ultimate fragility, and in any case, the GDR's living standards never came close to matching what West Germans grew to expect. The GDR could afford less than the FRG; its per-capita GDP has been measured at only 56 percent of GDP in the west.⁶

Nonetheless, one can hear apologists for the GDR and its socialist system argue that the East German state provided social goods such as extensive childcare, correlating to a relatively higher degree of participation by women in the workforce. In postunification debates, such features are sometimes taken as evidence of the positive accomplishments of the GDR. Yet in fact they represented instances of making a virtue out of necessity: in light of migration to the west and the dwindling population, raising labor force participation through



the inclusion of women became unavoidable.

Such retrospective considerations of the notionally positive accomplishments of the GDR are, however, less a matter of substantive examinations of the socialist system than they are functions of rosy false memories in the context of postunification reality. The past may look attractive to those who do not have to relive it. Yet there is in fact no evidence of any significant interest on the part of former GDR citizens in returning to the socialist regime. Of course, it is true that parts of the so-called Left Party (*die Linke*), an opposition party represented in the Bundestag, maintain some positive evaluation of the socialist past—which explains why that party to date has not been viewed as acceptable for participation in any governing coalition on the national level. A full-fledged endorsement of the socialist past is simply not an appealing political program in contemporary Germany. However, one can observe some dissatisfaction in the former East Germany with the character of the unification process for various reasons, including a perceived condescension on the part of West Germany. East Germans at times experience the western critique of the GDR as offensively triumphalist, and, worse, they believe that the western critique of the socialist system simultaneously belittles their own personal lives within the system. This dynamic can generate defensiveness on an individual level, but it rarely turns into a reactive identification with the former regime.

A further aspect affects the character of memories of the GDR. The abrupt transformation of life contexts through the unification of 1990, the economic disruption as East German enterprises collapsed, and the GDR's sudden integration into a West German and, more broadly, cosmopolitan world has produced the phenomenon of *Ostalgie*, a nostalgia for the east. Sometimes it is expressed merely as a yearning for the (few) consumer products of one's childhood, and sometimes it is a more complex psychological orientation toward a remembered youth in an allegedly simpler past. Such diffuse idealizations of the East German past follow a certain cultural logic, but they fall far short of any systematic program for a return to socialism, and they certainly do not include any positive evaluation of the repressive aspects of the system. Yet for just that reason, the repressive aspects—the role of the Stasi, the secret police, the extensive surveillance network, the lack of a free press—are minimized or absent in the *Ostalgie* discourse, which therefore evades undertaking a critical examination of the repression. The psychological appeal of *Ostalgie*—of succumbing to the glow of a wrongly remembered past—therefore can be instrumentalized by left-of-center politicians to conjure the illusion of a better past in order to advocate for statist policies in the present, such as the current effort to impose an



across-the-board rent freeze in Berlin.

Yet there is more to the German example than the familiar comparison of the FRG and its economic miracle on the one hand with the dismal track record of the GDR and its gray socialism on the other. As Shenoy points out, the alternative economic systems dovetail with political and cultural phenomena. Therefore, the failure of GDR socialism to establish its legitimacy by maintaining the loyalty of its population—who, given the chance, evidently would have largely decamped to the west—was a matter of economics, but not only of economics. At stake is instead a broader infringement on human freedom that made life in the GDR undesirable. This broader perspective on quality of life within the German experience with socialism, which began well before the founding of the GDR, can tell us why socialism is incompatible with liberty and stands in the way of what, in the American tradition, is termed “the pursuit of happiness.” It is not only in terms of material prosperity that socialism fails.

To understand this broader failure of the GDR’s system, it is useful to explore its roots and the incompatibility of socialism and liberty at three pivotal moments in the history of German Communism, which also shed light on the substance of socialism internationally: (1) the origin of Communist doctrine in the 1840s, when Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels jointly authored *The Communist Manifesto*; (2) the revolutionary moment at the end of the First World War, when Kaiser Wilhelm was forced out and a republic was proclaimed in 1918 in Berlin, against the backdrop of the Russian Revolution; and (3) the end of the Second World War, when the GDR was established, as well as the first workers’ uprising against the dictatorship in 1953. When East Germans fled to the west or when they took the first opportunity to visit after the Wall opened, they were not only leaving behind an inefficient economy. They were leaving a dictatorship in order to encounter the opportunities that only a free society can offer. Socialism precludes that freedom.



The Roots of Socialist Repression in *The Communist Manifesto*

Communist politics played out in many countries during the twentieth century, but they have a particular relationship to the intellectual history of Germany, the land where the theory of socialism initially emerged. Its central thinker was Karl Marx, born in western Germany in the city of Trier in 1818. Initially a student of Hegelian philosophy, he began a career as a radical journalist and eventually spent much of his mature life in London, where he wrote *Das Kapital*. As Marx's worldview took shape during the 1830s and 1840s, he worked under the various influences of utopian thinkers in France and political economists in England, where the industrial revolution was in full force, well ahead of a still backward Germany. Marx attempted to amalgamate these diverse sources within the framework of German idealist philosophy. For our purposes, however, what is crucial is that Marx, like others in his generation of young liberals and radicals, found a key historical point of reference in the French Revolution of 1789, which, so it was widely argued, amounted to a bourgeois or middle-class revolution that successfully ended the feudal *ancien régime* but was ultimately insufficient. That first revolution therefore was expected to be followed by a second revolution, one that could surpass bourgeois civil society in order to replace it with an ultimately communist order. This worldview combined a teleological view of history (i.e., the assumption that society was moving toward an inevitable endpoint); an agonistic understanding of society as being always characterized by internal struggles or contradictions; and a deep suspicion of individual liberty, the specifically bourgeois legacy of the French Revolution.

These tenets generated the core Marxist narrative that the development of society must proceed through class struggle and requires the coercive elimination of individualism in the name of the collective good. This repressive outcome formed part of the socialist program from the start and cannot be attributed, as apologists sometimes do, to alleged misunderstandings of some pure core of socialism or to extrinsic factors that are said to have hindered a genuine and correct socialist order. With regard to the GDR, therefore, an evaluation of the dismal character of its social relations should not be explained away as consequences of competition from the west or the character of Soviet exploitation of East German productivity in the context of the Cold War. Such factors did, of course, contribute to the particular character of life in the GDR. Yet it was not these contextual elements that rendered the GDR a dictatorship. Its police-state character was no accident. On the contrary, the dictatorial outcome was integral to the program of socialist economics as it initially germinated in Marx's work, and then through subsequent ideologues, always



involving an explicit mandate to suppress individuality and to restrict liberty.

Marx and Engels, coauthors of *The Communist Manifesto*, are explicit on this point, linking the abolition of private property, the attack on individualism, and the elimination of freedom as parts of a single, unified agenda: “The theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property. . . . And the abolition of this state of things is called by the bourgeois, abolition of individuality and freedom! And rightly so. The abolition of bourgeois individuality, bourgeois independence, and bourgeois freedom is undoubtedly aimed at.”⁷ For Marx, the sort of freedom that developed in the wake of the French Revolution remained fundamentally flawed because it was “bourgeois” in several senses. It was a bourgeois freedom because it involved the rights of isolated individuals, defined by their separation from others rather than through their commonality. Furthermore, the immiserated population outside the middle class, the workers, was seen as having little access to, and frankly little interest in, such freedom; i.e., it was a liberal rather than a democratic good. Finally, bourgeois freedom pertained only to civil and political society, with little or no ramifications on social and economic matters. Marx and Engels relied on a teleological world view, based on Hegelian philosophy, that predicted that the progress of history would inevitably suppress this freedom because of its limitations, and replace it with an emancipated and socialized society: ending bourgeois freedom was the precondition of socialism.

In a separate text from the same period, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx used his characteristically predictive voice to claim that “the working class, in the course of its development, will substitute for the old civil society an association which will exclude classes and their antagonism, and there will be no more political power properly so called, since political power is precisely the official expression of antagonism in civil society.”⁸ For Marx, the heroic role of the working class had little to do with its economic disadvantage, its presumed impoverishment, which might be addressed through a different economic organization; rather, he assigned to it a world-historical mission of redeeming the world through the elimination of the bourgeoisie and all class distinctions. With the disappearance of distinctions, he foresaw the end of civil society, politics, or political power. It was this repressive agenda that was at the heart of the project rather than, for example, an amelioration of poverty.

The passage testifies to the political deficiency of Marx’s theory in general: he made extensive room for philosophical speculation, and, in *Das Kapital*, he postulated laws of economic development, but rarely did he give consideration to



a relatively autonomous political sphere in which citizens, members of a political community, could work through disputes and come to decisions. Such politics are at best, in Marxist terminology, epiphenomenal, merely secondary effects of underlying economic forces. Yet the elimination of politics means the end of distinctive institutions of governance; not, however, in the spirit of an anarchist paradigm—on the contrary, Marx would do polemical battle with anarchist competitors among late-nineteenth-century radicals—but because he foresaw and welcomed coercion and violence as alternatives to the political sphere of bourgeois civil society. Thus, for example, in a commentary on the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, Marx emphatically endorsed the use of force against class enemies:

So long as other classes continue to exist, the capitalist class in particular, the proletariat fights it (for with the coming of the proletariat to power, its enemies will not yet have disappeared, the old organization of society will not yet have disappeared), it must use measures of force, hence governmental measures; if it itself still remains a class and the economic conditions on which the class struggle and the existence of classes have not yet disappeared, they must be forcibly removed or transformed, and the process of their transformation must be forcibly accelerated.⁹

The statement is a chilling anticipation of what would take place in Russia—the extermination of Lenin’s and Stalin’s various class enemies—and similar processes in the GDR, elsewhere in Eastern Europe, and in China today. The brutality with which groups would be “disappeared” demonstrates the centrality of violence to the socialist project. To evaluate the legacy of GDR socialism, one certainly may dwell on its relative inability to generate a successful consumer economy, but there is a much deeper and ominous current of violence that pulses through the socialist legacy. The failure of socialism was not only a matter of too few cars.



Criticism of Bolshevism from the Left: Rosa Luxemburg

A fascinating aspect of the history of labor radicalism is that some of the most trenchant criticism of repressive currents in socialism came from within the movement itself, from self-identified radicals with otherwise impeccably radical credentials. Pointing out the terror inherent in socialism is hardly a monopoly of anti-Communists on the right. Consider now the second moment in the history of German communism: after *The Communist Manifesto*, written on the eve of the Revolution of 1848, which swept across Europe, we turn to early November 1918, the last weeks of the First World War, which came to an end as mutinies spread through the German military, igniting demonstrations and strikes in the cities to protest the continuation of a war effort many recognized as fruitless.

On the morning of November 9, the imminent abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm was announced, and that same afternoon two separate announcements of a parliamentary republic were made: one on a balcony of the Reichstag by the centrist Social Democrat Philipp Scheidemann, and the other, declaring a Soviet Republic, by the leader of the far-left Spartacus Group, Karl Liebknecht, in front of the Royal Palace. These double declarations set the stage for subsequent violent conflict, especially in January, between the new, Social Democratic-led Weimar Republic and the Communists, who developed out of the Spartacus group. Liebknecht founded the Communist Party in December together with the formidable writer and activist Rosa Luxemburg. On January 15, 1919, both Liebknecht and Luxemburg were arrested by rightwing paramilitary forces and murdered. As they were the assassinated founders of the party, their memories came to be honored throughout the history of German Communism, including during the four decades of the GDR. They were revered as symbolic martyrs to the cause.

Given Luxemburg's undisputed commitment to revolutionary radicalism, it is remarkable to read her text *The Russian Revolution*, published posthumously in 1922, a critical judgment by the leading German activist on the Bolshevik Revolution playing out contemporaneously in Russia. We find her expressing a stringent criticism of Bolshevik politics, especially of Lenin's and Trotsky's decisions to suppress democracy and free speech. First, however, she cushions this criticism with remarks that repeatedly emphasize her admiration for the leaders of the Russian revolution, her identification with their cause, and her own full commitment to a "proletarian revolution." Nowhere does she indicate any sympathy for the other political parties in Russia with which the Bolsheviks were competing. Her remarks firmly establish her partisan loyalties, which makes her



subsequent critiques of the Communist leadership all the more stunning.

In fact, her claim to radicalism is amplified by some initial critical points, which position her to the left of even Lenin and Trotsky, more revolutionary than the revolutionary leaders themselves. She argues that their policy of distributing land to the peasants would eventually backfire and have the effect of expanding the principle of private property ownership, therefore increasing the power of antirevolutionary parties. Her programmatic alternative on this point would have involved expropriations of large estates and their transformation into state-owned—i.e., socialist—enterprises. Similarly, she criticizes Lenin for his policy on those nationalities who had been included in the Russian Empire and his willingness to allow for their self-determination and potential departure. Here, too, Luxemburg foresees the potential for a counterrevolutionary consequence. In both cases, however, she stakes out a more radical stance, while criticizing Lenin and Trotsky for making opportunistic choices that may have seemed to serve the short-term purpose of winning political support but undermined long-term goals.

Given her flaunted radicalism, it is all the more surprising that she proceeds to criticize the Russian revolutionaries precisely for their curtailing of democracy and civil rights, including freedom of speech and opinion. In her account, every revolution depends on the expansion of democratic participation, not its limitation. Yet whenever the Bolsheviks saw democratic institutions opposing their program, they were prepared to suppress them. For Luxemburg, this antidemocratic inclination toward repressive strategies was characteristic of the Bolshevik tendencies in the Russian Revolution that she hoped to prevent from gaining a foothold in German Communism. (In fact, by the mid-1920s, most Communist parties around the world had become “bolshevized”; i.e., brought under the influence of Moscow, and they participated in the same kind of internal repressive discipline.) She also regarded this tendency as ultimately inimical to the revolutionary enterprise. In her own words: “It is true that every democratic institution has its limitations and flaws, a feature shared with every human institution. But the solution that Lenin and Trotsky found—the elimination of democracy in general—is worse than the problem it is supposed to fix: it seals off the living source which alone can correct the congenital deficiencies of all institutions: the active, unhampered, and energetic political life of the broadest masses of the people.”¹⁰ Similarly, she accuses the Bolsheviks of “blocking off the source of political experience and development progress by their crushing of public life.”



The passage makes Luxemburg’s approach clear, especially her vitalism, which valorizes popular spontaneity against efforts by any party leadership to impose its will from above. For this reason, during the subsequent decades of Communism, authoritarian orthodox Marxists often denounced popular initiatives “from below” as “Luxemburgist” threats to party rule. Luxemburg’s achievement is to have recognized this inherent hostility toward freedom as constitutive of the Bolshevik position, despite her own de facto radicalism on a range of specific policy points. She articulates this understanding in the passage immediately following the initial citation with a clarion defense of free speech against authoritarian rule: “Freedom only for the supporters of a government, or only for the members of one party—no matter how many that Hoover Institution may be—is not freedom. Freedom is always the freedom of those who think differently. Not because of the fanaticism of ‘justice,’ but because all the instructive, wholesome, and cleansing potential of political freedom depends on this feature, and it will be ineffective if ‘freedom’ becomes a privilege.” Luxemburg’s insistence on the importance of respect for “the freedom of those who think differently”— i.e., for the freedom of the critic of the powers that be, the outsider, the freethinker—became the phrase with which she would be most often associated over the decades. Yet it is precisely her emphatic underscoring of the importance of this freedom against the Bolshevik leadership that indicates she had come to recognize the repression at the heart of the socialist revolution. Her insight into how socialism displays a predisposition toward extirpating freedom goes a long way toward understanding the anxiety and trepidation that Shenoy observed in the streets of East Berlin.

As one follows Luxemburg’s argument, it is impossible to resist the conclusion that her dystopic predictions for the outcome of the bolshevization of the Russian revolution presciently anticipate the dictatorial character of the Sovietstyle socialism that came to prevail in East Germany. She begins with an epistemological rejection of what would become the priority of planning in the GDR: “The implicit precondition of the Lenin-Trotsky theory of dictatorship is that the revolutionary party has a finished recipe in its pocket for the socialist upheaval, and that one only needs to apply the recipe energetically: this is unfortunately, or rather fortunately, not the case.” She explains that the standard socialist presumption of the capacity to plan with accuracy rests on an untenable epistemological dogmatism, the heir to Marx’s non-fallibilistic claim to predictive capacity. Instead of the illusion that theory predicts history, she points to an alternative modality of knowledge, empirical experience and genuine events. “The socialist society can and must only be a historical product, born out its own school of experience. . . . Only experience is capable of corrections



and identifying new paths. Only unconstrained, effervescent life finds its way to thousands of new forms, and improvisations, shedding light on creative power and correcting all mistakes.” For that reason, the importance of evidence based in experience, socialism cannot be simply “decreed by a dozen intellectuals.” A robust democracy is required because it alone allows for the full participation of the population, which could bring with it the full richness of its own historical experience. Dictatorship by definition precludes that participation and therefore suffers from a knowledge deficit that necessarily prohibits the success of planned economies.

While Luxemburg invokes the image of a robust democracy perpetually incorporating new experience, the strength of her account lies in her ominously prescient worry concerning the character of political life that would develop in the Soviet Union and that would then be exported to its Eastern European satellites. The passage is worth citing at length because it anticipates with uncanny accuracy what would play out again and again in the subsequent decades of socialism, especially in Russia but throughout the Communist bloc, including in the GDR:

Without general elections, unlimited freedom of the press and assembly and a free competition of ideas, the life of public institutions withers away into a pseudo-life, in which bureaucracy is the only active element. Gradually public life falls asleep, while a few dozen party leaders, with inexhaustible energy and unlimited idealism, direct and rule, a dozen exceptional heads are truly in charge, and the elite of the working class is convened now and then at meetings, in order to applaud the leaders’ speeches and unanimously approve the resolutions put forward: ultimately rule by a clique, a dictatorship, but instead of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the dictatorship of a handful of politicians, i.e., a dictatorship in the bourgeois sense, like the Jacobin dictatorship. . . . And more: such conditions must end up with a brutalization of public life: assassinations, executions of prisoners, and so forth.



Party Leadership, the Working Class, and the End of East German Socialism

The Communist Manifesto announced the program of ending civil liberties and eliminating enemies by force. Luxemburg watched that process play out in the early years of the Communist revolution in Russia. The consequences in the GDR show how the failings of East German socialism went much deeper than bad economic results. Two pieces of literary and historical evidence testify to the indigenous flaws in the mindset of the East European satellite countries and especially the GDR, where patterns of subordination, obsequiousness, and obedience worked against the disruptive capacities of individuality, creativity, and spontaneity that drive change and growth. Instead the “really existing socialism,” as it was labeled, entailed a systemic bias against the recognition of any signals that might allow for processes of autocorrection. Infallibility and determinism, hallmarks of socialist thought, systematically eliminate opportunities to undertake modifications on the basis of experience.

The first piece of symptomatic evidence is the poem “Song of the Party” (Lied der Partei), which became the anthem of the Socialist Unity Party, the official name of the ruling Communist Party of the GDR. (It was the “unity” party because it emerged from the forced unification of the Social Democrats with the Communists at the outset of the GDR, in a sense resolving the duality of the doubled announcement of a republic in November 1918.) The anthem was written by German-Czech Communist poet Louis Fűrberg. Prior to the Second World War, he was active as a journalist in Prague, fleeing when the Germans invaded. He was eventually apprehended by the Gestapo and tortured. Reportedly thanks to a bribe, he was able to escape through Italy to Palestine and after the war returned to Prague as well as to the GDR. Despite a prolific literary career, he is primarily remembered for this one song, written in 1949, and particularly for its repeated line that conveys the core message “the Party is always right.” The refrain sums up the poem and provides an accurate description of the intellectual expectations of participants in the cultures of Soviet-style socialism:

The Party, the Party, it is always right!
And Comrades, may it stay that way;
For whoever fights for the right
Is always in the right.¹¹

The original version even included some praise for Stalin, which was eliminated after 1961, but the substance of the poem did not change. It conveys an unironic



insistence on absolute obedience to the organization, which in turn is regarded as all-defining for the existence of its members. Even worse, the song propagates a radical consequentialism: if one is fighting for the right, one is necessarily in the right; i.e., the end justifies the means. No room remains for any ethical limitation on the instruments one employs in order to reach a goal. As a document of the psychology and values of GDR socialism, the “Song of the Party” helps considerably in understanding the widespread suppression of individuality: this was, after all, the party anthem, a sort of ethical catechism for party members and society as a whole. The problems with GDR socialism went far beyond the indisputable quantitative failings of the economy; Fűrberg’s ethos, as expressed in the “Song of the Party,” is exactly the opposite of the spontaneity that Luxemburg envisioned, but it gives clear expression to the desiccation of political life that she foresaw as a result of the essence of the Bolshevik program and the socialist enterprise.

In the summer of 1953, four years after Fűrberg wrote the song, the East German Central Committee declared an increase in production quotas in response to worsening economic conditions. The mandate involved an expectation that workers achieve 10 percent greater output for the same wage, while simultaneously facing price hikes for food and various services. Spontaneous protests erupted across the country, reaching a high point on June 17, 1953, with strikes in all major industrial areas. The Soviet occupation forces suppressed the uprising quickly, as protestors were shot and executions followed.

Poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht responded to the suppression of the 1953 uprising with a poem that has been repeatedly cited as an account of the mismatch between statist governance and democratic legitimation. Brecht, who had achieved world fame in the 1920s with his *Threepenny Opera*, had to flee Germany in 1933, after Hitler’s accession to power, eventually traveling through Scandinavia and Russia and then sailing across the Pacific to reach Los Angeles, where he joined the large German exile community. After the war, Brecht returned to settle in East Berlin, one of the celebrated authors of the Communist world. His bitter response to the suppression of the June 17 uprising is recorded in his poem “The Solution” (Die Lösung), in which he describes how head of the Communist writers’ organization handed out flyers criticizing the workers for disappointing the government. He concludes with bitter irony and the laconic suggestion that the government should “dissolve the people and elect another.”¹²

The poem captures what must have appeared to Brecht and many others as the absurdity of the socialist condition in East Germany, with the Communist



government, allegedly the party of the proletariat, using violence against workers. More generally, the poem focuses attention on the distortion of political life inherent in the expectation that the people are obligated to win the confidence of the government, a complete inversion of normal democratic processes. In addition, Brecht's scene-setting reference to the role of "the Secretary of the Writers' Union" conveys both animosity toward the propagandistic instrumentalization of literature in the Communist world and a subtle invocation of the labor issues at stake in the uprising, in which the official unions, normally the vehicle of workers' interests, failed to take action. Yet the overriding point of "The Solution" is the counterintuitive suggestion in the final quatrain, the darkly humorous contradiction of the government electing the people. (Brecht elsewhere builds part of his aesthetics around the notion of the "humor of contradiction.") In the final analysis, the poem corroborates the prediction in Luxemburg's critique of the Bolsheviks: the hollowing-out of democracy and the elimination of rights, consistent with Marx and Engels's animosity to "civil society" and merely bourgeois liberty, produces dictatorship as the defining feature of socialism.

Such was Communist culture in the early years of the GDR. Yet later, just before the end of the socialist regime, matters had begun to change. There is evidence that servility and subordination were giving way to different personality types no longer consistent with authoritarian rule. In a fascinating document from November 21, 1988, less than one year before the opening of the Wall, the director of the Youth Institute, Walter Friedrich, composed an internal memorandum for Egon Krenz, at that point head of the official youth organization, the Freie Deutsche Jugend. (Between October and December 1989—i.e., around the time of the opening of the Wall—Krenz would serve briefly as general secretary of the party.) In the report, Friedrich describes the emergence of a shift in attitudes, especially among the youth of the GDR. He points, for example, to "a shift in people's selfconfidence to a higher level of self-esteem, a stronger sense of self-determination and self-fulfillment."¹³ These greater aspirations for oneself, he goes on to explain, turn into a more critical and less obedient attitude toward social authority:

Sometimes this results in exaggerated antiauthoritarian behavioral patterns. The consequences are as follows: conflict with authority figures of all type (parents, teachers, self-righteous functionaries, and media or media actors who lack credibility and offer slogans rather than realistic information); rejection of the adulation of politicians, artists, athletes (unfortunately also [two-time Olympic gold-medal



winner] Katarina Witt!), and other people; general rejection of all forms of know-it-all behavior and the cult of personality.

The consequences include expectations of greater freedom in personal lives and in relationships, such as “the demand for freedom in choosing a partner, and surely also the phenomenon of cohabitation and the high divorce rates here. The greater demands by women, especially younger ones, for self-determination should also be regarded from this perspective—right up to feminist postulates.” He goes on to report on how changes in personality characteristics were also leading to greater engagement in organizations such as church groups and the environmental movement. Despite these significant shifts, Friedrich complained that the leadership of the country, the political leaders as well as the social scientists, were paying too little attention to these cultural-psychological developments, which were running against the established behavioral patterns for socialist society. A protest potential was growing.

One year later, the East Germans were pushing their way into West Berlin. The end of the socialist regime was approaching rapidly, although it was not immediately apparent to all. Even after the border opened, some continued to harbor illusions that the GDR might remain a separate state. Parts of the East German intelligentsia and cultural elite promoted this idea; after all, they had often benefited from relatively privileged positions in GDR society and continued to identify with aspects of socialist ideology, even if in a spirit of moderate reform. There were also a few voices in West Germany who were against unification, notably the 1999 Nobel Prize winner Günter Grass, author of *The Tin Drum*. For Grass, the division of Germany was punishment for the Holocaust, although none of the occupying powers ever justified the division of the country in those terms. This was solely Grass’s perspective, but his argument implied that it was up to the population of the GDR, not the West Germans, to pay the price for the crimes of the Hitler era. (Later, in 2006, Grass’s own World War II-era participation in the Waffen-SS came to light, a bizarre twist at the end of a long literary career.)

It was, however, in the voices of the demonstrators during the fall of 1989, especially in Leipzig, where a series of “Monday demonstrations” unfolded, and then in Berlin, that an important transition took place. The crowds expressed aspirations to end not only the dictatorship, but also eventually the division of Germany. Prior to the opening of the Wall, in October and early November, the demonstrators regularly chanted, “Wir sind das Volk” (We are the people); i.e., they asserted the democratic claim on popular sovereignty against a regime that



had never achieved legitimacy through a free election. “We are the people” was, in effect, a call for a realization of the democracy that had been consistently denied due to the dictatorial character of GDR socialism, precisely as Luxemburg had predicted would develop out of Lenin’s pattern of suppressing of elections and civil rights: as in Russia, so too in Germany.

That democratic chant was, however, sometimes accompanied by another sentence: “Wir sind ein Volk” (We are one people). There is evidence that this variant was initially intended as an appeal to the police and the military to refrain from using force against the demonstrations. The historical setting is crucial for this understanding of the phrase: in the fall of 1989, the events at Tiananmen Square in Beijing, where the Chinese Communists used the military to attack demonstrators, were barely three months old. The prospect that the GDR leadership might similarly choose to use violence was plausible. It certainly had not shied away from the use of force in 1953; it had used violence against people trying to escape; and it might turn the military against the demonstrators: hence the demonstrators’ slogan.

Yet simultaneously there was a degree of semantic ambiguity in the insistence on “ein Volk,” a shared peoplehood. The terminology could also be taken to convey an assertion of a single German national identity, a protest against the division and therefore against the separate existence of the GDR. There are also reports of demonstrators, as early as October, carrying signs with the words “Deutschland, einig Vaterland” (Germany, unified fatherland), a verse from the original East German national anthem, authored by poet Johannes R. Becher. Becher’s text had been sung regularly until 1973, when the GDR gave up on the political vision of achieving unification with the west, and thereafter the music of the anthem was played and hummed without the lyrics, which had grown politically obsolete. The reappearance of the verse in October 1989 indicated that the prospect of ending the division of the country had begun to circulate. After the opening of the Wall, the call for “one people” spread rapidly, promoted by the Alliance for Germany, the East German partner of the Christian Democratic Union in the west.¹⁴ The end of the GDR and its socialist system was rapidly approaching.

On October 3, 1990, East Germany—or, more precisely, the five *Länder* in the territory of East Germany—joined the Federal Republic, leading to the formation of a single German state and the end of the post-World War II division. Whether this unification was inevitable is now a matter of, at best, academic speculation. The West German constitution, or Basic Law, had always foreseen a unification, although unification had long ceased to be a realistic goal for West German



politicians or public sentiment. On the contrary, during the 1970s and 1980s, a gradual accommodation to the division into two states had developed.

Ultimately, the conditions for unification were arguably driven less by indigenous German developments than by global politics in the final decade of the Cold War, the pressure of the Reagan administration's arms buildup, and the reform initiatives unleashed by Mikhail Gorbachev. Without that larger context, especially Russian agreement, it is difficult to imagine the division of Germany coming to an end. Might the GDR have survived as an independent but postsocialist state? One could point to an inexact analogy, Austria, which, after its annexation into the Third Reich and its postwar four-power occupation, achieved national

independence on conditions of neutrality in 1955. With some imagination, one could dig further into the past to posit an independent GDR as the heir to the long-gone kingdoms of Prussia and Saxony. Yet such musings are just implausible counterhistories. What one can instead say with certainty is that the specifically socialist character of the GDR—its poor economic performance and its constitutively repressive character that precluded political processes of democratic legitimation—made the continuity of an independent state deeply unappealing. In the end, the East Germans chose to abandon socialism in order to pursue greater prosperity and political freedom through integration into the liberal democracy and social market economy of the Federal Republic. There are few regrets.

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Endnotes

¹ Jaap Sleifer, *Planning Ahead and Falling Behind: The East German Economy in Comparison with West Germany, 1936–2002* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2006), 53.

² Sleifer, *Planning Ahead*, 18.



³ B. R. Shenoy, “East and West Berlin: A Study in Free vs. Controlled Economy,” *Indian Libertarian*, August 15, 1960, <http://www.libertarianism.org/publications/essays/east-west-berlin-study-freevs-controlled-economy>.

⁴ Shenoy, “East and West Berlin.”

⁵ Shenoy, “East and West Berlin.”

⁶ Sleifer, *Planning Ahead*, 52.

⁷ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 484–85.

⁸ Marx and Engels, “The Coming Upheaval,” from *The Poverty of Philosophy*, in Tucker, 218–19.

⁹ Marx and Engels, “After the Revolution,” in Tucker, 542–43.

¹⁰ Rosa Luxemburg, *Die Russische Revolution*, in *Politische Schriften*, vol. 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1968), 106–41, http://www.mlwerke.de/lu/lu3_106.htm. Translations of Luxemburg’s writings are the author’s own. Subsequent quotes are from same text.

¹¹ “Lied der Partei (English and German lyrics),” YouTube, April 14, 2018, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZI_xm_PuJzM (author’s translation).

¹² Bertolt Brecht, “The Solution,” 1953, <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-solution>.

¹³ Walter Friedrich, “The Director of the Youth Institute Comments on the Progressive Alienation of the Youth of the GDR,” *German History in Documents and Images*, November 21, 1988, http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1178. Subsequent Friedrich quotes in this essay are drawn from the same source.

¹⁴ Vanessa Fischer, “Wir sind ein Volk: Geschichte eines deutschen Rufes,” *Deutschlandfunk Kultur*, September 29, 2005, http://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/wir-sind-ein-volk.1001.de.html?dram:article_id=155887.

