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EAST GERMANY: "SOLIDARITY WITH RED PRAGUE"

Philipp Gassert and Elisabeth Piller

In the German Democratic Republic, 1968 seemed like a non-event. In his book about 1968 in East Germany, *Der Traum von der Revolte* [The Dream of Rebellion], Stefan Wolle, then an 18-year-old student, remembers the eerie quietness of East Berlin's streets during that summer. As Soviet tanks were rolling into Prague, nothing seemed to be happening in the realm of East German state leader Walter Ulbricht. Yet it was precisely this stark and depressing contrast between the calm surface and inner revulsion that would linger in people's memories for years.

1968 in East Germany does not evoke dramatic images of protesting students, angry crowds, and countercultural discourses about Vietnam or sexual revolution. Still, 1968 was a significant turning point in East Germany's history. While the small-scale protests against the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia never reached the larger public, the Prague crackdown destroyed whatever illusions people still harbored about "real existing" socialism. Furthermore, in 1969 the cautious reform politics of the 1960s effectively came to an end. In retrospect, communism's inability to accommodate dissent became unmistakable in the events of 1968.

The East German 1960s: Reforms and the youth

The East German 1960s were an era of concerted reform efforts: Life was supposed to become more attractive, socialism more efficient. Greater freedom in the work place was meant to spur productivity. These economic reform efforts were flanked by a new approach to youth. More liberal policies were intended to direct the aspirations of young East Germans toward the socialist state.

Beginning in 1963, Western-style music, clothes, and leisure activities became more acceptable. In 1964, a three-day festival in East Berlin attracted 560,000 young East Germans and 25,000 West German visitors. The West German weekly *Der Spiegel* described the event's atmosphere as one of "sun, sex, and socialism." In early 1965, the East German label "Amiga" published a Beatles record. Under the slogan "real love belongs to the youth" [*Echte Liebe gehört zur Jugend*], sexual norms were liberalized.

These new freedoms raised hopes for a more democratic future. Yet, the ruling Socialist Unity Party soon became nervous about the more independent styles. At the Eleventh Party Congress in 1965, writers and intellectuals were accused of corrupting the youth. Books, records, bands, and films were banned. The party unleashed a campaign against Westernization. As the East German writer Brigitte Reimann remembers, “There were demonstrations; the police used water cannon, arrested people; there were prison and work camps. The laughter in us disappeared.”

1968: “Russians out of the ČSSR”

This aborted liberalization prepared the ground for the East German 1968. Events in Prague extended their influence into the GDR. Czech writer Ludvik Vaculik’s manifesto “2000 Words,” which famously advocated stepping up reform efforts in the ČSSR, sparked discussions about the democratic socialism in the GDR. Dissidents like Robert Havemann seemed to give credibility to the SED’s worst fears when he stated: “Socialism is Democracy—the great word has to

be realized. This is, given the exciting development in the ČSSR, our ardent hope.” Graffiti that read “Russians out,” “Hands off,” and “Solidarity with Red Prague” appeared on the walls. A whiff of Central European independence vis-à-vis the Soviet occupier was in the air.

Opposition to the suppression of the



East German demonstrators express their solidarity with the Prague Spring on May Day 1968 in East Berlin.

Prague Spring came from all strata of East German society. It was the protests of the children of high functionaries that received most of the attention. Yet the backbone of the rebellion consisted of young workers, who made up more than 70 percent of those persecuted after the crackdown. Often, they had refused to sign official declaratory acts [*Willenserklärungen*] designed to force them to state their agreement with the invasion of Czechoslovakia.

The impact of 1968: Silence and the end of reform

Even though the GDR seemed to be on the way to its own short spring, dissent never got beyond the safeguards that the East German security services had put in place. Different from its response in 1989, the regime in 1968 was willing to suppress dissent before it gained momentum. Suspicious persons were jailed, and the security apparatus was further expanded. Young protesters were barred from universities. The protesters also lacked effective lines of communication. With no space for dissent, East German youth lacked public access and the media, which could have given resonance to their demands.

While the East German security apparatus succeeded in quelling dissent, disenchantment with socialism grew to an all-time high. The ambitious reform projects of the 1960s were aborted. Erich Honecker soon replaced Walter Ulbricht as head of state and party chief. Honecker's long reign became one of continuous economic decline. For many East Germans, the gulf between the country's ideological claims and the lived reality had become painfully clear. East Germany's participation in the Prague crackdown was thus tantamount to a declaration of bankruptcy. As the East German historian Hartmut Zwahr put it, in 1968, the dream of a socialist society "shattered in the heads of the people."

The legacy of 1968, therefore, was one of heightened repression and a growing petrification in the East German system. While it did not directly lead to the events that ended socialism in 1989, it became a catalyst for growing disenchantment. In addition, it forced the East German regime to give up any hopes of reform from within. The frustrations of 1968 lay dormant for 20 years. They finally found an outlet in 1989, when East Germans would take to the streets once again. And this time, their revolution would succeed.

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