

Editors' Note: Peter Rossman, a free lance journalist, is former editor and publisher of *Across Frontiers*. He is currently working with the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly in Prague. He delivered this lecture at the symposium "Gegenwartsbewältigung/Coming to Terms with the Present," at the University of Michigan, 25-27 October 1990. It is printed here with permission.

## Zum Intellektuellenstreit: Contribution To The Symposium "Gegenwartsbewältigung."

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Despite the title of my paper, my interest here is less in the *Intellektuellenstreit* currently swirling around Christa Wolf and company than in examining aspects of the controversy for the light it sheds on the current state of GDR studies in the United States. I will keep my remarks brief, especially as we are privileged to have with us several activists from the democratic movement in the GDR, a movement whose voice has rarely, if ever, been heeded by academic specialists in the field.

I would like to begin by noting the fundamental ambiguity contained in the label *Intellektuellen*. In confronting the dramatic recent history of the GDR, we are really dealing with two distinct groups of intellectuals. There is, first, the small group of more-or-less "official" cultural figures, including Ms. Wolf, who addressed the monster rally on the Alexanderplatz on 4 November, authored the ill-fated appeal *Für Unser Land*, and who now find themselves the objects of vicious and often self-serving attacks from a West German press which was never particularly noted for its enthusiastic defense of the democratic movement in the GDR.

It is a relatively simple matter to uncover the apologetic and exculpatory content of *Was Bleibt*. Rather than take another cheap shot, I would merely like to suggest that the vehemence and the persistence of the attacks on Christa Wolf--whose views have remained essentially unchanged over the decades in which the same critics elevated her to the status of a cultural icon--indicate a pronounced recrudescence of the well-known German tendency towards *Vergangenheitsverdrängung*, ironically carried out now in the name of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. As the attacks have escalated, so too have demands for the transfer of the *Stasi* files to the safety of the Bundesarchiv in Coblenz. In the former GDR, the myth of the "große friedliche Revolution" has been promulgated most ostentatiously by those who played no role at all last fall or were clearly hostile to the emerging mass movement. Clearly, the task of any genuine *Aufarbeitung* of the recent past cannot be entrusted either to the editorial pages of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* or to those like Pfarrer Ebeling of the DSU, whose strident cries of "Nie wieder Sozialismus!" seem designed to obliterate the memory of the closed doors of his Thomaskirche last October.

A final word on the *Intellektuellenstreit*. Writing in the East Berlin *Wochenpost* last fall, Christa Wolf conveyed her shock and dismay at the inability of a Mecklenburg audience attending one of her readings to freely speak their minds. "Das haben wir nicht gelernt," explained one young woman, which the author attributed to the general failure of the East German school system: "...[daß] unsere Kinder in der Schule zur Unwahrhaftigkeit erzogen und in ihrem Charakter geschädigt werden, daß sie gegängelt, entmündigt und entmutigt werden mit wort- und bildreicher Schaumschlägerei, in der Schein-Probleme serviert und im Handumdrehen gelöst wurden."<sup>1</sup>

All of this is of course true enough, but the article is completely and characteristically lacking in any attempt at self-reflection on the complicitous role of the GDR's "official" intellectuals in legitimating and perpetuating this destructive system. But this particular group of writers cannot evade their responsibility as easily as, for example, Heiner Müller, who recently disposed of forty years of GDR history by telling a *Spiegel* interviewer "Es ist nicht mein Volk." Can those who, like Christa Wolf, publicly greeted the constitution of 1968 as a sign of the "elimination of the exploitation of man by man," were silent on the invasion of Czechoslovakia, and acquiesced in the official extirpation of every sign of autonomous intellectual expression in the GDR really be surprised at the difficulty with which the populace began to find its own voice last year? The "official" intellectuals, I think, enjoyed a brief moment of glory on 4 November precisely because East German society was for the most part unequipped to articulate its own demands. Those speakers on the Alexanderplatz podium stepped into a vacuum which was in no small measure their own creation, and no one should be surprised that the subsequent course of events completely passed them by.

This should by no means be taken as a blanket condemnation of the GDR intelligentsia as a whole, for the picture is in fact more nuanced. There were, of course, intellectuals who refrained from public identification with the regime and who managed, at the cost of professional marginalization and personal sacrifice, to work in a spirit of committed independence. These were, however, the exception. Rarer still were people like the late Robert Havemann, who had the courage to say "Ja, ich hatte Unrecht. Ich war ein Stalinist," and still remained true to their socialist convictions.

Perhaps the most damaging of all the accusations one can bring against the GDR intelligentsia and their Western fellow travellers is their willing promulgation of the notion that the GDR represented ("in spite of everything") the better of the two German states--as if this were the only choice. It was precisely this cynical acceptance of Stalinist political logic and the cold war division of the European continent which ultimately contributed more to the political demoralization of the population (and this spring's electoral fiasco) than the alleged consumer blandishments of the West and the lure of the D-Mark. The catastrophic after-effects of this abrogation of the responsibility to formulate *independent* moral and political alternatives to the status quo will weigh on German (and European) politics for many decades to come.

There exists, however, another group of intellectuals with quite a different history, a history which is all but unknown to GDR specialists in America whose professional lives have revolved around the old official cultural axis. I refer here to the group of intellectuals who, despite their cultural and professional marginalization, chose to remain in the GDR and work for change. A partial catalog of these "lumpenintellectuals" would include those who formed the backbone of the rebellious youth and cultural clubs of the 1960's, whose guerilla warfare with the authorities managed to keep a tiny spark of spiritual independence alive in the years after the construction of the Wall, those who organized the first independent disarmament, environmental, and human rights initiatives in the 1980's,<sup>2</sup> and those activists whose organization of the first "citizens' movements" like *Neues Forum* and *Demokratie Jetzt* marked the breakthrough into open democratic politics in the GDR.

These new political actors have also been derided as intellectuals suffering from the same maladies which have traditionally plagued the German intelligentsia: dogmatism, elitism, a tendency to engage in self-indulgent political reverie, and a reluctance to descend from the heights of theory and engage in the dirty world of real politics. Many of these criticisms are valid, and elsewhere

I have been highly critical of the performance of the GDR's fledgling democratic movements.<sup>3</sup> The point, however, is that to conflate, say, intellectual figures from *Bündnis 90* with leading members of the Writers' Union by bracketing them all as *the intellectuals* is to commit a serious error. This is not a backhanded relapse into the old division between "good" and "bad" Germans which was promoted here after the Second World War (and acquired something of a life of its own in the sub-genre of GDR studies), but a plea for methodological clarity, for a more nuanced understanding of historically and sociologically distinct groups of subjects.

If we then ask, for example, who these new political actors were, we are thrown back to the ostensible topic of my talk, i.e. the state of GDR studies. For East Germany, despite its indisputable achievements in a variety of fields, was a society almost entirely lacking in social and historical self-knowledge. How could it have been otherwise in a society where academic research was strait-jacketed within the narrow confines of a rigid, all-embracing party line, a country in which even census statistics were kept under lock and key, and in which independent research ran up against laws prohibiting the keeping of "private archives?" How well could one hope to understand a country whose ruling party, operating under the slogan "Everything for the good of the people!," refused to release such essential sociological data as the suicide rate?

Foreign specialists naturally labored under even greater handicaps, and I do not want to suggest that the dismal state of our knowledge concerning the GDR stems from the deficiencies of Western scholarship. Yet all too often, GDR specialists chose to overlook the grim reality of everyday life in the GDR, the omnipresent security apparatus, and even the existence of the Wall. Literary works were detached from their social and political context, elevated into so many "texts" and "discourses" independent of the life around them. It was considered bad form to point out the contradictions of writers with passports exhorting people to stay at home and help in the construction of "socialism," or to mention the hypocrisy of intellectuals silent on domestic militarism playing host to delegations from the World Peace Congress. Yet the reality was there for all who wished to see. Christa Wolf had many years to check out the state of East German education for herself, yet evidently chose not to. How many Western enthusiasts of GDR child care ever bothered to spend time in an East German day-care center? How many proponents of the so-called *soziale Errungenschaften* ever visited, say, a textile factory in Zwickau (an eminently feasible undertaking) to investigate working-class life for themselves? GDR studies became in effect a kind of *Mitläufersfabrik*, and many specialists were as surprised as the experts in the Normannenstraße when the whole edifice came tumbling down.

I definitely cannot agree with Stephan Heym, who on election night this March declared that nothing would now remain of the GDR but a "footnote" in history. The entire history of the GDR stands as eloquent testimony to the ability of a cynical regime and its intellectual fellow travellers to demoralize thoroughly an educated population, eradicate the best traditions of the labor movement, and paralyze democratic initiative. And there is one "achievement" of the GDR which is definitely worthy of preservation: the inspiring example of a massive, sustained, non-violent revolt for democratic change. Owing to the peculiarities of German history, this movement culminated in the overwhelming demand for the wholesale destruction of the "other Germany," but its memory deserves to be preserved. And I think that serious research into the history of these events and their background will provide more insight into the contours of East German history than all the critical commentaries on the writings of Christa Wolf have

so far contributed.

For the very first time, I would argue paradoxically, there is now an unparalleled opportunity for GDR scholars really to get down to work. Now that the archives may be opened, historians, sociologists, and literary critics have their work cut out for them--provided the historical record can be saved from the rapacious grasp of cynical politicians, and the sad legacy of academic apologetics can be worked through and transcended in the spirit of genuine understanding.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Reprinted in the West German *Tageszeitung*, 31 Oct. 1989.

<sup>2</sup>and were treated to the grotesque spectacle of Christa Wolf playing guru to a Western peace movement which was by and large afraid to meet with them, let alone defend them from the depredations of the security forces.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. for example my essay on "The East German Left" in *The Nation*, 7 May 1990.

## Rewriting GDR History: The Christa Wolf Controversy

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The recent events in Eastern Europe that have fundamentally transformed the political, economic, and social topography of the world occurred so unexpectedly and with such rapidity that they precluded a meaningful, differentiated analysis of these events as they were taking place, even--indeed, arguably especially--by those directly involved. By withholding Soviet military support from East-bloc regimes, Mikhail Gorbachev helped ensure that 1989 did not enter the annals of history, along with 1953, 1956, and 1968, as a year of bloody suppression of populist insurgency in East European communist countries. Lack of Soviet intervention, coupled with widespread internal weaknesses in individual states, contributed immeasurably to the success of the "revolutions" in Eastern Europe. Catapulted on by unprecedented successes, the players became increasingly emboldened, making up the scripts as they went along. The scenarios were so thoroughly improvised that the "happy" endings doubtless came as a surprise to many, if not most, of the participants.

The situation was, and remains, as complex for Western observers, especially for those sympathetic to socialism, for whom the collapse of East-bloc communism brought with it revelations about the pervasiveness of corruption, oppression, and other political abuses. These revelations have forced many of us to reassess our attitudes both toward individual East-bloc countries and toward socialism<sup>1</sup> per se. It has become painfully obvious that we were badly misinformed about many aspects of life in the East, and that we need to fundamentally reexamine conventional wisdom about everything pertaining to this part of the world.

In considering the German case, it is clear that the German Democratic Republic (GDR) collapsed like a house of cards and that its collapse was inextricably connected to Soviet *perestroika* and to the increasing economic inviability of East European communism in general--factors all too often overlooked or minimized in euphoric accounts of Germany's "bloodless revolution." I take issue with the use of this term to describe those events in East Germany in late 1989 that led to the collapse of the Honecker regime, the fall of the Wall, and the (re)unification of