

Appeal to Preserve Legal First-Trimester Abortions in Unified Germany (1990)

Abstract

Author Monika Maron left the GDR in 1988 and resettled in the Federal Republic. Many of her writings reveal her ongoing engagement with her homeland. This essay is an urgent appeal to preserve one of the few GDR achievements she deems worth keeping – women’s right to legal first-trimester abortions.

Source

Final Charge on Women

The question of German unification has been answered. The question of the currency will ultimately be answered to the satisfaction of most of those affected, because no one will tolerate even more East German siblings in their own West German house, and because one can always count on the business world’s desire for expansion.

Even the GDR’s accession to the Federal Republic under Article 23 has virtually evolved into a political fact. And here, before Paragraph 218 again rules over the unified German women, I would like to scream loudly for help.

When asked what in the GDR is worth keeping, all I can think of – aside from the green arrow allowing right turns on red – is the abortion law. I can’t get my mind around the notion that it could be taken from women as arbitrarily as it was given to them.

First-trimester abortions have been legal in the GDR since 1972. Pregnancies are terminated at no cost. For this surprising change in their lives, women in the GDR owe thanks not to the old men who ruled over them but rather to the loud and courageous West German women who took to the streets at the time to oppose government control of their bodies. Their protest sparked memories in the minds of the former proletarians who had fought against Paragraph 218 in the Weimar Republic, and it led them to revive the hybrid slogan of the Ulbricht era: “overtaking without catching up.”^[1] And this one time they even managed to do it. Since then, an unconditionally free and liberal law has decorated the otherwise dismal legal code of the GDR like a beautiful but alien foreign object.

I was thirty years old when women in the GDR were given this law. It came into being just as undemocratically as all the other laws. But a long forgotten resistance rumbled in the consciences of some Christian members of the People’s Parliament [*Volkskammer*], and this led to an incredible, outrageous fourteen nays, which the CDU, even in the 1990 election campaign [eighteen years later], still praised as the sole glorious leaf in an otherwise defoliated wreath.

My understanding of democracy was definitely fractured at the time, since I can remember rejoicing over the hopelessness with which the physicians and ministers fought against the new law.

Today I think differently about it.

In a future Germany, we need a law on unwanted pregnancies that is as democratic in spirit as the course of justice that leads to it. In this sense, the law in the Federal Republic has just as little democratic legitimacy as the one in the GDR.

Of the 519 members of the Bundestag, 83 are women. Of the sixteen constitutional judges, two are women, one for each Senate. The average age of female members of the Bundestag is roughly fifty; sixteen of them are under forty.

[...]

The abortion law of the GDR will be debated in the coming weeks. Women in the GDR will either lose the most important right they have to lose, or the discussion of Paragraph 218 will become the first opportunity to correct West German legislation in the course of the unification process and West German women will also finally receive the right that they helped East German women secure eighteen years ago.

[...]

NOTES

[1] On the policy of “overtaking without catching up,” see also vol. 9, ch. 9, doc. 5 – eds.

Source: Monika Maron, “Letzter Zugriff auf die Frau,” in Monika Maron, *Nach Maßgabe meiner Befreiungskraft: Artikel und Essays*. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1993, pp. 91–93.

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