A Liberal Western Journalist Praises the Progress of the GDR (1986)

Abstract

As a strong supporter of East-West détente, the liberal journalist Theo Sommer presents a rather positive picture of East Germany's progress—one that emphasizes advances in material consumption and reinforces the SED dictatorship's image of stability.

Source

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Twenty-two years ago, three journalists from *Die Zeit* detected some initial signs of change: small indications of an incipient prosperity; attempts at a new economic policy that would end Stalin's managed economy and would instead use the individual's own interest in improving his standard of living as a spur to progress; a strategic loosening of restrictions in the fields of art and literature; the gradual development of a separate GDR state consciousness. First signs—but the prevailing impression still remained: little is changing here. Stagnation, timidity, dull gray prevailed.

GDR, 1986: the country is worlds away from that point. Movement instead of stagnation prevails, timidity has given way to a self-confident equanimity, everywhere gray is yielding to more cheerful colors, the depressing gloom has evaporated. No more evidence of party functionaries shying away from contact with the West. No more aggressiveness in discussions, not even in the midst of controversy. No blatant agitation. Like Ernst Timm, the district secretary of the Rostock SED, many people have said, "Back then, yes, we agitated you [West Germans]. Time has moved on; much has become more real. It is easier to talk when each one knows the other's point of view without giving up his own."

There are still placards, banners, and propaganda banners, especially after the Eleventh Party Congress of the SED, but they are far fewer in number. Some are formulated in a way that flouts the rules of bourgeois grammar at the very least ("Firmly on the Course of the Main Duty"). For others, the logic doesn't seem quite right. "A World without Atomic Weapons until the End of the Century" begs the question of whether the plan is actually to replenish all the nuclear weapons arsenals afterwards. Yet we really need not take these slogans too seriously. Citizens of the GDR let them roll off their backs, just as the average West German does with television ads. And in official party circles, the "bannerism" of the overzealous tends to be laughed off condescendingly: "We need transparency [*Transparenz*] not banners [*Transparente*]."

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Above all, the country seems more colorful, its people have become more cheerful (although one of the younger *Zeit* travelers, whose own experiences precluded a first-hand comparison of today's conditions with those of an earlier period, quickly reached the conclusion that the GDR made an "unhappy" impression). Especially since boys there can hardly be distinguished from their contemporaries in the West; the high school seniors we met in the Mecklenburg town of Bad Doberan could have been dressed exactly the same way at a school in Bad Kissingen or Bad Tölz. Young people wear Levis, T-shirts with Western logos, lots of white. A lot of these products come from capitalist countries abroad—imported according to regulations, brought over by relatives, or bought in an Intershop in exchange for West

German marks (God only knows how they managed to get hold of them).

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People over there, who don't have Liberty with a capital L, enjoy the smaller liberties their state guarantees them. This could even be seen, in a preliminary way, back in 1964: "They live out their modest interests and hopes and have their pet projects. Once again, the private sphere serves as a place of refuge where one can escape the reach of politics, the same with private life. Education and training also offer a type of refuge." Since then, these tendencies have become even stronger. Günter Gaus, Bonn's first permanent representative in the GDR, coined the term "niche society" to describe this. The niche, according to his definition, is "the preferred space of the people over there; the place where they leave behind the politicians, planners, propagandists, the collective, the grand objective, the cultural legacy—the place where they leave it all behind….and, with family and among friends, water their potted plants, wash their cars, play cards, talk, celebrate. And where they think about how, and with whose help, they could procure and organize what's still needed to make the niche even homier."

It's no different with us; why should it be? And Gaus is right: a certain distance from the state shapes life within the niches, but they exist inside socialism, not outside socialism. Niches are not the breeding ground of opposition. In fact, the Party, the social organizations, and the factories do a lot to make people's niche existence possible in the first place. Stamp collecting, ornamental fish breeding, hunting, and fishing—everywhere there are groups and circles, clubs and organizations. Sports of every kind are pursued. More than four million GDR citizens (one quarter of the population!) earned a sports badge in 1986.

The favorite niche for people over there, however, is their own dacha. This might be a garden plot with a pergola, an old farmhouse in the country, or a hut in the forest. Although the word "dacha" comes from Russian, the thing itself does not. (In Thuringia, people of small means always had their "watering places," a small garden, a meadow patch, a little corner of the woods.) The Party has nothing against this. "Why shouldn't a man have a dacha," asked Kurt Hager. "A certain part of your public sees something totally anti-socialist in this. I see something completely natural in it."

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Life in the GDR—that means life in the crumple zone. It also means: life under Erich Honecker. The citizens of the other German state show him what almost amounts to a quiet admiration; it always comes across in conversations. He carefully avoids any cult of personality. It is never "since Erich Honecker took office"; it is always "since the Eighth Party Congress." Yet it amounts to the same thing. Most reforms go back to the year 1971, when Honecker succeeded Walter Ulbricht. Realism instead of utopia, confidence in the power of the factual; better meeting of material needs; less anxiety, more choice; strengthening of production; boosting of the service sector; environmental protection; more latitude for art and artists; even the introduction of centers offering counseling in sexual matters—Honecker gets credit for everything. Nobody calls him "Honi," which is a Western term and is considered embarrassing. He's called "the boss," "Number One," or simply Erich. "Erich lasts longest," is the title of a song in the latest show of the Berlin cabaret "Distel." The title reveals something about the secret affection of those under his rule.

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Source: Theo Sommer, ed., *Reise ins andere Deutschland*. Reinbek, 1986, p. 19 ff., p. 35 ff; reprinted in Christoph Kleßmann and Georg Wagner, eds., *Das gespaltene Land. Leben in Deutschland*

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