A Participant Looks Back at the Unrest in East Germany in 1968 (Retrospective Account, 2003)

Abstract

Florian Havemann, the son of the prominent East German dissident Robert Havemann, looks back at the year 1968 and his one-time hopes for the democratization of socialism. These hopes were brutally dashed by the repression of the Prague Spring, after which dissidents engaged in the wholesale rejection of the GDR.

Source

68er from the East

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There was not only a 1968 in the West. The year 1968 was also of great significance in the East, because of developments in Czechoslovakia, because of what is known as the Prague Spring, after which followed the horrific 21st of August, which saw the suppression of the Prague Spring by the invasion of the Warsaw Pact countries. There will be things to say about that, and also about the 1968 movement in the East, the fate of which was very closely linked to that of the Prague Spring.

In my own way, I myself am a 68er; in any case, I have always considered myself one. I belong to the tiny group of people who could be called 68ers from the East. There were maybe 200 of us in all, not more. You didn't know absolutely everyone, but you knew most of them—at least you had heard of or recognized them or knew their nicknames.

Due to the conditions in the GDR—which, in comparison with the West, was not free—these (at most) 200 people, who could have easily and would have gladly gathered together in a medium-sized cultural venue, were never able to assemble and discuss their cause, their goals, and their problems, much less achieve agreement and strength in all these areas. The medium of these Eastern 68ers, the medium of their exchange, remained conversation—often of a very intense nature—in small groups, which could only be called informal discussion circles. The forum for larger gatherings was parties. This small group tried to be everything and do everything—everything that was also part of 1968 elsewhere. It attempted to experiment with a different kind of art and culture, to try a different approach to living and child-rearing; it experimented with sexual liberation, different types of relationships between the sexes; it also experimented with new sorts of highs and with conceptualizing and practicing a new form of politics. Of course, that was *a bit much* for such a small group, one that, on top of everything else, was hindered by conditions, by political circumstances. Especially since here [in East Berlin], in the spirit of 1968, there was no specification or assignment of individual roles among us, as was usually the case in the provinces. But they still aspired to participate in the great game of the great big world in their little way and with their modest resources. In his book *Sad Tropics*, Claude Lévi-Strauss offered a wonderful description of this same phenomenon in Rio de Janeiro in the 1930s. In 1968, it was about the whole person, so every one of us had to be everything at once.

With all of these efforts to get down to the very basics, it is no wonder that little came of the group at first—but only at first, since, over the course of the following years, much did in fact come of it. This small group, which was so intensely preoccupied with itself and its intellectual and moral concerns, proved a

rare breeding ground for talents. Even people I regarded as pale marginal figures went on to write books for which they were celebrated and awarded prizes. This group included: Thomas Brasch, Katharina Thalbach, Nina Hagen, Barbara Honigmann, Toni Krahl, Reinhardt Stangl, Hans Scheib; it also included a very young man named Thomas Heise, and a few more who later became successful scholars, dramaturges, and editors, as well as some artists who did not become as well-known. This group also had a great attraction for people who were not directly part of it—here, I am referring to Einar Schleef, Heiner Müller, B.K. Tragelehn, Thomas Langhoff, and also Wolf Biermann. For a while, this group attracted all of the discontented people, all of the artistic and intellectual potential of East Berlin.

It is remarkable that no politicians, in the narrow sense of the word, emerged from this group. Naturally, this was very much attributable to the circumstances, which did not allow free and open political activity. (The only person who could be mentioned in this context is Gerd Poppe, whom we used to call Popov. He played a role after the Wall came down and later served as a human rights representative in the foreign ministry of reunified Germany.) But this fact was not only attributable to political circumstances but also to our understanding of what 1968 meant. If it can be said, in retrospect, that the cultural-revolutionary aspect of the 1968 movement in the West had the most significant impact, then it should be noted that this was always the main focus for those of us in the East, even from the very beginning. We followed the development of 1968 in the West, of the student movement, as best we could. There was also some direct personal contact—people such as Langhans, Teufel, and Kunzelmann from the K-1 Commune came to our parties, and later Rudi Dutschke as well. For us, they were people we felt connected to, but they were only part of a movement that included much more. Bob Dylan and Jimi Hendrix were equally—if not more—important. This music created a connection that reached all the way into the provinces, to a much larger group, the so-called Beat Fans who were being persecuted by the state, and who could boast the only truly functioning illegal organization of the time: the record club.

I have often asked myself whether our Eastern 1968 was just an offshoot, a *dépendance* of the Western 1968. I have also asked myself if our 1968 was truly our own and unique, if it occurred simultaneously with the Western 1968 only by chance and had little to do with it, or if common concerns stemming from parallel causes and motivations did in fact exist.

The conditions governing our actions were totally different. I think about the flyers, about forty of which landed me in prison for agitation against the state—and they had not even been handed out!—and then I think about the culture shock I experienced when I went into the cafeteria at the Technical University in West Berlin for the first time and saw hundreds of different flyers lying on tables, flyers that no one read or seemed interested in at all.

Our medium was also different. There was no Club Voltaire, no journals like *Kursbuch* or *Argument*, which the Haugs published, not even our own *samizdat*, or underground publishers, all of which could have helped give us a sense of identity. Merely operating one could have sent someone to jail for several years.

The reasons for becoming politically active were also different. In the West, it was the Americans and the Vietnam War, the Emergency Laws, and higher education policies that had sparked protest. For those of us in the East, there were manifold small reasons, those unreasonable demands to agree with things that no reasonable person could approve of, so that, first, it was not really about differing political views, but whether people wanted to preserve their own moral integrity and were willing to pay the price for it.

The fascist past had a different meaning for us. The accusation made by most 68ers in the West: that their parents were at least “fellow travelers” [*Mitläufer*], if not more, during the Nazi period, was not relevant for us. Our mothers and fathers were either active in the Nazi resistance or had spent the Nazi years in exile or emigration. The question posed to us was whether the development of GDR society did not demand that we follow the heroic example of our parents, which meant to act conspiratorially and resist this development, which we viewed as anti-socialist.

Even the extremes that always exist within such a movement had a totally different character for us. Terrorism of the sort found in the Western Left was completely out of the question for us. We had to (and were able to) content ourselves with purely symbolic actions.

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Those of us who grew up in the GDR and, thus, did not participate in the heroic struggles leading up to the creation of this country, and who don't belong to its founding generation saw lives ahead of us in a country marked by an ever-growing bureaucracy that continually restricted everyone's range of motion—not only those who were directly subjugated by it, but also political actors as well. We saw lives that would be determined by technology and technical necessities. We were not and could not feel comfortable with that; in any case, it no longer sparked any enthusiasm in us whatsoever. Perhaps this indicates that the era of faith in progress in which we were raised had come to an end. I only remember the book that all young people in the GDR received at their *Jugednweihe* [1]: it was called *Weltall, Erde, Mensch* [*Space, Earth, Human Being*]. Featuring illustrations that can only be laughed at from today's perspective, it presented us with technical solutions to all the problems of humanity. "Soviet power plus electrification equals communism"[2]—that was a motto that might have inspired us too, but an electrified GDR in which some switches were to be set according to a predetermined plan was certainly not what we had in mind. And the phase that could still captivate people such as Volker Braun and Heiner Müller, the phase "Schwarze Pumpe, Stalinstadt, Eisenhüttenstadt," when the construction of industrial plants was still associated with something heroic, was already long gone. Even if, unlike our peers in the West, we could not envisage a life of material abundance ahead of us, we could not imagine that the society in which we had been born and raised had any goal other than pure material affluence. Before us lay an intellectual desert since the socialism that we were served was not anything that could inspire or motivate us as young socialists.

This desert, with its petit-bourgeois structures, was lacking everything broad and great, yet it continued to spread out around us. But it was still alive, alive in those of us who asked whether this was really supposed to be socialism. In any case, it was not the socialism that any of us had imagined, and we could not imagine that the founders of the movement, Marx, Engels, and Lenin, could have intended such a dull and tedious socialism, one that seemed to restrict human productivity more than liberate it. And, to take up Henry Kissinger's formulation, we could not assume that our leaders understood or even grasped the metaphysical desperation that had taken hold of us—this desperation that derived from what little experience of socialism was possible in the GDR but at the same time went much farther.

My friend Thomas Brasch had a long conversation with Erich Honecker shortly after Biermann was expatriated. They talked about whether Brasch could and should leave the GDR as well. After the two had spoken for a while and Brasch had described his experiences in the GDR, Honecker made a significant statement: he said that he felt the same way as Brasch, and that he, too, had imagined socialism in a totally different way—so the understanding was there. But: there was no opportunity to discuss this question openly in the GDR; there couldn't be any in this kind of state.

Anyone who is somewhat familiar with Russian literature and has read Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed*, for example, might be able to imagine the small provincial world, with all its sublime ridiculousness, in which the drama of the 68ers of the East unfolded. This social class had a name in Russia: it was called the higher spheres and included both the representatives and the critics of power. In the GDR, we spoke of *Bonzen,* bigwigs, and when we speak now of the 68ers of the East, we are speaking of the bigwig children, of the sons and daughters of top-ranking GDR officials, and thus we are speaking of this peculiar GDR aristocracy, this socialist nobility that existed. It was our existence that seemed to have no meaning. What we lacked was a task that would have satisfied the ambition inspired by the deeds, by the heroic example, of our parents. As surprising as it may sound, there was no place for us in this GDR society, at least not as the children of our parents. And in this respect, one must ask if the comparison with an

aristocracy is fitting. It could be viewed as something positive that these people who ruled in the GDR did not work towards passing the whole business—that is, the power—down to their children, their direct descendants. Still, I would say that their inability to integrate this group—to which I belonged—into the system marked the beginning of the end of socialism.

The year 1968 was a time of new departures. The "socialism question" was posed anew, and we sought fresh ways to be politically active in the GDR as socialists without having our actions controlled by the party. But 1968 also meant the speedy end to all these experiments and hopes. The end was marked by a date familiar to all of us: August 21, the day troops entered Czechoslovakia. No matter how the details of the Prague Spring were viewed—and this was strongly dependent on the information available at hand—it was clear the moment the invasion occurred that something decisive was happening, that a chance for socialism had been destroyed. Later, it would become apparent that this had been its final chance. But that was not clear at the time.

NOTES

[1] A initiation ceremony for GDR youth or kind of secular alternative to religious confirmation—eds.
[2] Phrase attributed to Lenin—eds.

Source: Florian Havemann, "68er Ost," lecture given on August 29, 2003, at the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation on Franz Mehring Platz, Berlin; reprinted in *UTOPIE kreativ,* no. 164 (June 2004), pp. 544–56. Available online at: https://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/rls_uploads/pdfs/164_havemann.pdf

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