

Bitter News from Bitterfeld (Retrospective Account, 1995)

Abstract

The following is a retrospective account by West German journalist and documentary filmmaker Peter Wensierski on the Bitterfeld region, where the burning of coal and antiquated chemical production resulted in ecological disaster. Since 1979 Wensierksi had worked as a traveling correspondent to the GDR until its government banned him from entering the country and working there in 1985. His account describes both the shocking devastation to the landscape and the formation of an East German environmental movement.

Source

Bitter News from Bitterfeld

Suppressed, Blackmailed, Spied on: Environmental Initiatives in the SED State

“It’s best just to get drunk in the evening.” Residents of the heavily polluted industrial regions of the GDR used such bleak words to describe their life in the early eighties, a life that was all but unbearable in many places. Air, water, and ground pollution had assumed horrendous proportions:

- Entire landscapes had been devastated by the mining and burning of sulphurous brown coal;
- gigantic, open toxic waste dumps, such as the “Silver Lake” near Bitterfeld were causing illnesses and birth defects among children and local residents;
- cancers were rampant in the bismuth-uranium mining regions in the southern GDR;
- nuclear power plants and nuclear waste repositories operated out of public view;
- industrialized agriculture had done irreparable damage to the face of entire regions.

For a long time, church meetings offered the only opportunity for the public to voice complaints, since discussions about environmental issues were basically forbidden in the GDR’s mass media.

After the occasional copy of the Club of Rome report and other environmental books had been smuggled across the border by friends and relatives in the seventies, the first discussion forums were held at Protestant church youth meetings. These forums gave rise to smaller groups, initially in Schwerin, Leipzig, and Berlin.

Beginning in 1980, tentative efforts were made to pair the debates with public and practical actions that were quasi-tolerable to the state: together with communal enterprises like the VEB Stadtgrün, the church youth planted trees, for instance, in a concrete-slab ghetto in Schwerin. This was followed by “eco seminars” and country-wide “meetings of delegates.”

Already in 1983, more than 700 members of various eco groups, some arriving by bicycle, gathered in Potsdam from all over the GDR. Meetings were held in church spaces.

The Protestant “Research Center Wittenberg” served as a kind of hub for this work. It was also a place where mimeographed environmental information leaflets could be produced in modest numbers and disseminated. The environmental activists endeavored to provoke the state as little as possible. As it was, the churches dared to venture into the new social terrain only when it had already been secured by vanguard groups.

The state equated environmental activism with opposition in a green disguise. In some places, as in

Potsdam in 1983, the mere attempt to exhibit pollution-damaged trees from the Ore Mountains in a church landed those involved in a Stasi prison. The state responded similarly harshly to groups that organized joint bicycle tours during which small signs such as “clean air” supposedly rattled the average Trabi^[1] driver.

Their faces covered with handkerchiefs, environmentalists rode their bikes in front of the belching smokestacks of apocalyptic-looking industrial landscapes, where socialism was being promoted with banners such as “Our goal—the maximum fulfillment of production!”

Every intervention by the security forces resulted in new forms of resistance: in Berlin, tying a single white cloth ribbon to a bicycle handlebar functioned as a sign of protest for a long time—until the authorities got wise to this as well and sent the People’s Police [*Volkspolizei*] out with scissors. In the emerging eco scene, the bicycle had become a symbol of resistance long before the church gave its blessing to the annual “mobility without a car” campaign.

A GDR-wide demonstration against the planned highway between Schwerin and Wismar had been scheduled for June 1983—a day with parallels to the Brokdorf demonstrations in the West. The Stasi cordoned off entire train stations; in many places, travelers heading for Schwerin were held up.

Ringleaders were taken into preventive custody and warned; pressure was put on leading church figures. Eventually, the government prohibited all bicycle riding in and around Schwerin.

Only a few dozen cyclists reached the meeting place after adventurous detours. They rode along the planned highway route, distributed homemade flyers—and in so doing sent a small signal of victory over the state.

The concerns of the GDR ecological movement barely differed from those in the West: forest dieback, nuclear energy, the agricultural and chemical industries.

A recurring major problem was the lack of access to information. That is why the “Environmental Library” [*Umweltbibliothek* or UB] was set up in 1986 in the basement rooms of the rectory of Berlin’s Zionskirche in the Prenzlauer Berg district.

The pastor allowed a group that had formed around Carlo Jordan and Wolfgang Rüdtenklau to use those church spaces, and from then on, they functioned as a strategic base for the environmental movement and the GDR opposition. Banned writings and books were available there, meetings could be held there, and materials were mimeographed and distributed.

The state tried once more to quell this spirit of burgeoning change. In a nighttime raid (Stasi code word: “Action Trap”), twenty Stasi officers stormed the “UB” and arrested seven staffers.

The wave of solidarity that followed brought about the exact opposite of what the apparatus of repression had intended: following the model of the UB, fifteen new environmental libraries were set up as communication centers for the movement; 1988 saw the creation of the green “Network Ark,” which pushed the work of the various ecological initiatives with videos (“Bitter News from Bitterfeld”) and environmental projects related to forest dieback.

In May of 1989, environmentalists tried unsuccessfully to participate in local elections with an independent “Green List” alongside the unity list of the “National Front.” Through ballot-counting oversight measures, the independent groups were able to prove for the first time that the SED regime had committed election fraud. In response, demonstrations were organized against vote rigging.

A Green Party and the Green League were formed during the months of the *Wende* [in 1989]. Their

representatives were soon able to participate in shaping the *Wende* at the “Round Table” —thus also creating the preconditions for unifying the ecological movements in East and West Germany.

NOTES

[1] The *Trabi*, short for *Trabant*, was an East German car spewing exhaust fumes—eds.

Source: Peter Wensierski, “Bitteres aus Bitterfeld,” *Spiegel special*, 2/1995, pp. 56-57. © DER SPIEGEL. Reproduced on this website with permission from SPIEGEL.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

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