Cultural Repression by the SED Central Committee (December 16, 1965)

Abstract

Erich Honecker was appalled by the disquiet that had accompanied prior liberalizations. Thus, under his leadership, the SED reverted to hardline policies: it rejected demands for freedom of expression and cultural experimentation, increased literary censorship, and insisted upon a clear ideological commitment to the socialist cause.

Source

Report to the Central Committee of the SED

[…] It is a historic achievement of our party that, in the 20 years since its founding, it has devised and embarked upon the path to a socialist national culture along with the overwhelming majority of the intelligentsia in the GDR. In this current stage of the comprehensive building of socialism, artists are confronted with greater tasks. Now, the goal is to enrich the life and worldview of socialist people, to portray struggles and triumphs, conflicts and their solutions in socialist society. Art and literature, with their specific means, can help develop the creative powers of people in socialist society. This, however, requires a determined struggle in all areas of the arts against the old and backward remains of the capitalist past, and against the influences of capitalist non-culture [*Unkultur*] and immorality, which find expression in American sex propaganda and the glorification of banditry.

A Clean State with Unyielding Standards

Our GDR is a clean state. It maintains unyielding standards of ethics and morality, of decency and proper behavior. Our party takes a decisive stand against the imperialist-driven propaganda of immorality, which pursues the goal of damaging socialism. Here, we are in full agreement with the population of the GDR and the overwhelming majority of the people in West Germany.

In recent months there have been a few incidents that required our special attention. A few young people formed groups and committed criminal acts; there were rapes and instances of rowdiness. There are several cases of serious breaches of discipline at school and at work. Students on harvest duty organized drinking bouts resembling those of reactionary West German student fraternities. During this assignment, work morale among some groups of students was low. Here, again, the negative influence of Western television and Western radio on segments of our population is becoming apparent.

We agree with those who note that the causes of these instances of immorality and this lifestyle that is alien to socialism are also visible in some films, TV-shows, plays, literary works, and periodicals available here. Recently, anti-humanistic depictions in television broadcasts, films, and periodicals have increased. Acts of brutality are being portrayed; human actions are being reduced to sexual impulses. Manifestations of American immorality and decadence are not being countered publicly. This is especially true in the case of light entertainment and individual literary works and, unfortunately, also in the case of many “DT64” broadcasts. […]

No Place for Petty Bourgeois Skepticism

In the name of an “abstract truth,” these artists concentrate on depicting alleged deficiencies and faults

in the German Democratic Republic. Some writers are of the opinion that socialist education can only succeed when deficiencies and faults are depicted in a totalizing manner. They don't realize that their works of art have a regressive effect and that they inhibit the development of the working population's socialist consciousness.

How is an ideology of "petty bourgeois skepticism without limits" supposed to help the working population? To the adherents of this ideology, who exemplify semi-anarchist lifestyles and take pleasure in talking about "absolute freedom," we would like to say quite frankly: You are mistaken if you believe that the division of labor in our republic means that the working population selflessly builds up a socialist society and that others need not participate, that the state pays and others have the right to promulgate a life-negating, petty bourgeois skepticism as the sole means of salvation. The calculation is simple: if we want to keep increasing labor productivity and, by extension, living standards, which is something in which all citizens of the GDR have an interest, then one cannot spread nihilistic, despondent, and morally subversive philosophies in literature, film, theater, television, and periodicals. In the comprehensive building of socialism, skepticism and a rising standard of living are mutually exclusive. And conversely, a varied, down-to-earth, and realistic art and literature based on our socialist worldview makes a good companion and guide for working people in our German Democratic Republic.

The active role of art and literature lies precisely in its ability to artistically capture, on the basis of our socialist conditions, the way in which the constructive policy of the party and the state overcomes the contradictions in people's conscious actions.

Of course, we are not opposed to the portrayal of conflicts and contradictions as they arise in the building of socialism. We are not for a superficial reflection of reality. But we do hold significant the partisan point of view of the artist in his political or aesthetic assessment of our reality and, correspondingly, his active cooperation in the portrayal of conflicts and their solutions in socialism.

The totalizing presentation of faults, deficiencies, and weaknesses is fueled by circles that are interested in sparking doubts about the policies of the GDR and in spreading the ideology of skepticism. These circles include, for example, Wolf Biermann. In a volume of poetry published by Wagenbach Publishing House in West Berlin, Biermann reveals his true colors. In the name of a poorly disguised petty bourgeois-anarchistic socialism, he directs sharp criticism at our social order and our party. With cynical verses written from antagonistic points of view, Biermann betrays not only the state that gave him a high level of education, but also the life and death of his father, who was murdered by the Fascists.

The enemy is systematically turning Biermann into the poster child of a so-called literary opposition in the GDR, the voice of the "rebellious youth." This is confirmed by West German radio broadcasts, reports in the West German press, and reviews of the poems he published in West Berlin. There, Biermann is celebrated as an "extremely outspoken and bold critic of the Central [i.e. East] German regime." Biermann's so-called poems reveal his petty bourgeois, anarchistic behavior, his arrogance, his skepticism and cynicism. With his songs and poems, Biermann violates basic socialist perspectives. In doing so, he enjoys the benevolent support and patronage of certain writers, artists, and other intellectuals. It is high time to oppose the dissemination of alien and damaging theories and un-artistic machinations that, at the same time, also exhibit strong pornographic tendencies. Failing to confront these machinations does not strengthen the authority of the German Writers' Association or other organizations such as the German Cultural League. […]

Source: Erich Honecker, "Bericht an das Zentralkomitee der SED," *Neues Deutschland,* December 16, 1965; reprinted in E. Schubbe, ed., *Dokumente zur Kunst-, Literatur- und Kulturpolitik der DDR*.

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