

Internal Critique of the SED Regime (September 28, 1988)

Abstract

Very few GDR citizens had the courage to critically confront East German leaders. The majority often preferred to remain anonymous. This letter, found in the Stasi archives, was written by a concerned member of the ruling SED party. The writer was inspired by developments in the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev but discouraged by the reaction of the SED leadership. The letter highlights the contrast between propaganda and reality and theory and practice in the lives of GDR citizens.

Source

Dresden, September 28, 1988

Comrade Dr. H. Modrow
Member of the Central Committee
First Secretary of the District Headquarters of the GDR
Devrientstr. 4
Dresden
8010

Dear Comrade Dr. H. Modrow,

This is a very unusual way to convey to you, dear comrade, my ideas on the current situation in the GDR. These and similar problems have been discussed for years in the basic organization, but we never received a relevant answer. All these things are allegedly taboo and are also punished accordingly. Hence this form of approach which is unworthy of a comrade; yet the prevailing circumstances compel me, since we are living under manifestations of absolutism.

It is no longer possible to speak openly in larger forums of the party. We are experiencing conditions similar to those prior to the reorganization of the CPSU. We are all so pleased that it has been possible to recover the origins of Marxism-Leninism in the vanguard party^[1], and—this is the most important thing—to act accordingly. What has happened to Marxism-Leninism in our country, we only talk of it gushingly.

[...]

Please do whatever you wish with the document [the enclosure]; perhaps, in keeping with the usual practices, it won't even reach you—but one person will have read it. I wish you much strength and good health in the pursuit of good reputation of the party.

With socialist greetings,
a comrade devoted to M[arxism]-L[eninism]

[Enclosure]

Critical comments about real socialism^[2] in the GDR

[...]

Now, every party has a program and bylaws. No comment is necessary here about the program. But if we turn to the bylaws, certain conclusions arise. The wording of the bylaws summarizes what is regulated in the subsequent §§.

“The party watches over the strict adherence to democratic centralism and to the Leninist norms of party life, the collectivization of the leadership bodies and democracy within the party. It develops the activity and creative initiative of all members and promotes general criticism and self-criticism. . .” If only it were true, all comrades could say, but what does everyday practice look like? The daily work of the party is far removed from theory. All one does is lie in wait to see which expression of opinion is permitted by the Politburo—“democratic centralism” is working well.

Let us begin by looking at democracy within the party. A crucial factor here is the election of the leadership organs and of the delegates for the higher leadership bodies, and the open discussion of problems which lead to resolutions.

In the basic organization the comrades still know one another, but here, too, the election of the leadership is a farce. As long as there are not more candidates to choose from than what is needed, democracy does not function. A member must have the possibility to select by secret ballot the comrades who enjoy his confidence. But with the current practice, he can only cross out the candidate for whom he does not want to vote. Here, too, there is a wide gap between theory (bylaws) and what has been practiced for decades. Now, this “democratic election system” continues in the higher leadership bodies. And here there are further conditions that compound the problem. The delegates know too little about the candidates, the list of candidates is already drawn up by the party apparatus. In this way, a state party (see the constitution) thus establishes itself all the way into the highest bodies. With that, the Politburo becomes the decisive, power-exercising assembly of comrades. As such, the “democratic centralism” emanates from this body. With the principle of its efficacy, the basic organizations are completely incapacitated, and the member is powerless in the face of what transpires.

The Politburo, in turn, endows the general secretaries and the other secretaries responsible for specific policy areas [*Fachsekretäre*] with an indescribable degree of power, whereby the party apparatus plays a role that should not be underestimated. In the Politburo the central decisions are made collectively (Leninist principle), and at certain intervals the work of this body is reviewed in front of the “elected” Central Committee. This usually unfolds like a well-staged script. Those who speak in the discussion are eager to make a good impression and support the submitted report without reservations; all one hears are hymns of praise about life in the GDR, things are only moving forward, there are no critical issues to discuss. Criticism is not discernible; the work of the Politburo is simply “wise” and infallible. Hence the party—that is: the Politburo—is always right.

[...]

The old operating principle must be revived: good work—better performance—higher monetary income—an adequate selection of goods in line with needs—a higher living standard (quality of life).

At the moment, however, we find this vicious circle: no adequate provision of goods in line with needs (high-quality consumer goods are traded illegally—cars, fruit supply is intermittent, resulting in purchases beyond demand)—less productivity in the workplace—fewer goods—a smaller supply—a lack of exports, and thus a lack of imports—surplus money among the population (wage payments without performance—see provision of materials—)

Establishment of an illegal market with greatly inflated prices for high-quality consumer goods—the social fabric has been completely disrupted.

It is fundamentally true that human beings are materialistic in orientation, as demonstrated precisely by

Marxist philosophy. But the party leadership must abide by this. Over the longer term, one cannot carry on production solely on the basis of the enthusiasm of the masses. The few good work performances that are publicly celebrated are not enough to affect a turnaround in the huge number of cautious masses who cause this negative circle, the size of these masses demonstrates precisely this negative quality.

[Here follows a list of functional deficits in the economy of the GDR.]

The problem of pensions has not been fairly resolved, there is no pension adjustment (denial of the rate of inflation etc.). Pensions are calculated based on life-time earnings, which means that subsequent wage hikes are not taken into account. Thus, the discrepancy between older pensioners and new pensioners remains, even though they did the same work and were in the same wage or income groups.

Discipline in the enterprise stems too much from “collegiality.” The leaders, especially of the direct production, are always caught between duty and “colleague.” Because of that, the necessary measures are not possible.

[...]

Because of the circumstances laid out so far, to which others can be added, a radical rethinking is becoming vitally necessary also for the SED. The party can no longer invoke the decisions of the VII. Party Congress.

In spite of existing differences and peculiarities in the various socialist countries, openness and more democracy in society and the workplace must also make their way into the SED. Much more attention must also be paid to domestic policy; one cannot simply conduct a good foreign policy—the struggle for peace—and hide everything behind that. Critical discussions about longstanding problems and contradictions cannot be avoided. If this does not happen in the near future, and if everything is left to the outdated party leadership with the entrenched system of “democratic centralism,” then there could be a rude awakening. The many people who want to resettle in the FRG are not eager to give up their ancestral homeland. But the number of these GDR citizens speaks for itself, and one cannot dismiss this as selfishness and adventurism. In many cases, they are good skilled workers of optimal working age and are highly motivated.

In past periods, a lot was said, and even more was written, about Marxism-Leninism, but in daily practice people have moved very far away from it. How to handle Marxism-Leninism correctly without constantly using that term was demonstrated by the CPSU at its party congress. Reason dictates that we must learn from that Congress and not fall into arrogance as though we had no contradictions to resolve, something that has been repeatedly practiced by leading comrades of the party leadership.

The time will come when the comrade in the basic organization will raise his demands loud and clear and will hold the leading comrades accountable. The renewal of the Politburo cannot wait until the XII. Party Congress or until biology takes effect. We need a party leadership that is able to introduce the transformation in our country.

The slogan is: More democracy—more socialism!

NOTES

[1] Reference to the development of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) under Mikhail Gorbachev—eds.

[2] In the 1970s and 1980s, this terminology was used in the GDR and other East European countries to describe their status of economic and political development, which fell short of socialism but was a stepping stone toward it—eds.

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