

Peace and Human Rights (1986)

Abstract

In November 1985, after a human rights seminar planned by various East Berlin peace groups was canceled at the last minute under pressure from the Ministry for State Security (the Stasi), preparation committee members Wolfgang Templin, Ralph Hirsch, and Peter Grimm decided to issue a call for a general discussion of human rights. In doing so, they took a decisive step away from a narrowly focused peace movement toward a more general opposition to the GDR dictatorship. Templin, Hirsch, and Grimm were active in the Peace and Human Rights Initiative, which, in the following years, became one of the most important opposition groups in the GDR. There were differences within the peace movement, however, largely concerning the manner in which the movement was to be organized and represented, as the second text shows.

Source

I. Spokespersons for the Peace and Human Rights Initiative (Human Rights Seminar)

Dear Friends!

Within the peace movement there is a growing consciousness of the close connection between peace and human rights. Many experiences in recent years prove that the goals of peace initiatives depend upon the implementation of basic democratic rights and freedoms. There is a tense continuation of the arms build-up in both political blocs, negotiations are being held behind closed doors, and peace movement activists are being prosecuted and sometimes criminalized, without any regard for those affected. As far as these practices are concerned, the “Western democracies” are right up there with our governing leaders. That’s the state of our experience—we didn’t know how to deal with it. We have yet to do any real work in the area of human rights, aside from reacting to isolated cases and spontaneously expressing concern. Last summer, people in various Berlin peace circles proposed the organization of a human rights seminar. At the first meeting, common experiences were to be discussed, ways of working on human rights issues reviewed, and contacts made. The proposed subjects and focal points were regarded as an impetus to discussion and were to aid in the later results of our work. Our statement on the postponement of the human rights seminar of November 16, 1985, and our letter to the synods of the Berlin-Brandenburg State Church document the debates on the prohibition of the seminar.

This situation did not relieve us of our responsibility to organize a human rights seminar and to do further work in this area. In the preparation committee, additional agenda points were discussed and devised; working groups were formed to address them. In these groups, members of different church and autonomous peace groups worked together. We would like to inform you of the current state of our work.

Main focal points and working groups:

- ☒ Peace and human rights
- ☒ The right to employment as a basic human right
- ☒ Human rights and society (historical development)
- ☒ Human rights and the justice system
- ☒ Church and human rights
- ☒ Human rights and education/childrearing—youth

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- ☒ Prospects for human rights work in the GDR
 - ☒ Environment, health, and human rights
 - ☒ Human rights in the military sphere

In all these areas of focus, we want to concentrate on the situation and on development in our own country; this does not rule out a discussion of human rights problems and cooperation and solidarity with human rights initiatives in other countries.

We aspire for our work to spread throughout the GDR. Presently, representatives of all the above-mentioned areas of focus and working groups are active in a preparatory committee that meets in Berlin and coordinates the content-related and organizational work on a regular basis.

The Peace and Human Rights preparation committee will be represented publicly by three spokespersons who will rotate annually. We wish and hope for your ideas, criticism, materials, and participation. The current spokespersons are Wolfgang Templin, Ralph Hirsch, and Peter Grimm.

II. Expression of Protest by the Opposing Faction: Statement Regarding Preparations for the Peace and Human Rights Seminar

[...]

There was agreement to continue work on a seminar, to form working groups on various subjects, to have an editorial committee draft a new petition whose contents are more specific than the present one and to submit this to the synods of the Protestant state churches, and to appoint a group of three spokespersons. The spokespersons' sole function will be to inform the church leadership and the hosts of the parochial church council of the status of our work and to represent the opinions of the preparation committee. Finally, content-related and organizational work in the preparation phase should be better coordinated. March 1986 was fixed as the target date for a new seminar. Also, the working groups were nominally constituted, and it was agreed that the entire group of people organizing the seminar should be convened for all important decisions and in special situations.

At a later meeting, in December 1985, the preparation committee sent the aforementioned petition to the synods.

At the next meeting on January 9, 1986, several interested people were told that their presence had not been intended, since a coordinating group comprising the three speakers and the conveners of the working groups had already been formed on November 23, 1985, and they were not part of that group. But since such a decision obviously contradicts grassroots democratic principles—also in the view of the coordinating group—those people were allowed to stay. At this meeting, the decision was made to draft an informational letter to peace groups and friends [here] in the GDR who are interested in the seminar. The text was to have an exclusively informal character and to provide information on the status of preparations for the seminar.

On February 3, RIAS and SFB^[1] announced that representatives of various peace groups had met in East Berlin and decided to make human rights the focus of GDR-wide peace work. The basis of this was a so-called “Document III” of the Peace and Human Rights Initiative. This was how most people involved in organizing the seminar found out that such a “document” existed, since it was not delivered to the Berlin peace groups. This omission constitutes a violation of the instructions given on January 9, 1986. Attempts were made later to shift responsibility for this onto others.

The lone authors of this letter are the three spokespersons, who showed the letter—mind you, already in duplicated form—to only five members of the coordinating group prior to its dissemination.

The high-handed, autocratic actions of the spokespersons in composing the so-called “Document III” constitute a major breach of trust. The portions of the text that had not been agreed upon pertain to:

1. political assessments that anticipate the possible results of the seminar, which has yet to be held;
2. the announcement of intentions for GDR-wide human rights work,
3. the labeling of the statement of November 16, 1985, the petition of December 1985, and the “information” of January 24, 1986, as “Documents I to III”;
4. the pretension of an “annually rotating” group of spokespersons to represent the group publicly;
5. the transformation of the preparation committee involved in organizing the seminar into a “Peace and Human Rights Initiative.”

With this, the reservations of the Treptow Parochial Church Council and the representatives of church leadership, which had led to the postponement of the seminar, were indirectly confirmed. In the text, the seminar’s role as the aim of the undertaking retreats into the background.

The contents of the so-called “Document III” represent a political threat to preparations for the seminar, create a sectarian separation between human rights and peace work, and harm the peace movement.

When the speakers were first confronted about this so-called “Document III,” they either made light of the criticism or did not respond at all. Their comments included: this is the agreed upon informational letter; there was no reason to convene the Preparation Committee; the passages to which there is objection include approved terms; the interpretations feared by those who intervened represent nothing but panic-mongering; the critics are actually obstructionists who waste time by constantly raising provocative discussions of fundamental issues and hamper the work being done.

When—contrary to the spokespersons’ expectations—reservations were voiced more loudly and pressure to convene a meeting of the entire Preparation Committee grew, massive efforts were made up front to exclude critics from this meeting and to prevent their attendance. Some members of the Preparation Committee were given false information about the time and date of the meeting; some claimed that everyone had already been invited to it—though this can be proven untrue—and, up to the last minute, attempts were made to keep critics of the so-called “Document III” away from the meeting on February 24, 1986. One of the speakers even said at the meeting itself that the presence of some of the people there was contrary to what had been agreed upon, though invitations were extended to friends who belonged neither to the coordinating group nor to the critics.

Consequently, the meeting was very emotionally charged from the outset. The spokespersons tried to shift the blame to the people who attended the meeting of January 9, 1986, by once again claiming that the contents of “Document III” corresponded with what had been agreed upon at that meeting, and that whoever was unaware of that must have been sleeping. The charge of sabotage and pressure for a discussion of fundamental principles was reiterated. But since a majority, even among those friends who had initially remained impartial, had expressed criticism, and since no convincing arguments for the so-called “Document III” were presented, a vague disclaimer representing the minimum consensus on defusing the criticized text was drafted after four hours of discussion. This result was immediately undermined by assurances that conditions in the Preparation Committee would repeatedly lead to the same old conflicts. On the very same evening, some participants reported that they did not feel bound by the minimum consensus.

This makes it clear to us that any hope of working toward a joint seminar in the present group is illusory. Therefore we have come to the following conclusions:

We declare:

☒ that the preparation of a human rights seminar, in particular, requires democratic conduct and

organizational structures. The moral integrity of those involved is a prerequisite for working together in a trusting relationship. Dirty tricks cannot be tolerated.

☒ that, for us, this subject is an integral part of peace work, and we want to continue to work toward this end.

☒ that our political responsibility forces us to stop participating in this preparation committee as of the present meeting.

☒ that we intend to organize a seminar in Berlin and we invite anyone interested to help organize it. One possible theme is: “Human rights—the individual and society.”

The following subjects could be addressed as part of this:

☒ different ideas of democracy and other forms of rule (e.g., grassroots, commissar republic, pre-bourgeois, bourgeois, and socialist democracies);

☒ development and differentiation of legal terms

experience with socialist law and social practice in the GDR

questions of concrete solidarity

This is not a firm program, but instead is open for any subject-related modifications.

This paper is intended for use in the GDR.

Signed: Vera and Knud Wollenberger, Silvia Müller, Thomas Klein, Reinhard Schult, and Wolfgang Wolf

NOTES

[1] RIAS (Radio in the American Sector) and SFB (*Sender Freies Berlin*) were two radio stations in West Berlin—trans.

Source: “Sprecher der Initiative ‘Frieden und Menschenrechte’ (Menschenrechtsseminar)” and “Erklärung zur Vorbereitung eines Seminars ‘Frieden und Menschenrechte’”; reprinted in Wolfgang Rüddenklau, ed., *Störenfried. DDR-Opposition in Texten 1986–1989*. Berlin, 1992, pp. 56–57.

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