The Show Must Go On:
Censorship and Popular Culture in the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1989

by Tamika Roach

"What is the difference between painters of the naturalist, impressionist and the socialist realist schools? The Naturalists paint as they see, the impressionists as they feel, the socialist realists as they are told."
--Joke from *Hammer & Tickle*[1]

      The German Economic Commission formed the provisional government, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the Soviet Zone on 7 October 1949. The move was a response to the United States, Great Britain and France holding united and occupied zones in the west. This effectively divided a nation that had only been actively united for about 70 years. The division, only more noticeable when they erected the Berlin Wall in mid-August 1962. Despite every piece of propaganda Moscow pumped out, the Berlin Wall stood as a symbol of oppression and loss of human rights. It would also show the German people--specifically those in the East--who really had the power over the ins and outs of their lives. *Foreign Policy* magazine released an article in 2014 that examined eight matters that former East Germans remembered as 'better' before the current reunited Germany. Child care and good nurseries were among the top things missed, along with nudism, communal solidarity and funnier jokes.[2] While the jokes did provide a sense of a shared national narrative for the *ossi*, it remains disputable that the articles on this list were actually better.[3] The author Paul Hockenos, a Berlin-based writer, included some facts about the reality of East German past, proving that *ostalgie* is a strange phenomenon.[4]

      At the end of World War II, the world chose sides and a new and different kind of war was waged; not one based on old historic lines or hidden alliances, but one based on ideological differences that the two superpowers--the United States and the USSR-- believed could not prosper while the other existed. The Cold War, an almost fifty-year long struggle for ideological domination between the two, would see the smaller countries struggle to not be crushed underneath the two giants' boots. Germany was one

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[1] Lewis, Ben. *Hammer and Tickle: The History of Communism Told Through Communist Jokes.* London: Phoenix, 2009.

[2] Hockenos, Paul. "8 Things that were Better in East Germany*" Foreign Policy. November 7, 2014.

[3] The term *ossi* here defined as a term for former citizens of the former German Democratic Republic.

[4] The term *Ostalgie* here defined as 'East Nostalgia' or "nostalgia for aspects of life in East Germany."

of the first to fall. It would see itself be split in half; the legacies of that decision still linger in the minds and culture of the German people today. The politics of the Cold War have seeped into every aspect of the German people's lives. This intersection between Soviet Communist politics and popular culture in East Germany must be explored. Popular culture in Eastern Europe could be a dangerous hobby as governments in the Soviet Bloc viewed the resulting creations as potentially subversive. They would, however, attempt to monitor and censor all art forms. Most active artists, especially in East Germany, faced high levels of censorship. Those unwilling to comply with these restrictions would become targets. While numerous historians have written about the effect of popular culture on communism, here the focus will be on those that 'played by the rules' in an attempt to show how adhering to strict censorship shaped a distinct culture and national narrative in the German Democratic Republic.

The GDR was known as the Soviet Union's 'most loyal ally' in Eastern Europe, perhaps simply because of the new eastern country's inability to procure international recognition. Without this recognition, East Germany was dependent on the Soviet Union.[5] Historically, economic, cultural, military and political influence ran from Germany to Russia. The Soviet Union however, imposed a brand of Marxism-Leninism onto East Germany effectively forcing the GDR to adopt a governmental system modeled on the Soviet Union and switching the historic path of influence in the opposite direction, not only for politics but for the other areas mentioned as well. Here, Soviet influence on culture will be the focus.

Russia in the 1920s and 1930s saw economic depression and heightened racial conflict and the rise of fascist regimes internationally. Socialist Realism was a political movement and artistic exploration that created idealized--though implied to be a 'realistic' view--images of the lower and working class, labour unionists and the politically disenfranchised in order to form a picture of the 'masses'--critical members of the whole of society. The teachings of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin would serve as inspiration to emerging artists as well the lingering effects of the Great Depression would give these artists even more of a sense of community and potentially a reason to paint realistically.[6] The Russian Communist Party would announce a political period they called the Popular Front in 1935. They believed this front would create a united political opposition to fascism which was an even greater enemy to communism than capitalism.[7] In many artistic movements of the times, the members of the working class were depicted

[5] *East Germany from Stalinization to the New Economic Policy, 1950-1963.* <u>Archives Unbound Series.</u> Gale, online resources.

[6] Shapiro, David. *Social Realism: Art as a Weapon.* Frederick Ungar Publishing Co, 1973.; Anreus, Alejandro et. al. *The social and the Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere.* Pennsylvania State University, 2006.

[7] Pike, John. "Military." COMINTERN Communist International/Third International. Accessed December 9, 2016.

as social outcasts, yet, in the eyes of the Socialist Realist, they were social heroes. These heroes were often depicted as wearing overalls and holding tools; their jaws were strong and usually square and determined. This was the depiction of a worker-hero and he was the backbone of the society. The Socialist Realist style would find its way into the mainstream of places all over the world including America, but it could be argued that this style of art worked best under agrarian and communist governments, although the economic shift of 1930s America saw a rise in the Industrial Labourer as hero instead of agriculture. Socialist Realism would help create a unique social narrative in most of the Soviet Bloc, but none more unique than in East Germany.

The heroization of workers was a part of the propaganda imagery and literature of pre-1945 Germany. After the establishment of the GDR, the shift from pro-Nazi worker heroes to anti-Nazi/pro-communist imagery was not such a difficult shift to accomplish. One significance denoting that shift from Nazi rule to a Soviet one, was the establishment of the censorship policy. From the very beginning, the leaders of the GDR felt it was crucial to distance their state from Nazi-era Germany. In order to make the conscious break from the practices of National Socialism, the GDR defined itself as an anti-fascist state. In the first few years following the war, censorship, they argued, was an important part of the de-Nazification process.[8] The leaders "spoke of 'planning' cultural processes and 'protecting' socialist art, and they constantly reminded artists of their 'responsibility' not to damage the state or its reputation."[9] Censorship, regardless of the excuse given by those that would implement it, brought about an interesting relationship between artist and the state; a relationship that, at least for the German Democratic Republic, developed into a unique and distinct culture amongst those that conform to those rules.

The form of Socialist Realism that developed under Soviet rule in East Germany sought to depict the beneficial side of everyday life under socialism John Frey, author of *Socialist Realism in East Germany* states, "Applied specifically to the situation in the German Democratic Republic, the method of socialist realism, which properly defined should be called a realistic manner of presentation with socialistic-communistic orientation, is pointed at educating the rank and file in the spirit furthering the solution of the German problems at hand."[10] As opposed to the decadence of symbolism, expressionism, surrealism and even naturalism in propaganda, art and other works, Socialistic Realism worked to highlight the good about living in a socialistic-communistic reality. Literature that came out of this period and region between 1961 and 1971, was

[8] Herf, Jeffrey. *Divided Memory: The Nazi past in the two Germanys.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.

[9] Bradley, Laura. "The Secret of East German Censorship--Who's Watching Who?"

[10] Frey, John R. *Socialist Realism in East Germany.*The German Quarterly, VOL. 26, No. 4. 1953. P 275.

much less ideological. Instead, it was practical.[11] The Socialist Realism guidelines that were laid out told that the work that could be approved would have to be: Proletarian and relatable to the workers, typical and pulled from scenes of everyday life of the people, realistic, partisan and supportive of the aims of the State and the Party.[12] It would be highly regulated--the party was to always be depicted in a favourable light and soviet ideals promoted.[13]

By the 1970s, however, the GDR saw a rise in German Romanticism. East German writers saw parallels between their current Germany and Germans from the Napoleonic era-- political and social suppression and loss of self-rule.[14] This would also fit in with the Revolutionary romanticism that meant to glorify the common worker's life and job to show how much the standard of living improved as well as illustrate the Party's successes and instill party values on a massive scale.[15] By splicing in images of flowers and sunlight, the body and youth, the artists could show the utopianism of communism and the Soviet state. This would successively turn art from aesthetic to serving a very specific purpose; "There can be no doubt that art acquired a social significance only in so far as it depicts, evokes, or conveys actions, emotions and events that are of significance to society."[16] The trick was to walk the line between depicting reality and hiding any negatives of living in such a society. The 'art' was in trying to find out how to present reality truthfully, depict great content "human, revolutionary and democratic in character" and to do so "in the specifically national form of one's own people."[17] In doing so, those artists that 'played by the rules' would help form a national social narrative that seemingly gave the masses autonomy.

Music, unlike many other forms of art in the GDR in this time period, lead the path of scrutiny from the GDR government. Musicians seemed to face higher levels of censorship, while those who were "unwilling to conform to state restrictions frequently became targets for harassment and repression."[18] Popular music would forever be under suspicion, especially those that found themselves influenced by the west. Officially, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) saw western music as a "dangerous American cultural weapon designed to corrupt its young people, turning them away from socialist

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[11] Emmerich, W., 1996. Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR. Leipzig: Aufbau Verlag. Via Taylor, Ronald. *Berlin and its Culture: A Historical Portrait.* Yale University Press. 1997.

[12] Juraga, Dubravka and Booker, Keith M. *Socialist Cultures East and West.* Praeger, 2002, p 68.

[13] Nelson, Cary and Lawrence, Grossberg. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture.* University of Illinois press, 1988, p.5.

[14] Finney, Gail. *Christa Wolf.* New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999. p.6.

[15] Overy, Richard. *The Dictators: Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia.* W.W. Norton & Company, 2004. P. 354.

[16] Schwartz, Lawrence H. *Marxism and Culture.* Kennikat Press, 1980. P. 110.

[17] Frey, John R. *Socialist Realism in East Germany.* P. 277.

[18] "Rocking the Wall: East German Rock and Pop in the 1970s and 1980s." The View East. 2011. Accessed November 25, 2016.

ideals" thereby allowing the Party to draw a hard line towards popular music.[19] As the global Cold War ebbed and flowed between its 'hotter' moments and moments of detente, so too did this line of censorship on all forms of art. The big influx of rock-and-roll music across Eastern Europe during the mid-50s brought on no serious action except to print articles in the press about the "dangerous effects of rock music."[20] For those that complied with the Party Line, the SED was actively encouraging. Beginning in Czechoslovakia in the Late 1950s however, the Communist party decided to crack down and, needing a "well-defined target for their diatribes against Western influences," they focused their attacks on rock and roll and in January of 1958, the East German government would declare war on rock and roll[21]. By January 2nd, the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Finance successfully issued the "Ordinance for the Programming of Entertainment and Dance Music" establishing a sixty/forty percentage split of all music broadcast, giving East German musicians more airtime, promotion and effectively protecting these bands against foreign competition. Throughout the 1970s, this active 'protection' would also help East German rock music develop its own distinctive style as they were also less likely to be influenced as heavily by western music because of its lack of play on East German airwaves. Many of the bands that did not adhere to the still strict guidelines would be told "You don't exist anymore. Your lyrics have absolutely nothing to do with socialist reality," and that the "working class is insulted and the state and defense organizations are defamed."[22] There were a few bands that conformed to the guidelines that were also permitted to travel outside of the GDR to tour. These bands, *The Puhdys, City, Karat,* and *Silly*, would achieve widespread popularity, were widely tolerated by the authorities and held privileged positions in the GDR--a show that would nudge other musicians and artists into conforming as well. That is to say, if a handful of artists found themselves with fame outside of the GDR while still boasting about the benefits of living in the GDR perhaps there should not be a reason for others to rebel against the system and the Party. Bands like these had the ability to achieve the perfect blend of rock and roll and a healthy socialist world view. The Puhdys became the essential state-sponsored ensemble. They cut their hair, shaved their beards, forwent singing Anglo-American rock numbers. Their harmonies were sweet, the volume reasonable, and were the most celebrated ensembles of the Soviet Bloc. While they were the favourites of the State, other East German rock fans would pick hard-rocking, six-man band Renft. In the early 1970s in a warmer cultural climate, Renft would skirt state

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[19] Ibid.

[20] Timothy W. Ryback, *Rock around the Bloc: a history of rock music in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990), 25.

[21] Ibid, 25.

[22] "Rocking the Wall: East German Rock and Pop in the 1970s and 1980s." The View East. 2011. Accessed November 25, 2016.

approval as a band--singing pacifist justification for military might under their first big hit "The Rose." But when compared to the Puhdys there was a stark contrast between the two groups.

While the state cracked down on lyrics, the East German Communist party came together in a special "cultural conference" to consider further means for bringing the music scene under control. In this "fight against American Cultural Barbarism" Alexander Abusch would champion East Germany's fight and announce "We have begun to battle the influences of American *Unkultur* and bourgeois decadence with particular vigilance in the area of entertainment and dance music."[23] No longer were the communist leaders content with censoring lyrics, by 1959 they had begun to censor dance *movements* as well. The difficulty of dissuading teenagers from listening to and dancing to rock and roll was no easy task. Walter Ulbricht conceded that the campaign "against '*Hotmusik'* was a failure and that instead of taking away their music and dances, they should come up with 'something better,' "We already have some advances to show...several new songs and even dances, as, for example, the 'Lipsi.'"[24] These new dances and songs seemed like a simple solution to a complex ideological problem; the 'something better' was the perfect blend of modern form and socialist content.

East German Jokes were the most widely used form of artistic expression that really helps define the uniqueness of East Germany under Soviet leadership. Straddling the line between conforming to censorship rules and rebelling against them were jokes that reflected the concerns of East Germans. It should be noted that "Communism is the only political system to have created its own international brand of comedy."[25] These jokes could be seen in three lights: notion of the joke as "a tiny revolution," a harmless way to let off steam, or, an early warning sign about problems in and with the system.[26] The first way is obvious--any negative comment that could be said about the Soviet system in East Germany was punishable; the censorship demands on popular art were harsh and determined to only promote the good that they believed they were achieving. "The monopoly of State power meant that any act of nonconformity, down to a simple turn of phrase, could be construed as a form of dissent."[27] However, the idea that jokes about the Communist system or the State being an individual form of dissent could be dismissed as most leaders in the GDR and in Russia frequently made political jokes about

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[23] Ryback, p. 28.

[24] Ibid, 29.; Lipsi is a created by a 35 year old Leipzig composer that combines two waltz steps to create a 6/4 beat that assured continuous body contact but gave the dancer a sensation reminiscent of the jitterbug.

[25] Lewis, Ben. *Hammer & Tickle.* Prospect Magazine. May 2006.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

themselves. Stalin was known to use humour in his daily life himself; he once told a joke about a visit from a Georgian delegation:

> They come, they talk to Stalin, and they go, heading off down the Kremlin's corridors.
> Stalin starts looking for his pipe. He can't find it. He calls in Beria, the Dreaded head of his secret police.
> 'Go after the delegation, and find out which one took my pipe.' he says.
> Beria scuttles off down the corridor.
> Five minutes later, Stalin finds his pipe under a pile of papers.
> He calls Beria--'Look, I've found my pipe.'
> 'It's too late,' Beria says, 'Half the delegation admitted they took your pipe, and the other half died during questioning.'[28]

The jokes fell into several categories which included, but were not limited to, jokes about the economy, about Soviet propaganda, Marxist-Leninist theory and communist art.[29] East German jokes were typically self-deprecating, as opposed to those of other nations in the Soviet Bloc.[30] Some jokes played off of the lack of resources common in Communist/Socialist societies that frequently meant that those that could afford to, had to wait for long periods of time in order to receive specialty items like cars and certain foods.

> A man dies and goes to hell. There he discovers that he has a choice: he can go to capitalist hell or to communist hell. Naturally, he wants to compare the two, so he goes over to capitalist hell. There outside the door is the devil, who looks a bit like Ronald Reagan. "What's it like in there?" asks the visitor. "Well," the devil replies, "in capitalist hell, they flay you alive, then they boil you in oil and then they cut you up into small pieces with sharp knives."
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> "That's terrible!" he gasps. "I'm going to check out communist hell!" He goes over to communist hell, where he discovers a huge queue of people waiting to get in. He waits in line. Eventually he gets to the front and there at the door to communist hell is a little old man who looks a bit like Karl

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[28] Ibid.

[29] See opening quote.

[30] Lewis, Ben. *Hammer & Tickle.*

Marx. "I'm still in the free world, Karl," he says, "and before I come in, I want to know what it's like in there."

"In communist hell," says Marx impatiently, "they flay you alive, then they boil you in oil, and then they cut you up into small pieces with sharp knives."

"But… but that's the same as capitalist hell!" protests the visitor, "Why such a long queue?"

"Well," sighs Marx, "Sometimes we're out of oil, sometimes we don't have knives, sometimes no hot water…"[31]

In order to fully defend the conclusion that East German adherence to Soviet censorship now meant that Socialistic Realism would be a defining characteristic of East German popular culture, a comparison must be drawn between those East Germans that complied to censor guidelines and those that did not. Popular culture in the GDR was as much influenced by those two outside sources as it was influential to them. Musicians and artists across the board who allowed themselves to be influenced by the West, would eventually help to tear down communism's hold over the GDR. Rock and Pop musicians would help actively start a revolution in the 1970s and 1980s--many of the student activists in the period would be influenced by these East German bands as well as actual western groups like the Beatles and Springsteen. Even western television found its way into the GDR. Mikhail Safonov argued that the Beatles influenced the collapse of communism more so than did dissident intellectuals. He described their influence to such an extent that even just wearing one's hair as they did would get one stopped on the streets and forcibly having their hair cut.[32] An episode of *Dallas* that was allowed to play in Romania "in order to show how corrupt the American system was…" Only served to show the people how much better life under a capitalist system was and subsequently led to the death of their dictator leader, Ceausescu.[33] David Hasselhoff would claim to have a similar effect on the people of East Germany, since his 1989 song '*Looking for Freedom'* was number one in West Germany--and East Germans had access to radio and television from the West, especially in the latter years as more privately owned television sets increased.[34] Despite not having conclusive evidence to just how much these figures influenced the Fall, it is safe to assume that even if they did not actively bring down the

[31] Ibid

[32] Hignett, Kelly Phd. *Video May have Killed the Radio Star, but did Popular Culture Kill Communism?* The View East.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

Wall, the government thought enough about Western entertainment in the broader sense to actively try and prevent their influence on the East German people--and in particular, the youths.

Despite its failure to continue past reunification, the approved popular culture of 1949 to 1989 Eastern Germany was unique and defined the generation. Historians should look at the literature and art that has come out of this period as more than just aesthetic; it can be used to discover what society was like in the period for everyday folks as it tended to be grounded in a form of reality. While some of the jokes of the day have been lost, their political references falling out of relevance after reunification, the ones that did survive could also tell us what the people cared about. Ben Lewis opens his book *Hammer and Tickle* with the strong statement, "There have been political and anti-authority jokes in every era, but nowhere else did political jokes cohere into an anonymous body of folk literature as they did under communism."[35] While all of the art that came out of the GDR in some way formed what we have come to know as the German Democratic Republic, these artistic mediums--the jokes especially--served to define the social narrative of the GDR from 1945-1989.

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[35] Lewis, Ben. *Hammer & Tickle*.