

Socialist solidarity in the German-German reality

Influences of East German dissidents on the West German radical left milieu in
the 1970s



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3946290

RMA HISTORY THESIS

UTRECHT UNIVERSITY

SUPERVISOR: PROF. DR. J. PEKELDER

13 SEPTEMBER 2018

WORD COUNT: 43936

Front cover illustration

Rudolf Bahro (left) and Wolf Biermann (right)

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Acknowledgements

I cannot believe that the writing of this thesis, and with that this master as well, is coming to an end. It was an extremely challenging task, which I fulfilled experiencing many different emotions. I could not have managed this without the help and inspiration of some people, whom I would like to thank here. First of all, a big thank you to all my family and friends just for being in my life and giving me moral support during this challenging period. I would also like to thank my supervisor Jacco Pekelder, without whose scholarly insight and expertise this thesis would not have been possible, and who was the only person with whom I could truly share my passion for this topic. Furthermore, I would like to thank my dad, Berry, for the inspiration on the topic; his life and my interest for the past somehow brought me here. My sister, Imme, for her inspiring and exemplary courage and determination in doing research and pursuing what you want, for being the greater of an example for me than she realises. Otilie, for our weekly talks, for her unconditional support and believe in me, and her expertise in editing parts of this thesis. Lisette, for her indefatigable interest in what I was doing, and for the exceptional fits of laughing we can have which always cheers me up. Pilar, for always managing to give me back my confidence in myself, and for just being an angel. Marta, with whom I could always share both our passion for history, as well as our passion for life. Roos, for dancing the evenings away with me to clear my head, and the very good talks that always make me feel worthwhile and her courage for always asking me the thing that needs to be asked. Marwa, for showing and reminding me that there is more than study in life, and whom was always there to experience that with me. Eva, for our endless days of study together as the Zeilstra & Lammertink duo, without whom this whole process would have been unbearable, and without whose insights I could not have done. Amir, for going to the finish line together and giving me some brilliant insights and tips when finishing my thesis. All my colleagues of the RMA, for going through this crazy particular roller coaster of our master together – alone it would have been much more dark and lonesome, and nobody understood my situation better than you. Laurien Crump, for both her scholarly and moral support throughout the two years of this master, which always came at the exact time that I needed it. Hanke, for being my friend, for knowing me so well, without having to use many words. Marije, for our engaging talks about life, literature, and history. Beatrice, for saving my life in Sheffield, inspiring me more than she knows, and for letting me be her Watson in the detectives of the past that we are. Christoffer, for being who you are, proof reading my thesis, and making life unbearable without you there.

Abstract

This research sets out to examine the influence of the East German Marxist dissidents Wolf Biermann and Rudolf Bahro on the radical left milieu in West Germany in the late 1970s. In doing so, it aims to fill the historiographical lacuna of reciprocal influences between political activists on both sides of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain during the Cold War. A more integrated history of East and West Europe has implications for contemporary debates on a common European heritage, and on the problems faced with European integration. Deploying the methodology of critical discourse analysis, within the theoretical framework of transfer history, leads to the a source selection that consists of the cultural media output of the radical left in West Germany, such as magazines, leaflets, journals, newspapers, published books, letters, and songs.

After a reasoned context overview of the rather elusive radical left milieu in West Germany in the 1970s, the influence of two particular East German dissidents is examined: Wolf Biermann and Rudolf Bahro. Biermann and Bahro were both active in the scenes in which the radical left in West Germany organised themselves: the music and youth festival scene, and the literature and intelligentsia scene respectively. Biermann came to the Federal Republic after his (in)famous expatriation from the German Democratic Republic in 1976. His songs critical of the GDR authorities were unacceptable to the SED. Bahro arrived two years later, when he was released from an East German prison as part of an amnesty, and was threatened with longer prison sentences if he did not leave the country. Bahro had been in prison because he had written a theoretical book which criticised the ‘actually existing socialism’ in eastern European states.

Both men’s arrival did not go unnoticed in the FRG, and especially not in the splintered and isolated radical left milieu. Critical examination of the sources, reveals that Biermann and Bahro had a legitimising, unifying, and pragmatising effect on the radical left milieu in West Germany. Eventually, with the help of these legitimising, unifying and pragmatizing dynamics, the radical left started to organise themselves along other lines than ‘Marxism-socialism’, and even establish a political party that would participate in the political system of the FRG. This research proves that the iron curtain was not always as impenetrable as suggested by historians, and it challenges the often made assumptions that the West only influenced the East.

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Abbreviations

APO	Außerparlamentarische Opposition
AStA	Allgemeiner Studentenausschuss
CDU	Christlich-Demokratische Union (Deutschlands)
CSU	Christlich-Soziale Union
DKP	Deutsche Kommunistische Partei
FDJ	Freie Deutsche Jugend
FDP	Freie Demokratische Partei
FRG	Federal Republic Germany
GDR	German Democratic Republic
KgU	Kampfgruppe gegen Unmenschlichkeit
KPD	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands
KU	Kritische Universität
ML	Marxism/Leninism
PCE	Partido Comunista de España
PCI	Partito Comunista Italiano
PID	Politisch-ideologisch Diversion
RAF	Rote Armee Fraktion
SA	Sturmabteilung
SB	Sozialistisches Büro
SDS	Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund
SED	Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands
UZ	Unsere Zeit
VOS	Vereinigung Opfer des Stalinismus
VPO	Vereinigung Politischer Ostflüchtlinge

Prologue

December 2015 on a cold winter day, I sat in the *Mensa* of the University of Leipzig. While eating my lunch in between the lectures for that day, my thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a student with a megaphone, shouting: ‘Anti-Legida demonstration tonight at 6pm! We meet at the *Moritzbastei*. Be there!’ I noticed myself taken by surprise. This kind of political engagement I did not see happening soon in the library canteen of the university in Utrecht. It reminded me of stories my father used to tell me about his hippie times at the PSP (*Pacifist Socialist Party – socialist political party in the Netherlands from 1957-1991*). During the stay of my exchange in Leipzig I encountered many more similar situations. I found it fascinating to notice how politically engaged the students there were. And how leftist they were – which formed a peculiar mix with the extreme rightist Legida adherents in the city. This experience fuelled my interest in (East-) German history and its protest culture. What was the historical context in which I should view these so publicly politically engaged students? Additionally, I have always had a fascination for dissidents: people going against the mainstream, doing something different from what their environment has taught them to be the truth. Inspiration in that sense might have come from my parents as well, both breaking away from (religious) traditions of their families. In deciding a topic of my thesis, I had a lot of difficulty choosing something from my far-ranging myriad interests in history. In hindsight it seems, however, that this topic of German radical left protest movements and dissidents was in fact always there in my mind, and was probably without me realising it, the inevitable topic of my thesis all along.

Utrecht, August 2018.

group Krempetiere sang, for example, at the six-week steel-worker's strike from 28 November 1978 until 11 January 1979.¹⁰⁰

The *Liedermacher* scene was also a scene in which artists from outside the FRG could be seen, such as dissident artists from East Germany. Among them the most famous one, Wolf Biermann. Chapter two is devoted to the case of Wolf Biermann and additionally discusses how the music scene was important in his case. The Liedermacher scene was, just as the literary scene, an important hub for the radical left milieu in West Germany to meet leftist people from other particular groups. The festivals corresponded with the utopian ideas of 'a big folk family', an ideal that was frequently lived out in exemplary fashion at the festivals. Holler recalls from his own experience with these festivals: 'Set against this commonly projected utopia [the 'big folk family'], the aforementioned conflicts over the "correct" political line – as ferocious as they were – played a subordinate role at the West German folk festivals'.¹⁰¹

Universities and the radical left sub-culture

Another scene where a so called leftist 'sub-culture' developed, was at universities. Peter Glotz, a member of the SPD and Secretary of Education and Science in Berlin during the late 1970s, argued that two different cultures, had developed in the FRG: existing parallel and separately from one another. This led him to say in *Der Spiegel* in 1977, in the aftermath of the Mescalero affaire:

The differences are so great that I have to speak of two cultures. It is as if Chinese are trying to communicate with Japanese [...] One side lives in a subculture within the university, reading only their own flyers and informational materials [...] And then there exists the totally different culture of the many, who read their mainstream newspaper no matter whether the paper was produced by the Springer media conglomerate or someone else [...] Those who have lived for three years in the subculture speak another language than those of mainstream culture, and even the common assumptions are being destroyed.¹⁰²

Glotz's assessment of universities as the bastion of the radical left sub-culture needs some nuancing, especially since at the time he said this, it was strongly connected to the events of the German autumn and the conviction of many people in the FRG that universities were the breeding ground for terrorism. Although it is thus not fair to say that all universities, all students, and all professors were amongst a radical left sub-culture, it is fair to say that a relatively high number of students and professors adhered to Marxist-socialist ideas and that the climate in itself was at least very tolerable towards the radical left milieu. This is not surprising, as the radical left milieu had developed out of the disintegration of the APO, amongst which the SDS, an organisation made up of predominantly university students, was one of the main organs.

¹⁰⁰ Holler, 'The Folk and *Liedermacher* scene in the Federal Republic of the 1970s and 1980s', pp.136-137.

¹⁰¹ Holler, 'The Folk and *Liedermacher* scene in the Federal Republic of the 1970s and 1980s', p. 147.

¹⁰² Peter Glotz quoted in: Dirke, *All power to the imagination!*, p.105.

To be sure, in the late 1960s the relationship between the SDS and the universities was not harmonious. Through sit-ins and teach-ins, protests, and occupations and barricading of university buildings, the SDS students had forced a debate on university reform. Nick Thomas explains that ‘above all, the universities defended themselves against a concerted attempt at their politicisation by the left’.¹⁰³ One of those attempts was the initiative of the *Kritische Universität* (KU, ‘Critical University’), proposed by SDS member Wolfgang Nitsch in June 1967. The founders of KU saw it as an alternative to the existing universities. The structures and events of the KU were highly politicised and conformed entirely to SDS ideas on higher education. The KU initiatives led to vicious conflicts between the newly appointed *Rektor* at the *Freie Universität* Berlin, professor Ewald Harndt, former Nazi Party and SA (*Sturmabteilung*, a commando group of Hitler’s National Socialist Party) member.¹⁰⁴ The protest to reform university government to make it more democratic, resulted in a debate on the role of universities in which academics had to reassess the Nazi past, and had to conclude that reform was essential if academic freedom of thought and expression was to be retained or attained.¹⁰⁵ Universities had successfully resisted the SDS demands of left political encroachment of the university, but the one-sided anti-communist representation of the 1950s was no longer tenable.¹⁰⁶

How did the situation described above develop into one where universities came to be regarded as this radical left sub-cultural place? Especially after the German autumn of 1977, when the alternative milieu was more active and profound in dissociating themselves from the violent strategies of the left-wing terrorist groups, universities became not the sole, but definitely a very important place where people could be recruited for the alternative milieu. It was for this reason that not only the big university cities, but also the medium sized university cities, such as Heidelberg, Freiberg, Marburg, and Göttingen had thriving alternative cultures.¹⁰⁷ Sven Reichardt states that in 1980, 13,5 percent of the West Berlin students could be counted as part of the alternative culture, and in Frankfurt this number reached as high as 20,1 percent. The average of the whole Federal Republic was 11,5 percent.¹⁰⁸ Additionally, the AStA (*Allgemeiner Studentenausschuss*, or ‘General Students Committee’) elections in the mid-1970s reveal that the undogmatic left groups, in the guise of the *Sponti* and Grassroots groups (*Basisgruppen*), in West Berlin, Frankfurt and Heidelberg were gaining popularity at a good pace. For example, in Frankfurt in December 1977, the *Gruppierung Ungomatische Linke* (‘faction of the undogmatic left’) won eleven out of the twenty-two seats in the students parliament, and in Heidelberg the *Wahlbündnis Linke Liste* won 25 percent of the seats in the winter semester of 1975-1976.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰³ Thomas, *Protest movements*, p.144.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas, *Protest Movements*, p. 134.

¹⁰⁵ A description of the reforms can be found in: R.M.O. Pritchard, *The end of elitism? The democratisation of the West German university system* (Oxford, 1990), pp.97-102.

¹⁰⁶ Thomas, *Protest movements*, pp.144-145.

¹⁰⁷ Reichardt, *Authentizität und Gemeinschaft*, p. 28.

¹⁰⁸ Reichardt, *Authentizität und Gemeinschaft*, p. 29.

¹⁰⁹ Ibidem, p. 29.

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