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How East German students received the '56 Hungarian Revolution

News of the events of the Hungarian Revolution, right after political changes in Poland at the end of October 1956, threw the East German public into ferment. Walter Ulbricht, first secretary of the German Socialist Unity Party (GSUP)[1] Central Committee, was afraid of a repetition of the June 1953 uprising in Berlin and of the Hungarian and Polish efforts at reform might be acting as a catalyst. The state-controlled media spoke of counter-revolution and anti-state activity by Horthy-fascist bands shielded by Western provocateurs.[2] These official commentaries on counter-revolution and the Western broadcasts of revolution and a struggle for freedom from the Soviets were the two influences on East German public opinion.

Almost all strata in society contained some who took a great interest in the developments in Hungary, but the most active and receptive reactions came from members of the intelligentsia. It was groups of students in higher education and opposition communist intellectuals who constituted the greatest danger in the party leadership's eyes.

What effect did news and information about the revolutionary events have on the activity of students? Was there an enhanced risk in the autumn of 1956 of the kind of resistance dubbed "rebellion of the intellectuals"? After some consideration of the antecedents, these are the questions considered here, mainly through GSUP documents and recollections by witnesses.[3]

1 Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED).

2 See, for instance, *Neues Deutschland* October 25 and 27, and November 6, 1956.

3 For more detail on reactions of the East German intelligentsia to the Hungarian Revolution, based mainly on German literature, see Cseh 1995.

THE REACTIONS OF STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Of the various intellectual groups, the students were the most vehement in their reactions and the numbers involved. The East German press set about dampening or even silencing the reactions of sympathy with the Hungarian revolutionaries and efforts to take the demands of the Hungarian students as an example. The central GSUP daily, *Neues Deutschland*, reported on October 26 of outrages committed by bands of counter-revolutionaries, and of solidarity with the authorities from East German students and antipathy to the Hungarian counter-revolutionaries.[4] There were indeed some college groups—and some industrial workers—who sent telegrams of sympathy to a Hungary "afflicted by fascist bands".[5] A Berlin school and a police station were among those proposing to raise international forces to crush the counter-revolution.[6]

After initial silence, *Neues Deutschland* published articles on October 25 and 27 describing how the authorities, the workers, and the Soviet troops rushing to their aid had jointly broken the resistance of the armed fascist rebels.[7] These pieces infuriated several intellectuals. As Günter Zehm, a pupil of Ernst Bloch and by then an assistant lecturer at the Jena University, wrote to his friend Gerhard Zwerenz, "What our lamentable newspapers want to conceal is that clearly one of the biggest revolutions in modern history since 1917 has broken out in Hungary (dubbed by our press here as a 'counter-revolution'), where the real revolutionaries have triumphed."[8]

The Stasi (Ministry of State Security) also reported to the party leaders on the public's "unpleasant" reactions. Some of the university discussion groups started at the beginning of the year were revived by the accession of Gomułka and the initial

4 *Neues Deutschland* October 26, 1956.

5 Cseh 1995, 74.

6 The Office of the Federal Commissioner, Ministry for State Security (Die Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR, Ministerium für Staatssicherheit, hereafter BStU, MfS), Information on the Polish and Hungarian events (Kurzinformation zu den Ereignissen in Volkspolen und der Ungarischen Volksrepublik, hereafter Information…), Allg., 79/56., Berlin, November 11, 1956, 6.

7 *Neues Deutschland* October 25 and 27, 1956.

8 Stiftung Archive der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv, Zentrales Parteiarchiv (The Donation Archives of the Parties and Mass Organizations of the GDR in the Federal Archives, Central Party Archives, hereafter: SAMPO-BArch, ZPA) IV 2, 1, 182., 38. Analyse der Feindtätigkeit innerhalb der wissenschaftlichen und künstlerischen Intelligenz (Report on the enemy activity of the scientific and cultural intelligentsia, hereafter: Report…).

successes of the Hungarian uprising. According to a Stasi report of October 25, "hostile" leaflets were spread on the night of October 24 at the Humboldt University in Berlin, where students demanded more information on events in the world.[9] According to the district leadership, Professor Robert Havemann, who taught at the university, had given a lecture "not in accordance with the party line".[10] Gatherings to discuss the Polish and Hungarian situation had been called for at a Berlin art college.[11]

On October 25, leaders of the Free German Youth (FGY)[12] in the history department at Jena University compiled a ten-point draft entitled "FDY opinions and proposals on problems of democracy and university life in the GDR[13]", which was posted up on the walls of the university.[14] The proposed political remedies were 1) to change the one-sided reporting of the press, 2) publish fresher information and the papers' own opinion, 3) have open and critical debate on basic questions of government policy and greater scope for the press, 4) not conceal disagreement among party and government leaders even if it conflicted with the majority opinion of the party's Central Committee, 5) make West German university papers and more important dailies available at universities, 6–7) increase the rights of the Free German Youth and hold democratic university elections, 8) raise student stipends, 9) organize student exchange programmes with the FRG[15], and 10) hold annual student congresses to discuss student maters, but with the main task of formulating a new programme for higher education.

In a writing of October 26, the Hungarian uprising was seen as a consequence of the Polish events.[16] Some took positions against the counter-revolutionaries, but anti-Soviet and anti-party voices strengthened as well.[17] According to reports on the public mood, much of the public and some party members listened to Austrian and Swiss stations, claiming domestic ones did not report the truth.[18] People were bewildered, according to one report, which could be explained in party by the various conflicting rumours.[19]

9 BStU, MfS, Information…, Allg., 74/56., Berlin, October 25, 1956, 1.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 1–2.

12 Freie Deutsche Jugend (FDJ).

13 Deutsche Demokratische Republik (DDR).

14 Fritsch–Nöckeln 2000, 13.

15 Federal Republic of Germany (Bundesrepublik Deutschland, BRD).

16 BStU, MfS, Information…, Allg., 75/56., Berlin, October 26, 1956, 4.

17 Ibid., 4-5.

18 BStU, MfS, Information…, Allg., 79/56., Berlin, November 2, 1956, 3.

The report of the situation on October 27 stated that the intelligentsia was still behaving in a restrained way and taking a wait-and-see attitude, but there was concern about situation in institutes of higher education.[20] Students of the Humboldt University, for instance, had intended to hold a demonstration, which the party had intervened swiftly to prevent. Students in Leipzig, Rostock, Dresden and elsewhere, and in the Humboldt, had publicized their demands. Their programme resembled Jena's in demanding independent student bodies and more objective information from the media, but went on to call for an end to courses in the Russian language and the course known as Bases of the Social Sciences.[21] A Stasi document of October 29 reported that the idea of dismissing the party leaders, especially Ulbricht, had been raised at several colleges.[22]

A comparison of these drafts with the demands compiled by the Hungarian students reveals that the East German ones were more put in a milder form and never brought before open plenary meetings. The most radical aspirations were to remove the Russian language from the syllabus, and if only by implication, to remove Ulbricht from office. By contrast, the Budapest students included the withdrawal of Soviet troops in a programme that was posted up in many parts of the city and even printed.

Although the reports said the district leaders thought the party capable of preventing any provocations, commando units formed at the time of the 1953 uprising were placed on alert outside the Humboldt University in Berlin.[23] There really were several student rallies at the end of October, in Berlin, Jena, Leipzig, Magdeburg, Greifswald, Halle and elsewhere, where the students reiterated their demands.[24] On October 30, the Politburo set up a university council, probably in response to the mounting pressure, as a way of calming the students.[25]

The sources state that the most active group, the veterinary students of Berlin, wanted to hold a demonstration on November 2, but the Free German Youth secretary informed the commandos, who prevented it by lining up before the lecture halls

19 BStU, MfS, Information…, Allg., 77/56., Berlin, October 29, 1956, 2.

20 BStU, MfS, Information…, Allg., 76/56., Berlin, October 27, 1956, 3.

21 Ibid., 4.

22 Hoffmann 1993, 258–9.

23 Ibid., 260–1.

24 Prokop 2006, 56–7.

25 Brandt 2002, 162. That was never done; the measure was rescinded on November 20 under pressure from Ulbricht. Ibid., 197–8.

armed with rubber truncheons, in a show of strength.[26] Karl Schirdewan, a secretary of the GSUP Central Committee, disagreed with this, at least according to his memoirs, and would rather have won the young people over.[27]

On November 5, the day after the revolution had been crushed, about 1000 students gathered at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin for a sit-down protest against the Soviet intervention.[28] They too were dispersed by the commandos. The Politburo, at a meeting on November 8, drew up a plan in several stages for suppressing further "counter-revolutionary acts".[29] Stasi forces would be used to prevent acts of provocation in the first instance, followed if they failed by the people's army. In the last resort, Soviet troops would rush to the defence of the GDR.

SUMMARY

Partly due to the shortcomings in the East German news services, few people in the 1956 GDR knew much of Hungary beyond that it was a "fraternal socialist state". It becomes clear from reading the recollections that some of the intelligentsia were no exception to that in the spring of 1956. Those receptive to Hungarian politics and culture tended first of all to admire Georg Lukács, many of whose works had appeared in the GDR. There was interest from several East German writers in the activities of the Petőfi Circle. The literary and political activity of the Hungarian intelligentsia were followed particularly by the intellectuals associated with the publishers Aufbau and the journal *Sonntag*. Significantly, one of the actions never carried out was a detailed plan to rescue Lukács.[30]

The outbreak of the Hungarian Revolution was a catalyst for some intellectuals who had been activated politically by the 20th Congress of the CPSU, primarily for the hopes it raised of democratic change in the GDR. They showed great enthusiasm for Gomułka and in the early days of the Hungarian Revolution. Though most did not expect such democratic change to come by revolutionary means, some greeted the uprising warmly and were outraged at the media presenting it as a counter-revolution. Others feared the revolutionary events might spread and were alarmed at the street fighting in Hungary, and a few even supported the suppression.

26 Prokop 2006, 56–7.

27 Schirdewan 1994, 116.

28 Wolle 2001, 318–9.

29 Hoffman 1993, 263–4.

30 Janka 1989, 28–35.

Those to become most active in October 1956 were the university students, whose meetings to debate the Polish and Hungarian events yielded political demands, for instance for more authentic information, student self-government, and an end to courses on Russian and the bases of Marxism–Leninism. However, it would be an exaggeration to ascribe these student actions entirely to the events in Hungary. Most of the debating groups had formed after the 20th Congress and gained new strength from the events in Poland, before reaching a climax in late October and early November, during the Hungarian Revolution. There were also protests at the suppression of the revolution, but the state security service learnt of these plans and stepped in rapidly to forestall them.

The catalytic effect of the Hungarian Revolution applied in other intellectual circles as well. Philosopher Wolfgang Harich, for instance, had been encouraged by the 20th Congress and sought to gain his purposes by diplomatic means. He saw the autumn of 1956 as a good opportunity to reorganize the GDR in a socialist fashion, but his plan proved too radical for the party leadership, involving as it did reorganization of the whole party apparatus, including its leadership and a comprehensive programme aimed at German reunification. The party leadership itself contained some relatively liberal figures, such as Schierdewan, who criticized the personality cult surrounding Ulbricht and urged political reforms.

But the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution quashed any intention or hope of reform in the GDR. Ulbricht was especially outraged at the intentions of the communist intellectuals. Several-year prison sentences were given to Harich, Janka and other "rebellious intellectuals", and many others were excluded from the party. A timely excuse for these reprisals came with the Soviet explanation of the Hungarian Revolution as something fomented by Western provocateurs and by fascist groups, who had mainly won support for their infamies among the Hungarian intelligentsia. A succession of articles on treacherous anti-state activity by Hungarian and then East German writers appeared in the East German press after the revolution had been suppressed.

According to Stasi documents analysing intellectuals' behaviour in '56, the East German intelligentsia had been spurred to action by the devilish ruses of "the enemy". The reports told of conspiracy and espionage against the state and party. The Hungarian counter-revolution and Hungarian intelligentsia—e.g. Lukács and the Petőfi Circle—were especially prominent in the trial documents of Harich and associates as an ideological background with a detrimental influence on the conspirators' thinking.

Several of the show-trial victims published memoirs after 1989. Although these differ in their accounts in many respects, they agree that after a brief period of détente

and the defeat of the Hungarian Revolution, the mood in the GDR "iced over" again. There were none of the long-awaited personnel changes at the top of the communist party; Walter Ulbricht remained the party's first secretary, to the chagrin of many. For although Khrushchev was dissatisfied with Ulbricht in many respects, he concluded after the events in Poland and Hungary that he had the conservative East German leader to thank for the fact that no revolution had broken out in the GDR. Ulbricht, encouraged by the changed policy in the Soviet Union and bloody suppression of the Hungarian Revolution, went on in 1958 to exclude from the party leadership all who had dared to criticize its first secretary.

Contemporaries such as Gerhard Zwerenz also agreed that Ulbricht, paradoxically, had the Hungarian Revolution to thank for stabilizing his position. He had shown good tactical sense in using it against the none-too-dangerous 1956 opposition movement among the East German intelligentsia, which had been influenced by the Hungarian "counter-revolutionaries". They were presented as having envisaged grave actions against the party and state and severely punished accordingly: "For Ulbricht, the tragic Hungarian events provided the chance of prevailing. The writers knew their bell had tolled when Wolfgang Harich was arrested. The dream of intellectual freedom was dispelled."[31]

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31 Zwerenz's article published in the West German paper *Der Telegraf* is quoted in Report…, SAPMO-Barch, ZPA, IV 2, 1, 182., 43.

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