

**British-GDR Relations, 1949 – 1989/90**

Conference held at the University of Glamorgan, Pontypridd, 4 – 6 April 2003

Despite a small number of trail-blazing studies, above all those by Marianne Howarth and Henning Hoff,<sup>1</sup> the subject of British-GDR relations remains conspicuous by its near absence in the otherwise booming field of GDR historiography. The purpose of this conference, hosted as a regional conference of the German Historical Society at the University of Glamorgan from 4 – 6 April 2003 and generously supported by the British Academy and the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Glamorgan, was to provide a forum for work in progress as well as the established subject expert. An important outcome of the conference was to stress that the lack of research in this area stands in contrast to the extent and diversity of the contacts and connections between Britain and the GDR and the vast expanse of newly available documentation.

The opening address by **Ulrich Pfeil** (Deutsches Historisches Institut, Paris) set out the context and *modus operandi* of the GDR's *Westpolitik*. Entitled 'Cultural Relations between the GDR and the Western Countries', Pfeil's main thesis was that despite the caution exercised by the GDR, a process of cultural transfer can be meaningfully discussed. Pfeil also delineated the cognitive structures in which the GDR's self-representation in the West operated by providing interesting examples of the use of regime-sanctioned censure in official East German autobiography (Franz Dahlem) and the generational limitations of East Berlin's use of antifascism as a legitimising ideology. These themes remained a *leitmotif* running through the subsequent sessions.

The first conference session addressed the part played by film in British-GDR relations. Contributions by **Bert Hogenkamp** (University of Utrecht), **Martin Brady** (King's College, University of London) and **Rosemary Stott** (London Metropolitan University) detailed the GDR's political and social self-representation in films viewed in Britain and the public reception of a select number of British films viewed by East German audiences. Common to each contribution was the evident failure of East German film to achieve the recognition accorded in the field of literature by such prominent figures as Bertold Brecht and Christa Wolf.

The second session addressed the diversity of organisational contacts between Britain and the GDR. **Stefan Berger** and **Norman LaPorte** (University of Glamorgan) appraised the evolving nature of trade union relations between the two countries. While accounting for the Trade Union Congress' official anti-Communism through out the Cold War, this contribution located the motivation for widespread union-to-union contacts in the desire to promote détente and, to a lesser extent, ideological affinities in a deterministic picture of socialism as an outgrowth of industrial nationalisation. **John Sandford's** (University of Reading) appraised the relationship between the GDR and the British peace movement in the 1980s, focusing on the Stasi-led campaign against END. The following paper by **Anthony Glees** (Brunel University) further developed the role of the Stasi in Anglo-GDR relations, arguing that the Stasi was at the heart of British-GDR relations. **Hennig**

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<sup>1</sup> Hennig Hoff, *Großbritannien und die DDR 1955 – 1973. Diplomatie auf Umwegen* (Oldenburg: Munich, 2003); Marianne Howarth, 'Britain and East Germany: The Politics of Non-Recognition' M.Phil. (University of Nottingham, 1977)

**Hoff** (University of Cologne) delineated the extensive, if complex, relationship between the GDR and the Labour Party, underlining the importance the GDR attached to its relations with a large number of Labour Party MPs and party leaders.

The third session appraised the role of regionalism in British-GDR Relations. **Damian MacCon Udlah** (University College London) set out to fill the gap left by other studies of Anglo-GDR relations by addressing East Berlin's policy towards Northern Ireland. In addition to detailing East German media and literary interest in the 'Troubles', MacCon Udlah also set out party-political relations and a number of sporting links. **Marianne Howard** (Nottingham Trent University) located the GDR's relations with Scotland and Wales within a context of evolving regional identities. Relations with Scotland aimed to tap a growing national identity, while relations with Wales exploited a growing feeling of minority status within a dominant culture defined by Englishness.

The fourth session turned to professional relations between Britain and the GDR. **Mike Dennis** (University of Wolverhampton) appraised GDR studies in Britain until 1989, placing particular emphasis on the development of the historiography since the late 1960s and academics' inability to anticipate the collapse of East Germany. Toby Thacker traced the development of musical transactions between Britain and the GDR, emphasising his thesis that classical music represented an important space for cultural relations during the non-recognition era. **Merrilyn Thomas** (University College, London) focussed on the nature of church relations. Central to her argument was the view that the British government secretly used religion during the 1960s in a bid to prop up the regime, rather than undermine it while the after shocks of the Cuban missile crisis continued to resonate in Cold War Europe.

The fifth session provided a forum for a witness seminar. **Peter Johnson** (BBC and Reuters reporter) commented on how, despite a degree of sympathy for the regime's social policies, he collected and collated materials to expose East Germany as a dictatorship with a serious human rights problem. By contrast, **Stanley Forman** (a filmmaker and life-long British Communist) discussed his efforts to improve East Berlin's image in Britain by distributing documentaries which aimed to expose the allegedly 'fascist' character of the Federal Republic. A final paper by the former *Neues Deutschland* journalist **Reiner Oschmann** depicted the experiences of an East German reporter in Thatcher's Britain. Focusing on East Berlin's spurned efforts to improve British-GDR diplomatic relations during the 1980s, Oschmann also gave an account of his involvement in East German espionage in Britain and how MI6 tried to win him over.

The final session turned to the role of the Federal Republic in British-GDR relations. **Arnd Bauerkämper** (Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung, Potsdam) provided a wide-ranging overview of the extensive influence the FRG exercised in Anglo-GDR relations at the governmental and non-governmental levels. Addressing the diversity of motivations driving some political parties and organisations in Britain to regard the GDR as the 'better Germany', Bauerkämper placed particular emphasis on the attraction of the regime's self-presentation as an antifascist state. **Detlef Nakath** (Wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiter bei "Helle Panke zur Förderung von Politik, Bildung und Kultur e.V., Berlin) detailed the involvement of Britain (as one of the occupying powers) in the negotiations leading to the Basic Treaty between the two Germanys and the developments leading to East German recognition.

The central findings of this conference centred on the diversity of East German political, economic (trade) and cultural overtures to Britain and the changing context of these overtures' reception in Britain. If the extent of contacts and connections were more limited than those between the GDR and France or Italy, this does nothing to eclipse the importance of British-GDR relations in the broader picture of East - West relations

during the Cold War. The conference organisers are grateful to the British Academy, the German Historical Society and the University of Glamorgan for the financial support making the conference possible.

Norman LaPorte

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