

BETWEEN DICTATORSHIP AND DISSENT: IDEOLOGY, LEGITIMACY, AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN EAST GERMANY, 1945-1990

Ned Richardson-Little

UNIVERSITY OF EXETER

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I.

In 1978, the East German intellectual Hermann Klenner wrote that “illusion and hypocrisy may be able to delay recognition of truth in the question of human rights, but progress is inevitable both in theory and in practice. The people will see to this.”¹ This kind of optimism for the cause of human rights sounds familiar today in the wake of the recent celebrations of the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The narrative of the late twentieth century is often told with the same framing as Klenner’s: the people rose up to demand their human rights, bringing down the illusions of state socialism in the process. In East Germany, the Socialist Unity Party (SED) could only rule as long as it could suppress the people and forcibly prevent outright rebellion.

Yet, when Hermann Klenner spoke of human rights, he was not speaking against the rule of the SED, he was not decrying the Berlin Wall, nor the abuses of the Stasi and its apparatus of mass surveillance. The illusion he denounced was the world capitalist system; the hypocrisy he saw as doomed was Western liberal democracy. Klenner’s human rights revolution began in 1917 on the streets of Petrograd; it advanced with the establishment of socialism on German soil, and eventually it would triumph around the world.

The rise of the human rights movement in the GDR is usually attributed to the signing of the Helsinki Accords, an international agreement signed by thirty-five countries from both sides of the Iron Curtain in 1975. According to this narrative, the SED’s decision to affirm the principles of human rights in a binding treaty created an unstoppable combination of diplomatic pressure from abroad and a dissent from within that eventually brought down the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 and eventually state socialism altogether.² The brutal and perfidious East German state was thus brought down by the hubris and hypocrisy of its short-sighted leaders, who cynically

1 Hermann Klenner, “Human Rights -Hypocrisy and Truth”, *Bulletin — GDR Committee for Human Rights* 3, no. 1 (1978): 15.

2 The main academic source for this narrative is Daniel Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism* (Princeton, 2001). In the popular press it is also a common historical framing Ulrich Schwarz, “Die Sprengkraft der Menschenrechte,” *Der Spiegel: Spezial Geschichte* 3 (2008): 106-109.

gambled on agreeing to human rights provisions that clearly contradicted the basic structures of the GDR. Helsinki simply unmasked the true feelings of the populace, which had been tamped down through threats of force, coercion, and the fearsome retribution of the secret police, the Stasi. The narrative of Western victory in the Cold War is thus integrated into broader historical accounts of the history of human rights as the inevitable march towards egalitarian liberal democracy, based on the “bulldozer logic” of human rights that relentlessly pressed forward towards progress.

Upon closer inspection, however, this narrative raises several questions: How could the SED, and indeed the rest of the Eastern Bloc, have been so careless as to have signed on to human rights commitments that would fatally undermined its legitimacy? If such agreements were so damaging to the regime, why did it then take until 1989 for the system to collapse? In the case of the GDR, why was there not a single independent human rights organization until 1986? Why did East Germans only take to the streets in the thousands in the name of human rights almost a decade and a half after the Helsinki Accords were signed? Furthermore, the idea that the human rights promises of the Helsinki Accords naturally aroused popular revolt is complicated by the fact that the SED had first claimed fidelity to human rights as far back as 1946. The East German state did not hide from the language of human rights in the early postwar period, but rather embraced the concept as an element of socialist ideology and of the legitimizing discourse of SED rule. In 1959, it created the state-directed GDR Committee for Human Rights, which mobilized parts of the East German population in the name of human rights against West German anticommunism and remilitarization. The Helsinki Accords were preceded by the SED’s commitment in 1968 to sign on to the United Nations Human Rights Covenants of 1966 as soon as the GDR became a member of the U.N., which then occurred in 1973. These commitments went beyond simple slogans and propaganda, as the regime created a whole philosophy of “socialist human rights” and spearheaded an initiative to draft an international “Socialist Declaration of Human Rights” in the 1980s.

While the SED was exceptional in its early adoption of human rights as a discourse of legitimization and propaganda against the West, the East German people were noteworthy for their late adoption of human rights as a tool of political dissent. When East Germans did revolt against the SED in June 1953, there was no talk of human rights

in the demonstrations and protests that ensued. In 1968, while the Prague Spring rocked neighboring Czechoslovakia, the SED peacefully held a plebiscite on the adoption of a new “Socialist Constitution.” As leaders like Walter Ulbricht called this new foundational document a step forward for human rights in the GDR, few sought to turn these words against the SED to demand political reform or to challenge the party’s monopoly on power. In the 1970s, as human rights became a global movement, East Germany remained an outlier in the socialist world: while thousands invoked human rights to legitimize their petitions to emigrate, the GDR was one of the few countries in the Eastern Bloc without an organized human rights movement demanding systemic change. Although those who sought to leave the GDR invoked international treaties, those who remained did not challenge socialist rule based on the idea of human rights. The most prominent dissidents in that decade avoided the language of human rights, and some East German intellectuals even attacked the human rights movements as reactionary.

Speaking in 1978, Hermann Klenner could survey the domestic and international political scene and hold to his faith in the global socialist project and its respect for human rights. By 1989, however, the intellectual elite of East Germany was far less confident. As the East German political system was about to collapse in the face of mass protests in September 1989, the GDR Committee for Human Rights celebrated its thirtieth anniversary under a cloud of uncertainty. The group was treated to a speech by Frank Berg, a member of the group’s Presidium, who lauded the fine work of the East German state and its intellectuals in furthering the cause of socialist human rights, but cautioned that work still had to be done to come to terms with the mistakes of the past. The crimes of Stalinism needed to be examined and laid bare, but he warned the audience against going too far: “The history of socialism would, however, be turned upside down if it was represented as a history of human rights violations.”³ At that time, Berg could not have known that in less than two months the Berlin Wall would be opened, or that exactly four months later the headquarters of the once feared Stasi would be occupied by protestors, or that a year later a treaty for the reunification of Germany would have been approved by parliaments in both Bonn and East Berlin. In that short span of time, however, he was proven correct about one important thing: when East Germans collectively viewed the SED as violators of their human rights everything would indeed be turned upside down.

3 Frank Berg, “Socialist Conception of Human Rights under Discussion,” *Bulletin – GDR Committee for Human Rights* 15, no.2 (1989): 17.

More than twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it is difficult to see how Klenner or Berg could have viewed a regime that denied the rights of its citizens to free speech, free assembly, unrestricted travel, and of course the right to vote in competitive elections as not only compliant with human rights norms, but as an international leader in the field. The tens of thousands of East Germans who took to the streets in the fall of 1989 with banners demanding “Human Rights and Freedom” seemed to conclusively demonstrate that these claims were no more than cynical and hypocritical propaganda.⁴ The Berlin Wall and the actions of the Stasi are held up today as prime examples of human rights abuses committed by a modern dictatorship. Yet for decades, the SED asserted its claim to be a champion of human rights with minimal backlash from the populace. The first dissident East German human rights organization, the Initiative for Peace and Human Rights, was only founded in 1986. How do we reconcile the revolution of 1989, arguably driven by mass popular demand for human rights, with the long and almost completely forgotten socialist human rights politics of the SED?

II.

While human rights were an almost completely neglected topic among historians until the end of the 1990s, since then it has exploded as a subject of inquiry.⁵ But where does the story of human rights begin? Some scholars have approached human rights as a timeless concept stretching back to philosophical principles of justice and equality found in antiquity. In this interpretation, the universal morality of the Stoic philosophers of Ancient Greece, the Babylonian legal system in the Code of Hammurabi, and the Persian guarantees of religious freedom for conquered peoples in the Cyrus Cylinder represent the beginnings of a process to realize human rights, even if the term itself was not yet in use.⁶

Others have disputed this lineage as anachronistic and instead traced the idea of human rights to the development of the theory of natural law and the Enlightenment in Europe. For Jonathan Israel, the concept of human rights is the end product of the rational materialist thinking of Spinoza and others in the Radical Enlightenment.⁷ According to Lynn Hunt, the origins of human rights can instead be traced to a moral awakening caused by a revolution in sensibilities brought about by the mass reading of accounts of torture and epistolary novels. These experiences created “brain changes” that aroused new forms of

4 Michael Richter, *Die Friedliche Revolution: Aufbruch zur Demokratie in Sachsen 1989/90* (Göttingen, 2010), 279.

5 Samuel Moyn, “The First Historian of Human Rights,” *American Historical Review* 116 (2011): 58.

6 Micheline Ishay, *The History of Human Rights: From Ancient Times to the Globalization Era* (Berkeley, 2008); Paul Gordon Lauren, *The Evolution of International Human Rights: Visions Seen* (Philadelphia, 2011).

7 Jonathan Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790* (Oxford, 2011), 12.

empathy leading to demands for universal rights.⁸ Although both the intellectual and moral theories of the Enlightenment origins of human rights are sharply disputed, most scholars agree that at least the modern terminology of human rights can be traced back to this era.

While language similar to that employed by the human rights movement was first put into action during French and American Revolutions, drawing a clean line from that era to human rights as they are understood today is problematic. Dan Edelstein has pointedly argued that rights language functioned to legitimize the Terror and the brutal destruction of the counterrevolution in the Vendée and not just freedom, democracy and equality.⁹ Laurent DuBois, among others, has demonstrated the reluctance of the French to apply the concepts of universal equality to its colonial subjects.¹⁰ Empathy for the suffering of others did not necessarily lead to a belief in universal equality and democracy but it could also spur on imperialism and interventionism in the name of spreading the ideals of civilization. In the nineteenth century, human rights language was applied to the cause of abolitionism, but even this movement rejected the idea of civic equality of Europeans and non-whites.¹¹ In spite of proclamations of human equality, women remained disenfranchised throughout the “enlightened” world. Although there were some rudimentary international legal structures in connection to anti-slavery, human rights was a concept tied to nationalism and sovereignty rather than supra-national universal morality.

By the mid-twentieth century, the idea of human rights may not have been universally accepted or employed, but it did begin to play an important role in global politics through the creation of United Nations. Passed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights represented the first near-global agreement on a list of specific rights held by, theoretically, all human beings. Yet the meaning of the Declaration, like that of the Enlightenment, remains hotly contested: some have portrayed its creation as the expression of a pan-global moral awakening following the horrors of the Second World War while others see it as little more than an arrangement between superpowers to secure a new international status quo at minimum cost to either side.¹²

III.

It was in the midst of these global developments that the story of human rights in East Germany began. In German history, the vocabulary

8 Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York, 2008), 19.

9 Dan Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature, and the French Revolution* (Chicago, 2010).

10 Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution & Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Chapel Hill, 2004).

11 Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, “Genealogies of Human Rights,” in *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (Cambridge, 2010), 8.

12 Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York, 2001); Mark Mazower, “The Strange Triumph of Human Rights, 1933-1950,” *Historical Journal* 47 (2004): 379-98.

of human rights had been rare with political actors and movements focusing on civil rights (*Bürgerrechte*) or human dignity (*Menschenwürde*). Social Democrats were the earliest to adopt the language to promote their own agenda, particularly after the First World War, but this was not a popular and widespread discourse.¹³ The SED initially adopted the vocabulary of human rights in response to competition for political legitimacy with the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD). Running on the slogan “No Socialism without Human Rights,” the still independent SPD in the Western Zones of Occupation soundly beat the SED in city-wide Berlin elections in 1946. In response, the SED sought to appropriate the language of the SPD. While moving away from liberal democratic principles towards the creation of a dictatorship of the proletariat, the new SED party slogan became “No Human Rights without Socialism!”

This rhetorical acquisition deepened in the late 1950s when the SED needed ammunition for its propaganda campaign against the outlawing of the West German Communist Party. Founded in 1959, the GDR Committee for Human Rights took up the cause of fighting for human rights on behalf of the SED. As the Eastern Bloc’s only state-directed human rights organization, the Committee was created to coordinate the mobilization of GDR citizens in protest against mass arrests of Communists in West Germany following the banning of the KPD. Founded two years before the creation of Amnesty International, the Committee organized protest letter-writing campaigns to apply pressure on West German officials and raised money for the family members of those affected by the state crack-down on communist organizations and left-wing activists protesting increased militarization. By directly promoting activism by East Germans along state-approved lines and by tightly controlling public discourse, the SED was able to mobilize GDR citizens to fight for human rights on behalf of the state without sparking backlash against SED rule in the name of these same principles.

In the 1960s, the GDR became more concerned with its lack of diplomatic recognition outside of the Socialist Bloc and its deficit of international, as opposed to just domestic, legitimacy. In order to integrate into the emerging postcolonial international order, the SED shifted to a new strategy of engaging the newly founded Afro-Asian states through human rights politics. East German intellectuals, including the aforementioned Hermann Klenner, created an ideological conception of “socialist human rights” drawing on Marxist ideology and the

13 Alexander Schwitanski, *Die Freiheit des Volksstaats: Die Entwicklung der Grund- und Menschenrechte und die deutsche Sozialdemokratie bis zum Ende der Weimarer Republik* (Essen, 2008).

human rights claims of anti-imperialist activists and leaders from the developing world. The GDR sought to join the United Nations in order to gain widespread diplomatic



recognition and as a means of entrenching GDR sovereignty against West German claims to represent the whole of the German people. The SED used the language of human rights to try to demonstrate that it was a state fit for membership in the international community and one that would support the struggle of the postcolonial states against western domination. The U.N.'s International Year for Human Rights in 1968 presented a perfect opportunity to promote the GDR to the world as a champion of self-determination. The adoption of the new "Socialist Constitution" of 1968 following a nation-wide plebiscite was thus used as evidence of the regime's popular support and official embrace of human rights. While this campaign did little to convince the world community that the GDR was a leader in the field of human rights, it led the SED and loyal East German intellectuals to internalize the notion that they represented the highest ideals of human rights in comparison to the hypocrisy and self-delusion of the capitalist west.

East German stamps commemorating Human Rights Day 1956

The SED's internalization of its own propaganda would have important consequences for international diplomacy in the 1970s, most prominently the GDR's signing of the Helsinki Accords. The leadership of the GDR had developed its conception of human rights at a time when notions of state-sovereignty, self-determination, and non-interference were paramount due to the new power of the postcolonial bloc in shaping the discourse of international affairs at the United Nations in the 1960s. In negotiating first the Basic Treaty with West Germany in 1972 and then the Helsinki Accords, the SED worked from the assumption that the norms of the United Nations human rights system were inherently favorable to state socialism and would further the GDR's claims to sovereignty in the face of Western efforts to interfere in internal affairs. Just as the international human rights discourse was shifting to a focus on individual rights rather than state sovereignty and anti-communism, the SED saw no threat from committing the GDR to further human rights provisions.

IV.

During the constitutional plebiscite of 1968 the idea of human rights began to be re-appropriated by East German citizens. The SED invited East Germans to comment and make suggestions to improve the new document that would serve as the ideological basis for the GDR. Thousands of East Germans took the opportunity to demand greater rights for free expression, free movement, and the right to strike. In particular, East German Christians demanded that the SED restore a number of constitutional protections for religious freedom that were to be eliminated. In adopting the language of human rights, however, GDR citizens worked within the dominant SED discourse and argued that the inclusion of greater commitments to human rights would provide greater legitimacy on the world stage and allow for the better participation of those citizens who supported socialism as a political and economic system but held different worldviews from those of the atheistic state.

While citizens were willing to use the language of human rights to have a “voice” within the East German dictatorship when provided a safe opportunity by the state, the GDR failed to develop a domestic dissident human rights movement. When conciliatory requests failed to produce results, those who sought the right to travel outside the GDR in the 1960s turned to demand immediate emigration in the name of human rights. Although Christians were amongst the loudest voices calling for the entrenchment of human rights during the adoption of the new constitution, in the wake of the Helsinki Accords the Protestant church leadership decided to endorse the SED’s position that the GDR was fully compliant with international human rights treaties in order to gain leverage in privately protesting abuses against congregants. Soon the church hierarchy itself, not just the Stasi, took on the task of disciplining clergy who used the language of human rights to demand political and legal reforms. Since so many GDR dissidents still believed in the ideals of socialism even if they had soured on SED rule, supporting US President Jimmy Carter’s new human rights stance against the Eastern Bloc was deemed ideologically untenable. East German dissidents who gained international prominence at this time thus chose not to employ the language of human rights as a vehicle for change because they believed the concept to be corrupted by its connection to anticommunism.

In the 1980s, finally, human rights in the name of political reform came to the fore by way of the peace movement. Increasingly disillusioned

East Germans dropped out of the official social system and created a parallel civil society, at first within the confines of the church. The emergence of an independent peace movement marked the beginnings of an important antipolitical mass movement striving towards disarmament, demilitarization, and environmentalism. While these activists sought to eschew politics, the SED's refusal to allow for a social sphere outside of party-approved organizations and the ensuing repression by the security services demonstrated to many that political reform was needed even to achieve purely moral goals such as peace or non-political aims such as environmental protection. In 1986, a small group of activists created the Initiative for Peace and Human Rights, and the idea of human rights rapidly became a rallying point for the disparate groups of dissident and disaffected East Germans. These activists invoked human rights not as the antithesis of socialism, but as its true core value, which had been forgotten and abused by the SED.

At the same time, the ideological bulwark of "socialist human rights" crafted by the SED was crumbling. As peace activists were coming together under the banner of human rights, Ideology Minister Kurt Hager attempted to create a socialist version of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that could unify the communist world in the face of Western pressure. Despite initial enthusiasm from socialist allies, one country after another pulled out of participating in the Socialist Declaration, because they were scared off by various human rights guarantees contained within the proposed Declaration. In 1988, when human rights was becoming the rallying cry for change across the Eastern Bloc, solidarity amongst communist elites on the matter collapsed, and they abandoned the joint effort to combat the growing movement from within and pressure from without.

In 1989, the intersection of those demanding human rights to obtain a political voice, in order to support democratic reform, and those who demanded human rights in order to be able to leave the GDR combined to create a terminal crisis for the SED. Party elites and loyal intellectuals who had once bought into the concept of socialist human rights that had legitimized the SED dictatorship now turned to the human rights ideals of the dissidents in the hopes of renewing the cause of socialism through the embrace of political and civil rights as well as the rule of law. Human rights served not just to rally a heterogeneous coalition of dissidents but also provided an ideological justification for SED officials who set about dismantling their own political system and abolished the party's monopoly on

power in response to popular demonstrations and mass emigration. In planning for a new East Germany, the intellectual elites of the GDR actually worked with dissidents to draft a constitution that would secure liberal democratic rights and freedoms alongside rights that would preserve the ideals of the socialist project, including substantive gender equality, strong social and economic rights protections, and greater provisions for direct democracy.

In 1990, however, the shared hopes of dissident activists and pro-reform communists to remake the GDR through this democratic socialist vision of human rights were dashed as the realities of East German economic collapse turned the population away from new utopian ideas. Rather than seeking to achieve the socialist ideal through internal reforms in the GDR, mass support turned towards realizing human rights through reunification with the Federal Republic. The idealistic anticapitalism of the dissidents alienated a population that sought guarantees of both democracy and prosperity through human rights. While the dissidents were successful in ending state-socialist dictatorship through their campaign for human rights, they ultimately failed to expand what they viewed as the narrow and unsatisfactory human rights system of the capitalist West.

V.

This account of East German history challenges the common Helsinki narrative by rethinking the role of human rights in the ideological, political, and social life of the GDR. Most importantly, this interpretation examines human rights as a fluid concept that is both socially constructed and historically contingent. In recent years, some historians have shifted from a focus on origins and discoveries towards a history of political conflict and social construction that seeks to understand what human rights meant to historical figures themselves. At the same time, “critical human rights” scholarship has rejected the concept of human rights as a single unified ideal, and maintained that historians should instead look at the historical contingency of human rights and the diversity of conceptions and practices from a non-teleological, polycentric, and transnational perspective.¹⁴ As Jean Quataert has argued, “rights are not self-evident, self-policing, or ethically monolithic; they are historical constructs rooted in struggle and are even at odds with one another.”¹⁵

Instead of searching for the moment when human rights were invented, this historical approach focuses on how differing groups

14 On historical contingency, see Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, “Genealogies of Human Rights,” *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Hoffmann, 4. On polycentrism, see Jan Eckel, “Utopie der Moral, Kalkül der Macht: Menschenrechte in der globalen Politik seit 1945,” *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 49 (2009): 437–84.

15 Jean Quataert, *Advocating Dignity: Human Rights Mobilizations in Global Politics* (Philadelphia, 2011), 4.

chose to employ the idea of human rights, how it was implemented, and how it was contested over time. According to Upendra Baxi, “the originary narratives that trace the birth of human rights in the Declarations of the Rights of Man need replacement by a history of human rights struggles for human rights futures.”¹⁶ It is from this same perspective that this article has focused on what problems, ideas, and topics were specifically connected with human rights and what social, political, and cultural function human rights ideas had within the history of the GDR.

Following the Second World War, the meaning of human rights was contested across all of occupied Germany and not just the Soviet Zone. From the perspective of today, the concept of human rights appears inexorably intertwined with the principles of the rule of law and democracy. In the late 1940s, however, the meaning of human rights was far from settled. The SED and its supporters claimed that human rights could only be achieved through the socialist revolution and the imposition of the dictatorship of the proletariat. By contrast, amongst conservatives there were many who saw individual-focused human rights as a root source of totalitarianism and Christianity as the sole path to moral regeneration and authentic human rights. Others saw irredentism and the return of their lost lands in the East as crucial to fulfilling the German people’s right to a *Heimat*.¹⁷ There were voices calling for political democracy and social justice as a means to realize the cause of human rights, but they represented one interpretation amongst many within Germany alone.

Rather than focusing on moral inspiration, the source of individuals, parties and movements adopting the language of human rights was almost invariably based on the need to demonstrate legitimacy or challenge the legitimacy of opponents in political conflict. The example of the GDR helps to elucidate Costas Douzinas’s argument that “human rights are Janus-like, they carry the dual ability to emancipate and dominate, to protect and discipline.”¹⁸ Human rights, as a discourse of legitimization, can act to challenge power but they can also sustain it by appeal to higher moral authority. The SED’s embrace of human rights came at times when political pressure inspired the adoption of new discourses. The SED initially co-opted the discourse of human rights through slogans in response to pressure from Social Democrats in 1946. In 1959, in order to attack the West German persecution of the KPD, the SED created the GDR Committee for Human Rights. When the SED sought to gain acceptance from the

16 Upendra Baxi, *The Future of Human Rights* (New Delhi, 2012), 109.

17 Lora Wildenthal, “Rudolf Laun and the Human Rights of Germans in Occupied and Early West Germany,” in *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (Cambridge, 2010), 125–46.

18 Costas Douzinas, *The End of Human Rights: Critical Legal Thought at the Turn of the Century* (Portland, 2000), 175.

Third World on the international stage, it proclaimed its support of the UN covenants on human rights and, when it wanted recognition from the West, it signed the Helsinki Accords.

Similarly, East Germans adopted the language of human rights as a means to make their case to an unfriendly audience. As the SED sought to impress the world with its activities in support of the UN International Year for Human Rights in 1968, East German citizens used this rhetoric to demand a right to travel, a right to free expression, and increased freedom of conscience and religion. After the Helsinki Accords, its human rights provisions became discursive fodder for those seeking to see loved ones from whom they had been separated since the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961. Within the East German church, human rights politics were seen as a means to make an active church relevant in the officially atheist GDR. The idea of human rights did not inspire these feelings or demands, but rather created a new vocabulary outside of the normal boundaries created by the SED and a periodic opportunity to effect a new kind of politics.

Instead of seeing human rights as a concept imported wholesale directly from the West, it is important to examine these currents in the broader regional and global context. In seeking legitimacy through human rights, ideas and discourses were borrowed from a wide variety of sources. SED ideology represented a blend of nineteenth-century Western philosophy, Soviet ideology and, importantly, borrowed heavily from contemporary Third World ideas about self-determination and human rights as a weapon against imperialism. East German Protestants were strongly influenced by the work of Christians from the global South through engagement with the ecumenical World Council of Churches. The various dissident movements drew from the ideas and experiences of other Eastern European activists, third-world liberation movements, western NGOs, and even SED propaganda itself. New forms of human rights activism were formed through a constant process of appropriation across borders and ideologies.

From this initial adoption of the discourse of human rights came a transformation: once introduced as a strategy of legitimization, the idea of human rights took on new meanings and social power. In the process of campaigning for human rights, the SED and ordinary East Germans came to internalize the concept and connect their particular beliefs to a broader systemic struggle. What began as a rhetorical strategy came to alter existing political dynamics, as mere slogans

became transformed into statements of belief both by the state and dissidents. The SED's cynical reaction to Western criticism and opportunism in seeking Third World support led to party officials and bureaucrats coming to identify with the concept of human rights so thoroughly that they could not perceive that their own propaganda and diplomacy posed a potential threat to the established order. For SED officials, East Germany truly was a world leader in the field of human rights. Those seeking to emigrate who had at first simply made a trip to the library to find a new argument for possibly their fifth application to visit family members in the West soon found themselves connecting their personal desire to travel to an universalistic moral system. They were not just demanding to travel; they were invoking their right as a human being to do so. The grassroots activists of the 1980s who looked to the UN documents and the Helsinki Accords for cover to practice the campaign against militarization in schools or environmental devastation began to see themselves as fighting for the right to peace and the right to life. It was the engagement with human rights through political activism that generated genuine belief in the concept of human rights, rather than the other way around.

While human rights did not have a fixed and eternal connection with the cause of democratization and pluralism, the capacity for this discourse to create new spaces for dialogue and activism was crucial to the democratization of East Germany. Usually working from church basements and seeking to avoid the ire of both the clergy and the Stasi, those who sought changes to the status quo in East Germany in the early 1980s were thoroughly fragmented: some sought emigration, others wanted to repair the damage to their local environment; peace activists wanted to demilitarize society; and there also were socialists who thought that they could still achieve the long-dreamed of utopian revolution. The concept of human rights provided an umbrella under which all of these movements could gather, working towards similar goals with varying causes. When an independent human rights movement took shape in the GDR with the creation of the Initiative for Peace and Human rights in 1986, it was composed of a broad coalition of dissidents and the disaffected. International human rights diplomacy and activism did not simply inspire the civic movement or the dissidents, but rather provided a social glue that could hold together the diverse movements that arose organically in response to the failures of real existing socialism in the GDR. Human rights provided a way to move everyday problems from the realm of the particular to the realm of universal principles.

On November 9, 1989, there occurred a remarkable series of events leading to the opening of the Berlin Wall. First, SED spokesman Günter Schabowski appeared to announce the legalization of free travel across the border in a confused press conference. After that, crowds gathered at checkpoints to demand to be allowed to travel to the West. Rather than use deadly force against the crowd, the border guards gave way and simply opened the gates. In the 1960s, the order for guards to shoot to kill at the border legitimized this lethal act as a means to prevent “a crime against the sovereignty of the German Democratic Republic, against peace, humanity, and human rights.”¹⁹ It was a matter of ideology and party dogma for the SED and the East German state apparatus that deadly force could be used against a fleeing human being because to do so ultimately protected the broader cause of human rights. By 1989, however, the party leadership, its bureaucracy, and much of its security services had lost faith in this idea. The dissident conception of human rights had fully displaced the SED’s claims to “socialist human rights.”

The transformation of human rights from a concept that legitimized SED rule and the deadly force required to maintain it into an ideal that fueled the peaceful revolution is too often attributed to impersonal forces and to qualities inherent to the discourse of human rights. In such narratives, the bulldozer logic of human rights toppled the power structure of the GDR by the sheer force of its moral power. Yet, this version not only elides the SED appropriation of human rights, it also diminishes those activists and dissidents who made such a transformation possible. Only by re-imagining the meaning of human rights in the local context and in the vernacular of the GDR were East German human rights activists able to spur on such a movement and effect such immense change. By rethinking human rights as a mutable and evolving concept, we do not undermine its value but restore those who used it so effectively to their rightful place in the history of the German Democratic Republic and its dissolution.

Ned Richardson-Little is Associate Research Fellow at the University of Exeter (UK) working on the Leverhulme Trust project “1989 after 1989: Rethinking the Fall of State Socialism in a Global Perspective.” For his dissertation, “Between Dictatorship and Dissent: Ideology, Legitimacy and Human Rights in East Germany, 1945-1990” (Ph.D. Diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2013), he was honored with the 2014 Fritz Stern Dissertation Prize, awarded by the Friends of the German Historical Institute. His article “Dictatorship and Dissent: Human Rights in East Germany in the 1970s” appeared in *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s*, ed. Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn (Philadelphia, 2013).

19 A copy of the order from c. 1962 is reprinted in Bernhard Pollmann, ed., *Vom deutschen Reich bis zur Gegenwart*, vol. 3 of *Lesebuch zur deutschen Geschichte* (Harenberg, 1984), 245-46.