

“PEACE, FRIENDSHIP, SOLIDARITY”? EAST GERMANY AND ANGELA DAVIS, 1965-1989

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This dissertation explores the relationship between Angela Davis, one of the leading intellectual figures of the black freedom movement, and East Germany from a transnational perspective. Starting with Davis' first visit to East Germany in 1965, this study focuses on the question how these black-red encounters were entangled with the attempts to gain international recognition for East Germany and domestic acceptance of the ruling Socialist Unity Party. By analyzing personal interactions and cultural perceptions as well as the political and cultural recontextualization of Angela Davis in East Germany, my project traces the roots and routes of this relationship through the 1970s and 1980s. More broadly, this study seeks to examine what the relationship can tell us about the meaning of solidarity with regard to the formation of transnational identities and nontraditional forms of collaboration in Cold War culture and the history of the struggle for racial justice in the twentieth century.

The special affiliation between Angela Davis and East Germany started during Davis' first visit to East Berlin in 1965 while she was studying at the University of Frankfurt in West Germany. In December 1970, Davis was charged with murder, conspiracy, and kidnapping for her alleged role in an attempt to help a group of black convicts escape from a California courthouse. During Davis's subsequent imprisonment, the East German regime organized a wide-ranging, state-funded solidarity campaign on her behalf. The campaign for Davis was part of a longer tradition of East German solidarity efforts on behalf of the African American civil rights movement. East German support for the black freedom struggle was, moreover, closely tied to the regime's ideology. Since the 1950s, U.S. race relations had been a weapon in East Germany's propaganda. In its efforts to gain broader diplomatic recognition around the world, East Germany's solidarity with the African American struggle for equality was intertwined with its self-conception as the one German state free of racism and of any lingering trace of Nazi attitudes. As the Cold War was increasingly fought within a global arena, East Germany framed the defense of Angela Davis as the "front line battalion of anti-fascism," thereby

identifying support for Davis as evidence of its progressive and anti-racist agenda at home and abroad. The solidarity campaign became a centerpiece of East Germany's international politics of recognition at the early 1970s. In the years after her acquittal in June 1972, Davis returned to East Germany as guest of honor representing what East Germany considered the "other America" of black civil rights activists.

By reframing the relationship with Angela Davis as part of its Cold War foreign policy, East Germany challenged traditional forms of diplomacy, especially vis-à-vis the United States. This would become evident during the Tenth World Youth Festival in August 1973 in which Davis participated as the head of the American delegation. Under the slogan "For Anti-Imperialist Solidarity, Peace, and Friendship," the festival, popularly labeled the "Red Woodstock", brought more than 25,000 young people to East Berlin from all over the world. Both Davis and the East German regime interpreted this meeting as a further step in strengthening their nontraditional cross-racial alliance.

The East German politics of solidarity also had an impact on East German society as the issue of legitimacy was of vital importance to the East German regime. Daily acts of solidarity on behalf of Angela Davis led to a broad identification with Davis as an icon of international solidarity, especially among East German youth. By identifying with Davis and more broadly with the idea of international solidarity, East Germans were also able to identify more closely with their state. The solidarity campaign for Angela Davis thus helped form a national identity among East German youth in the early 1970s. Often mentioned together with other famous communists like Marx, Lenin, and Liebknecht, Angela Davis had by then become a household name in East Germany and was firmly enshrined in East German national memory.

Tracing the history of this relationship also throws light on the transnational dimension of Davis's political and intellectual development from the late 1960s into the early 1980s. Angela Davis can thereby be placed in a longer tradition of leftist black radical activists with a global agenda who were able to influence Cold War discourse on racial discrimination on a national as well as international level.