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Glasnost in the GDR?
The East German Writers Congress of 1987*

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Introduction

Across the Communist world, writers congresses could be restive affairs. While each state had powerful mechanisms to curtail dissent, as critical intellectuals writers often pushed the boundaries of the sayable and sometimes directly criticized state decisions, including at the national congresses of each country's official writers association. Demands to end state censorship, for instance, were voiced in 1956 at the Polish Writers Union's congress[1], as well as in 1967 at congresses for the Soviet Union of Writers[2] and the Czechoslovakian Writers Union[3]. The Hungarian Writers Congress in September 1956 declared support for reformist leader Imre Nagy, helping to spark revolution[4], just as statements at the 1967 Czechoslovakian congress contributed to the Prague Spring[5]. Yet in contrast to these examples, authors in the German Democratic Republic seldom used their writers congresses to criticize government actions. Several delegates at the Fourth Writers Congress in 1956 did question the ruling Socialist Unity Party's (SED) restrictive cultural policies, but they refrained from commenting

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1 Tony Kemp Welch, "Dethroning Stalin: Poland 1956 and Its Legacy", *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 58, no. 8, 2006, pp. 1261-1284.

2 Alexander Solzhenitsyn, "Letter to the Fourth Congress of Soviet Writers", in John B. Dunlop, Richard Haugh, Alexis Klimoff (eds.), *Aleksander Solzhenitsyn: Critical Essays and Documentary Materials*, Nordland, Belmont, MA, 1973, pp. 463-467.

3 Robert Darnton, *Censors at Work: How States Shaped Literature*, Norton, New York, 2014, p. 238.

4 Shingo Minamizuka, "The 'Third Road' Concept in 1956 Hungary", in Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik (ed.), *Broken Narratives: Post-Cold War History and Identity in Europe and East Asia*, Brill, Leiden, 2014, pp. 193-217.

5 Barbara J. Falk, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe: Citizen Intellectuals and Philosopher Kings*, Central European University Press, Budapest, 2003, pp. 65-68.

on non-literary issues[6]. Indeed, if by the 1980s critical intellectuals in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary tended to be more anti-Communist and "anti-political", their GDR counterparts often remained committed socialists, even through the revolutions of 1989[7].

These tendencies could be seen in East German writers congresses, whose content had become predictable by the late 1980s. Held every four to five years, these were part business conference, part propaganda showpiece where prominent authors gathered to discuss literary issues and demonstrate support for the SED. Seldom did any hint of turmoil emerge from these meetings, an outcome owing to the careful monitoring of all aspects of the planning, including delegate selection, by the SED and its secret police, the Ministry for State Security (MfS or Stasi)[8]. In 1987 the Tenth Writers Congress was to be no different. As with previous iterations, it would begin with a brief opening ceremony and a perfunctory vote on the schedule, followed by the reading of a welcome by SED head Erich Honecker and a keynote speech by Hermann Kant, president of the East German Writers Union (Schriftstellerverband der DDR or SV). Before the congress opened on 24 November, there was little evidence of anything amiss. Perhaps the presence, for the first time at any artist congress in the GDR[9], of the Western media should have been a cause for concern, but it was hoped that by limiting access to the plenary sessions, foreign journalists would merely witness a chorus of pro-SED acclamations.

Yet when the congress began, hints of turmoil surfaced immediately. At the start of the first session, First Secretary Gerhard Henniger, the SED's top man in the union, asked delegates for comments on the schedule. This was pure formality, with attendees expected to nod their approval. But on this day the silence was broken by Horst Matthies, a 48-year-old author from the Rostock

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6 Stephen Brockmann, *The Writers' State: Constructing East German Literature, 1945-1959*, Camden House, Rochester, NY, 2015, pp. 285-289.

7 Konrad Jarausch, *The Rush to German Unity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994, p. 78; Gale Stokes, *The Walls Came Tumbling Down: The Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1993, pp. 23-25, 122-127.

8 See for example, "Zur Vorbereitung des VII. Schriftstellerkongress der DDR in Berlin", 18 October 1973, Foundation Archives of Parties and Mass Organizations of the GDR in the Federal Archives (Berlin) (hereafter cited as SAPMO-BArch) DY30/IVB2/9.06/57, pp. 1-4; Abt. Kultur, "Stand der Delegiertenwahl in den Bezirksverbänden des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR", Berlin, 20 April 1978, SAPMO-BArch DY/30/JIV2/3J/2402, p. 3; MfS, BV Gross-Berlin, "Information über Hinweise zur Situation unter Schriftstellern der Hauptstadt der DDR in Vorbereitung der Wahlberichtsversammlung des Bezirksverbandes Berlin im Schriftstellerverband der DDR am 31.3.1977", Berlin, 26 March 1977, Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the former German Democratic Republic (hereafter cited as BStU), BV Berlin AKG 1274, pp. 1-4.

9 Kurt Hager, "Vorlage für das Sekertariat des Zentralkomitees der SED", Berlin, 4 December 1987, BStU HA XX 4808, p. 30.

district whose critical views had drawn Stasi attention over the years[10]. Rising to speak, he proposed a change. He was concerned key problems would not be addressed in the plenum, arguing that the congress "considers too little that there are burning problem areas for us all, whose meaning for our work simply forbids that they might come up only in one of the workgroups on the side"[11]. He shrewdly used Honecker's presence to strengthen his case, stating,

> "…I am not really mistaken if I assume that these comrades have not therefore come to us because they want to ensure our approval and thanks for the clever policies for the welfare of the people, but rather because they require the input of all the creative forces of our people, including writers, in the search for the cleverest solutions for our policies, and in some measure would like to inform themselves firsthand about our worries, our problems, and our further thoughts"[12].

The SED's top brass had come to listen, not command. Among the "burning questions" too important to relegate to workgroups (out of the media's view) was "the political culture of our information and propaganda mechanisms" that cut against "the growing need of the citizens of our country for more open, franker, and also more differentiated information", a condition that required literature "to adopt compensatory capacities for other media"[13]. He thus asked delegates to consider a new list of topics, including "the role of literature in the process of development of new thinking in our country" (a reference to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of glasnost), "literature and the development of intellectual-cultural needs as an indispensable component of a strong socialism", and "literature, environment, inner world [*Innenwelt*], stocktaking, and outlook", challenging the claim the GDR had no environmental problems[14].

Although a majority of delegates rejected Matthies's proposal[15], at least some agreed with the "substance" of his call for freer discussion, even if they questioned the manner in which he made it[16]. In fact, by acknowledging taboo topics, Matthies's call had a dramatic effect on more than a few participants, and the

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[10] See "Einschätzung zur politisch-ideologischen und operativen Situation im Bezirksschriftstellerverband Rostock", Rostock, 11 April 1984, BStU HA XX 21245, pp. 75-92; "Einschätzung zur politisch-ideologischen und operativen Situation im Bezirksschriftstellerverband Rostock", Rostock, 28 September 1985, BStU HA XX 21245, pp. 93-103.

[11] Horst Matthies, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik: Plenum*, Aufbau Verlag, Berlin, 1988, p. 13.

[12] *Ibidem*, pp. 13-14.

[13] *Ibidem*, p. 14.

[14] *Ibidem*.

[15] Gerhard Henniger, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß: Plenum*, cit., p. 15.

[16] Abt. XX/7, "Reaktionen unter Mitgliedern des Bezirksschriftstellerverbandes Rostock auf und zum X. Schriftstellerkongress der DDR", Rostock, 18 December 1987, BStU HA XX/AKG 852, part I, p. 42.

ensuing congress would be unlike any in the history of the union. All the pressing concerns writers had grumbled about for years at closed-door meetings were now in the open: limits on free speech, environmental degradation, and the expulsion of critical authors all came to light, and for the first time, a writers congress became more than a propaganda event, but an actual, candid, and public discussion of problems in East Germany. In so doing, it brought the SV more in line with its counterpart organizations across the Soviet bloc, both in the controversy it generated and in its significance within the literary community[17].

Surprisingly, the Tenth Writers Congress has received little attention among historians, and Robert Darnton is virtually alone in his assessment that "Never before had East German intellectuals spoken out so boldly"[18]. Literary scholars have given the event more attention, although studies that mention the congress focus overwhelmingly on the speech by authors, Christoph Hein attacking censorship, and to a lesser extent on a similar one by Günter de Bruyn[19]. Relevant scholarship rarely mentions the comments by delegates on the environment, youth problems, and those who were expelled from the union[20]. These accounts miss the full extent of the congress' role in criticizing

[17] For a comparison with the impact of glasnost on the Soviet Union of Cinematographers, see Cécile Vaissié, "L'Union du cinéma d'URSS, moteur, reflet et victime de la perestroïka (1986-1991)", in Caterina Preda (ed.), *The State Artist in Romania and Eastern Europe: The Role of the Creative Unions*, Editura Universității din București, București, 2017, pp. 283-308.

[18] Robert Darnton, *Censors at Work*…cit., 222. See also Ehrhart Neubert, *Unsere Revolution. Die Geschichte der Jahre 1989/90*, Piper, Munich, 2008, p. 36; Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk, *Endspiel. Die Revolution von 1989 in der DDR*, C.H. Beck, Munich, 2009, p. 142; Werner Mittenzwei, *Die Intellektuellen: Literatur und Politik in Ostdeutschland 1945-2000*, Faber & Faber, Berlin 2003, pp. 377-378; Bernd Florath, *Das Revolutionsjahr 1989: Die demokratische Revolution in Osteuropa als transnationale Zäsur*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 2011, pp. 140-141.

[19] See for example, Patricia A. Herminghouse, "Literature as 'Ersatzöffentlichkeit'? Censorship and the Displacement of Public Discourse in the GDR", *German Studies Review*, vol. 17, 1994, pp. 85-99; Wolfgang Emmerich, "The GDR and its Literature: An Overview", in Karen Leeder (ed.), *Rereading East Germany: The Literature and Film of the GDR*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 2015, pp. 8-34; Carol Anne Costabile-Heming, "Intellectuals and the Wende: Missed Opportunities and Dashed Hopes", in *Ibidem*, pp. 197-213; Wolfgang Emmerich, *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR, 1945-1989*, Luchterhand, Frankfurt am Main, 2000, pp. 268-269; David Bathrick, *The Powers of Speech: The Politics of Culture in the GDR*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1995, pp. 55-56; Barrie Baker, *Theater Censorship in Honecker's Germany: From Volker Braun to Samuel Beckett*, Peter Lang, Bern, 2007, pp. 23-24; Colin B. Grant, *Literary Communication from Consensus to Rupture: Practice and Theory in Honecker's GDR*, Rodopi, Amsterdam, 1995, pp. 71-72; Laura Bradley, *Cooperation & Conflict: GDR Theatre Censorship, 1961-1989*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, 2010, pp. 1-2, 234-237.

[20] For a brief discussion on the role of environmentalism at the congress, see Axel Gooddbody, "Literature on the Environment in the GDR. Ecological Activism and the Aesthetics of Literary Protest", in Robert Atkins, Martin Kane (eds.), *Retrospect and*

real existing socialism and its impact beyond the literary community, especially given the broader crisis of communism in the late 1980s[21]. Indeed, the congress can be linked to the breakdown of SED control, and thus created a precondition for the revolution of 1989.

At the heart of the Tenth Congress stood a debate on the function of writers under communism, one that had been raging for years within the Writers Union and was now public. Were writers, as loyal socialists, supposed to mute any criticism of the system in the interest of the larger Cold War struggle? Or was it their duty as public intellectuals to point out socialism's shortcomings in order to improve it? This article explores this tension from the mid-1980s through early 1989, using the Tenth Writers Congress as its centerpiece. It considers, first, growing discontent among writers in the areas of environmental degradation, youth policy, and censorship. Second, it probes the impact of Mikhail Gorbachev's radical reforms in the Soviet Union on these discussions. Third, it examines the planning, execution, and evaluation of the Tenth Congress, where the debate of writers' roles under socialism shifted dramatically. Finally, it explores surprising concessions offered by SED leaders after the congress, as well as the limits of these gestures. As we will see, the erosion of restrictions on public speech was not wholly successful, but determined activism in the union created promising avenues to critically engage the SED and achieve reforms, validating the significance of writers as public intellectuals and of the SV as a site of interaction between intellectuals and the state. Still, the regime's failure to fully embrace openness exacerbated disillusionment, a development that boded ill for the future.

Years of Resignation

From the country's founding in 1949, the SED enlisted authors to build a socialist and anti-fascist culture for the fledgling state. At the same time, many writers saw it as their duty to act as gadflies, prodding the SED to address shortcomings while extolling the superiority of their system *vis-à-vis* the West. One of the primary arenas to debate these sometimes-contradictory roles was the Writers Union, founded in 1950. From the SED's standpoint, the union's

Review: Aspects of the Literature of the GDR 1976-1990, Rodopi BV, Amsterdam, 1997, p. 245.

[21] East German born scholars Dieter Schlendstedt, Manfred Jäger, and Robert Grünbaum are rare exceptions in exploring the congress' radical scope. See Dieter Schlenstedt, "Der aus dem Ruder laufende Schriftstellerkongress von 1987", in Robert Atkins, Martin Kane (eds.), *Retrospect and Review: Aspects of the Literature*… cit., pp. 16-31; Manfred Jäger, *Kultur und Politik in der DDR, 1945-1990*, Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik Claus-Peter von Nottbeck, Cologne, 1995, pp. 249-250; Robert Grünbaum, *Jenseits des Alltags: Die Schriftsteller der DDR und die Revolution von 1989/90*, NOMOS Verlagsgesellschaft, Baden-Baden, 2002, pp. 71-78.

primary function was to ensure authors aided the state's mission, offering incentives, both positive and negative, to create literature to support the GDR and disseminate socialist values. Yet the SV was never just a political organization: it was also a professional association, charged with representing the interests of members, which meant fostering career opportunities and expanding their role in improving socialism, which to some members included the ability to offer constructive criticism. The union, in brief, was both an arm of the state's propaganda apparatus and a professional interest group, and these divergent purposes proved hard to balance[22].

To be sure, the SED had numerous advantages to ensure the union fulfilled its aims. Party officials met regularly with SV leaders, and the "educational" side of the dictatorship, where veteran communists instructed younger generations on proper political outlooks, likewise strengthened conformity[23]. The recruitment of Stasi informants in key leadership bodies also offered a powerful means of exerting influence and monitoring authors, and by 1987 twelve of eighteen members of the union's presidium (its core leaders) were active or former informants. Furthermore, the SED provided the SV with tools to ensure authors served regime-friendly ends. Much more than average citizens, members were given preferential access to apartments, vacation spots, cars, loans, stipends, and travel to the West. On the punitive side, beyond withholding such privileges, the SV could block publications, mount press campaigns against "problematic" authors, and, ultimately, expel members from the association, essentially ending their GDR literary careers. The union thus acted as a gatekeeper, permitting access to a host of socioeconomic benefits for those who played the game, but barring them from those who did not. Given these tools, it is little wonder that critical writers were frequently isolated within the union or forced outside of it, restricting their public voice. For instance, in 1976 dozens of members protested the expatriation of dissident songwriter Wolf Biermann, sending an open petition to the Western media demanding the SED reverse its decision. Yet despite acrimony within the union, by 1979 SV leaders were able to marginalize most of the critics, even expelling nine authors[24]. And at meeting after meeting, an "overwhelming majority" of attendees supported

[22] Sabine Pamperrien, *Versuch am untauglichen Objekt: der Schriftstellerverband der DDR im Dienst der sozialistichen Ideologie*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main, 2004, pp. 39-41.

[23] Dorothee Wierling, "The Hitler Youth Generation in the GDR: Insecurities, Ambitions and Dilemmas", in Konrad Jarausch (ed.), *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, Berghahn, New York, 1999, pp. 307-324.

[24] See Roland Berbig, et al. (eds.), *In Sachen Biermann; Protokolle, Berichte und Briefe zu den Folgen einer Ausbürgerung*, Ch. Links, Berlin, 1994; Joachim Walther et al. (eds.), *Protokoll eines Tribunals. Die Ausschlüsse aus dem DDR-Schriftstellerverband 1979*, Rowohlt, Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1991.

the Party's actions or denounced dissidents[25]. These attitudes stemmed from many motives, but the end result was that authors seeking to publicly criticize the regime, even constructively, lacked the support of most of their colleagues, reinforcing a state-friendly understanding of writers' role.

Still, such equilibriums were difficult to maintain, and in fact just a few years after the dust from this "Biermann affair" had settled, many writers raised anew questions about their role under socialism, animated by their alarm at serious problems emerging in the 1980s, especially environmental degradation, the alienation of young people, and censorship. As in many places in the Soviet bloc, environmental consciousness had been growing in the GDR since the 1970s as evidence mounted of staggering levels of pollution and its adverse health effects. Oft-cited statistics are no less astounding in their repetition. For instance, by the 1980s 80% of surface water was "polluted" or "highly polluted," and by 1989 the groundwater in the vicinity of Bitterfeld was judged by one scholar to register a pH level between vinegar and battery acid[26]. Likewise, by the 1970s SED leaders were cognizant that many in the generation born after the state's founding in 1949 felt alienated from the regime, in part due to continued dominance of older generations in professional and political life and in part due to the state's overreaction to expressions of discontent by young people. Young writers proved particularly difficult to incorporate into intellectual circles, and their sense of isolation hindered their willingness to join organizations like the SV[27]. And while critical authors had long grumbled about publishing difficulties, by the mid-1980s many regime-friendly authors unexpectedly ran into trouble, a reversal that left many loyalists confused as to the direction of cultural policy. Even several union presidium members, regime stalwarts all, unexpectedly had works banned or canceled, compounding frustrations immeasurably[28].

The result was an unlikely alliance of discontent as SED cultural policy veered towards incoherence. Dissidents might decry censorship of critical works while loyalists might chafe at printing difficulties, but all could agree publication policy was unacceptable. Critics might condemn the treatment of rebellious young authors while loyalists might lament the lack of integration of

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[25] See for example Vorstand des SV-DDR, "Entschließung des Vorstandes des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR", 11 March 1977, in Roland Berbig, et al. (eds.), *In Sachen Biermann*...cit., pp. 342-343.

[26] Scott Moranda, *The People's Own Landscape: Nature, Tourism, and Dictatorship in East Germany*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2014, p. 1; Konrad Jarausch, *After Hitler: Recivilizing Germans, 1945-1995*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, p. 203.

[27] Jeannette Z. Madarász, *Conflict and Compromise in East Germany, 1971-1989: A Precarious Stability*, Palgrave, Houndmills, 2003, pp. 15, 125-128.

[28] HA XX/7, "Information über operativ interessierende Fragen im Zusammenhang mit der turnusgemässen Sitzung des Präsidiums des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR am 23.2.1984", 29 February 1984, BStU MfS AIM 2173/70 part I, vol. 6, p. 385.

young people, but all could agree they needed a fresh approach to avoid losing the next generation. And while dissidents might decry the GDR's environmental woes and stalwarts might support the regime's talk of changes, all could agree serious changes in ecological policy were necessary. At the very least, many members could agree fundamental reforms were needed to rescue the country from the morass in which they found themselves, though what exactly they should be remained a hot topic of debate, as did the best manner to express their discontent.

The Gorbachev Factor

Those calling for reforms within socialism and open discussion of problems received a major boost from Mikhail Gorbachev, chosen as General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party in 1985. In the face of the grave difficulties, Gorbachev embraced a reformist mantel to revive a stagnating system. In 1987 he unveiled plans for economic restructuring or *perestroika* (decentralized decision-making), and political openness or *glasnost*, which would encourage more accurate reporting of data and problems and create a public opinion to counterbalance conservative Party members reluctant to change. The impact of glasnost was electrifying: banned films and books reappeared, and newspapers, suddenly credible, saw circulations balloon. Free to discuss once-forbidden subjects such as Stalinist crimes, the war in Afghanistan, social deprivations, and drug addictions, the population shook off its silence and joined a critical public discourse on the system[29]. While glasnost would ultimately and unintentionally erode the government's legitimacy, for the time being Gorbachev's ideas seemed precisely what disillusioned East German socialists had long hoped for. Yet despite this optimism, many senior SED members refused to consider a similar overhaul in the GDR, fearing it would destabilize the country. The result was frustration among SED critics and loyalists alike; it was one thing to hold experiments in Hungary or Yugoslavia at arm's length, but to reject their Soviet protectors' reforms at a time of brewing crisis in the Eastern bloc appeared to many as not only short-sighted but dangerous for the system's sustainability[30].

Authors were among the earliest to champion Gorbachev in the GDR, and Moscow's embrace of reform emboldened their efforts to push their

[29] Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, pp. 58-86.

[30] Konrad Jarausch, *After Hitler*…cit., pp. 204-205; Charles Maier, *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1997, pp. 121-123, 155.

recalcitrant regime to do the same[31]. Already in March 1986 a Stasi informant reported that many Berlin authors eagerly read Gorbachev's speech from the USSR's 27th Party congress, where he declared a "duty to tell the party and the people honestly and frankly about the deficiencies in our political and practical activities, the unfavorable tendencies in the economy and the social and moral sphere, and about the reasons for them"[32]. At a talk between Berlin members and the local SED chief that month, several attendees noted with dismay how he skirted questions about the Soviet congress[33] while in the subsequent discussion, participants condemned the SED's lack of "honest information" and "critical stance toward errors and deficiencies in the construction of socialism"[34]. Such views were not limited to Berliners. In May 1987 the MfS reported that in many districts the "CPSU reform policy" was gaining influence, inspiring calls to expand union democracy. As a first step, in Leipzig, Halle, and Berlin there were proposals to open up the list of candidates for SV elections[35]. Likewise in Suhl, some members were complaining that SED members always held top positions[36]. Many authors thus strived "to transform, even if somewhat restrainedly, domestic political changes in the USSR into necessities for actual socialism in the GDR"[37].

Even union leaders were enthusiastic about Gorbachev, as seen in a tense letter from union president Hermann Kant, normally a tower of regime support, to chief SED ideologue Kurt Hager in 1986 after the latter reproached presidium members for unfavorably comparing the SED's recent congress to the Soviet one. In his note, Kant defended the presidium's "established manner" of open discussion, admitting their conversations had "critical tones", but assuring they were "in line" with the SED. As such, "It makes me sad and furious if I must think that through this report and your discussion in your circles the impression has once again arisen: everyone is entirely in agreement; only the writers break ranks". In light of these "misunderstandings and misrepresentations", he demanded to meet

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31 "Rechenschaftsbericht zur Wahlberichtsversammlung der APO II am 26. März 1987", Berlin State Archives (hereafter cited as LAB) C Rep. 904-097 34, pp. 10, 13-14.

32 "Highlights of Gorbachev Talk to 27th Congress", 26 February 1986, *Los Angeles Times*: http://articles.latimes.com/1986-02-26/news/mn-47_1_27th-congress (accessed 1 January 2016); "Stimmungsbericht – Schriftstelleverband BV Berlin", pp. 175-177.

33 "Bericht vom 13.05.1986", 22 May 1986, BStU BV Berlin XX 4590 part I, p. 17.

34 "Bericht vom 13.05.1986", cit., pp. 17-19; Abt. XX/7, "Operative Information", Berlin, 15 April 1986, BStU BV Berlin XX 4590 part I, p. 52.

35 HA XX/7, "Information: Diskussionen und Meinungen unter Mitgliedern des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR, Bezirksverband Halle", Berlin, 22 May 1987, BStU HA XX ZMA 4130 vol. 4, pp. 177-178.

36 HA XX/7, Report, Suhl, May 1987, BStU HA XX ZMA 4130 vol. 4, p. 179.

37 HA XX/7, "Information ber die Lage im Schriftstellerverband der DDR", Berlin, 17 March 1987, BStU HA XX ZMA 4130 vol. 4, pp. 144-148.

with the Politburo[38]. "As I know Hermann Kant", Hager wrote to Honecker, "he will pursue this request with doggedness". Honecker agreed[39], and Kant met with the Politburo in December[40]. As this letter illustrates, invoking Gorbachev permitted authors greater audacity *vis-à-vis* the Party, especially after Kant had been elevated to the Central Committee in 1986. The Soviet leader, it turns out, could be both sword and shield.

Congress Planning

These trends coalesced in the Tenth Writers Congress in November 1987, the most radical event under the aegis of the union. Given the tumult in the communist world, SV members anxiously anticipated the congress as an opportunity to discuss high-profile issues[41]. Yet while SV leaders desired real debate, they also hoped to shape the discussions by framing them beforehand, just as they had at earlier congresses[42]. For instance, eight months before the event they discussed how to counter attempts to nominate troublesome authors as delegates[43]. Likely provoking the latter concern were talks with Berlin members that month, where "Probably never before has the word 'democracy' been voiced so often in group talks as in this year", leading to intense scrutiny of the voting process. One persistent complaint was that local leaders only presented the printed list of candidates at the election meeting and not beforehand, and made no effort to justify this list[44]. As a compromise, district leaders agreed that while they would still offer a list, they would accept other nominees before the vote[45]. That fall, the presidium replicated this idea, decreeing that at the congress they too would present a list for the union's steering committee and justify it, at which point delegates could object to candidates or propose new ones. If there were a dispute on a nominee, two

38 Hermann Kant to Kurt Hager, Berlin, 26 May 1986, Literature Archive: Archive of the Writers Union, Archive of the Academy of the Arts (hereafter cited as SV) 546 vol. 2, pp. 186-187.

39 Kurt Hager to Erich Honecker, Berlin, 30 May 1986, SAPMO-BArch DY 30/26310, pp. 1-2.

40 Hermann Kant to Kurt Hager, 9 December 1986, SAPMO-BArch DY 30/26310, p. 1.

41 "Material für den Bericht über die Gruppengespräche 1987", BStU BV Berlin Abt. XX 4513, p. 7.

42 HA XX/7, "Information", Berlin, 10 February 1987, BStU HA XX 13434, pp. 7-8.

43 HA XX/7, "Information über die Beratung des Präsidiums des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR am 17.03.1987", Berlin, 18 March 1987, BStU HA XX 13434, p. 13.

44 "Material für den Bericht über die Gruppengespräche 1987", cit., pp. 3-4.

45 "Information ber politisch-ideologische Probleme im Bezirksschriftstellerverband Berlin im Zusammenhang mit der Auswertung der Gruppengespräche", Berlin, 29 April 1987, BStU HA XX ZMA 4130 vol. 4, p. 169.

voices for and two against would speak, followed by an open vote on whether to put them on the list[46]. While making concessions to "associational democracy", leaders retained influence over the system.

SED leaders were also well apprised of these events. In addition to approving conceptual plans and nominations for SV leadership bodies, cultural bureaucrats observed and guided all preparations. For instance, a Party active group in the union met just before the congress on November 23 to check preparations and immediately afterwards to assess the event[47]. More sinisterly, the Stasi kept a close eye on the congress, deploying a small army of agents and informants to monitor proceedings[48]. The MfS developed elaborate surveillance plans as the event drew closer and Henniger held a consultation at the congress site with representatives from five Stasi offices days beforehand[49]. Beyond this, eleven full-time agents formed a "task force" to attend, one for every twenty-five delegates[50], and they instructed a host of informants to ensure "plans, intentions, means, and methods of hostile forces are recognized, clarified, and prevented in a timely fashion", including for those already under surveillance[51].

One unexpected Party decision was to invite a new set of observers: the Western media. Just before the event, the SED decreed the West German press could observe the congress' plenary sessions and talk with delegates[52]. It is unclear why they did so, but one can speculate that on the one hand they wanted to showcase writers at a time of growing turmoil in the Communist world, and on the other they perhaps needed to give a few inches on free speech after their refusal to adopt glasnost. Yet whatever they hoped to gain by allowing Western

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46 "WAHLORDNUNG (Entwurf)", 9 September 1987, SV 512 vol. 2, pp. 64-65.

47 "Ablaufplan", November 1987, SV 512 vol. 2, pp. 11-13.

48 See for example, "Information über politisch-operativ relevante Äusserungen und Verhaltensweisen von Schriftstellern während der Wahlversammlung des Bezirksschriftstellerverbandes Berlin am 18.9.1987", pp. 207-209; "Zur Vorbereitung des Schriftstellerkongresses 1987", 4 November 1987, Berlin, BStU HA XX ZMA 4130 vol. 4, pp. 223-224; Zentraler Operativstab, "Vorbereitung und Durchführung des X. Schriftstellerkongresses der DDR vom 24.-26. November 1987 in der Hautpstadt der DDR, Berlin", Berlin, 8 October 1987, BStU ZOS 3004, pp. 80-84; Zentraler Operativstab, "Vermerk über eine Absprache mit der HA XX/7 am 9.11.1987 zum Stand der Vorbereitung des Schriftstellerkongresses", 9 November 1987, Berlin, BStU ZOS 3004, pp. 88-90.

49 HA PS, "Information zur Vorbereitung und Durchführung des X. Schriftstellerkongresses in der Kongresshalle am Alexanderplatz", 20 November 1987, BStU ZOS 3004, pp. 99-104.

50 "Einsatz X. Schriftstellerkongress", BStU HA XX 4808, p. 1; "Inhaltsverzeichnis", 1987, BStU ZOS 3004, pp. 111-122.

51 HA XX/7, "Plan zur politisch-operativen Sicherung des X. Schriftstellerkongresse der DDR", 6 November 1987, Berlin, BStU HA XX 13434, pp. 38-40.

52 SV-DDR, "Vorlage für das Sekretariat des Zentralkomitees, Betreff: Teilnahme der in der DDR akkreditierten internationalen Presse am X. Schriftstellerkongress der DDR vom 24.-26. November 1987 in der Kongresshalle am Alexanderplatz in Berlin", 9 November 1987, SV 525, vol. 2, pp. 96-97.

reporters at the congress, by the end of the first day SED leaders were regretting their decision.

The Tenth Writers Congress

After Matthies' proposal had been rejected at the start of the congress on 24 November 1987, all eyes turned to Hermann Kant for his keynote address. In the past, he had used his speech to claim solidarity with the SED, and on this day he began no differently. He cheered the convergence of values between writers and the SED, and gestured to a photograph of late union president Anna Seghers and Honecker, "two people who listen to one another"[53]. "In this picture resides a strength of the association", he elaborated, "that is also as a strength of this country. One is not only the other's partner – one is a like-minded person, really a comrade"[54]. In this, Kant proclaimed the union a true partner of the SED, not merely its lapdog.

From this "bond of trust" between the SV and SED leaders, Kant next turned to the controversial expulsion of nine members in 1979, a source of heated debate in district meetings leading up to the congress. Kant had presided over these expulsions eight years earlier, but now surprisingly declared, "What we decided back then, parting with an array of colleagues, their expulsion, that must not apply for eternity"[55]. As such, he announced, "The association has an open door, it has a door as wide as its statute"[56]. A path back was open to expellees, but not unconditionally – they would have to accept the SV's statute and the limitations it imposed. Building from this extraordinary statement, Kant's boldest step came in discussing glasnost. All agreed "it is not good to live with gaps in consciousness, ignorance, lack of knowledge…" he claimed, but *Neues Deutschland*, the main GDR newspaper, was sometimes guilty of "terrible simplification" for complex topics[57]. "But Gorbachev", he stated, "and really all of him, we already take from the central organ and add him to our work which, like his, aims at socialism"[58]. He then shifted to safer territory, hailing Gorbachev's peace initiatives, but his brief mention of Soviet reforms was intentional. "Incidentally", he added, "it was Erich Honecker who recently expressed the conviction, that 'without the people of culture, without the writers and other artists, it would not stand the way it does today on disarmament'", a

[53] Hermann Kant, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß: Plenum*, cit., p. 28.
[54] *Ibidem*, p. 29.
[55] *Ibidem*.
[56] *Ibidem*.
[57] *Ibidem*, p. 47.
[58] *Ibidem*.

statement that both praised Honecker for being in line with Gorbachev and goaded the SED boss to accept "all of him"[59].

Kant was no firebrand. In his speech, he also rejected the popular idea of an independent "authors' theater", reacted defensively to complaints about union social policies, and defended the GDR publishing system[60]. Yet it is also unmistakable that Kant, as a Central Committee member and as SV president, cautiously but clearly asserted, in full view of the SED leadership and international media, that the boundaries of cultural policy should be expanded. The fact that the speech was met by "lively, sustained applause" suggested many delegates felt similarly[61].

As the first plenary session opened, many of speeches would have been indistinguishable from those at previous congresses, though others brushed against controversy. Eighty-year-old veteran communist Ruth Werner, speaking on the meaning of the Russian Revolution, described the murder of a friend during the Stalinist purges before declaring that books must strive for honesty, even with uncomfortable history[62]. More provocative was Helga Königsdorf, a 59-year-old mathematics professor-turned story writer. She observed that the world was getting smaller, resources were less attainable, and ecological damage was "more and more global and irreversible"[63]. With such threats, books must offer truthful descriptions to help readers overcome "calamity"; "[I]n my opinion", she concluded, "literature should and must be uncomfortable, must be uncomfortable to the people, in uncomfortable times as well"[64]. And Volker Braun, a 58-year-old poet, author, and playwright, admonished the plenum on the second day that "it is miserable to cynically downplay that which is regretted in order to save another belief"[65]. Like Werner and Königsdorf, Braun implied that literature was best when it was uncomfortable, precisely because it stirred consciousness and encouraged engagement.

The first real fireworks came on the second day in the congress' workgroups, away from the media but a far-from private venue as comments were soon leaked to the press[66]. By far the most incendiary remarks were by 43-year-old novelist Christoph Hein in his speech for the group "literature and effect", which took aim at one of the biggest taboos of all: censorship. Publishers, he asserted, were "people who understand their business, work

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59 *Ibidem*.
60 *Ibidem*, pp. 42-50.
61 "Auswertungsvermerk", n.d., BStU HA IX/11 SV 332/87 vol. 1, p. 61.
62 Ruth Werner, *X. Schriftstellerkongress: Plenum*, cit., pp. 78-79.
63 Helga Königsdorf, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß: Plenum*, cit., p. 95.
64 *Ibidem*, p. 97.
65 Volker Braun, *X. Schriftstellerkongress: Plenum*, cit., pp. 81-85.
66 See for example "Widersprüche", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 28, 1987, p. 25.

sacrificially with mind and heart for their books, struggle, and advocate"[67]. None therefore required "supervision", yet all had to answer to government overseers, leading him to exclaim:

> "The approval procedure, the state oversight, more briefly and no less clearly said: the censorship of the publishing houses and books, of the publishers and authors is antiquated, useless, paradoxical, hostile to people [*menschenfeindlich*], unpatriotic [*volksfeindlich*], unlawful, and punishable"[68].

Censorship, he explained, made sense after World War II to facilitate de-Nazification, but it had long since outlived its purpose and was thus antiquated. It was useless in that it could not prevent books from being written; it could only delay their propagation. It was paradoxical in that, far from silencing a work, it enhanced its notoriety by branding it political. It was hostile to people in that it led many "irreplaceable" authors to leave East Germany[69]. It was unpatriotic, insulting the "oft-named and vaunted wisdom of the people" to judge books on their own[70]. It was unlawful as it violated the Constitution, and it was punishable as "it damages in high degree the reputation of the GDR"[71]. News of Hein's words spread like wildfire, prompting strong reactions for and against. Yet the substance of his critique was not new – authors had been complaining about publication policies in SV meetings for decades. What was novel was the bluntness of his label "censorship" and the daring he showed in making these comments within earshot of the press.

Bolder still were comments by Günter de Bruyn at that afternoon's plenary session in front of the media. He began with a simple observation: "Enlightenment through literature is highly praised by us, but practiced less"[72]. Literature's effectiveness, he asserted, was hindered by "what I otherwise call censorship, but here, in order to avoid a fruitless dispute about terms, the approval procedure"[73]. Any society adopting such methods "harms its reputation, fuels doubts about its ability to reform, and robs itself of the driving force of criticism"[74]. He similarly decried the practice of "literary criticism behind closed doors" as it tended to "poison the atmosphere", a shot at the established method of resolving disputes within the union[75]. The upshot was

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67 Christoph Hein, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik: Arbeitsgruppen*, Aufbau Verlag, Berlin, 1988, p. 228.
68 *Ibidem*, p. 228.
69 *Ibidem*, p. 229.
70 *Ibidem*, p. 230.
71 *Ibidem*.
72 Günter De Bruyn, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß: Plenum*, cit., p. 128.
73 *Ibidem*, p. 128.
74 *Ibidem*, p. 129.
75 *Ibidem*.

that "our own judgment about books…is distorted; the reader is infantilized, the writer incapacitated, and many are prompted to leave the country, which often hurts not only them and literature and readers, but also the country"[76]. In brief, they needed "an approval process that makes despotism impossible and guarantees a right of objection"[77]. After all, he reminded, the union was obligated to protect the "artistic concerns of its members", which included censorship[78]. In his speech, De Bruyn challenged the SV's established norm to settle disputes privately, rejecting such methods as counterproductive. He also raised basic questions about the union's purpose, insisting it should be beholden to members above all else.

Having given his own statement, de Bruyn read a letter by novelist Christa Wolf, perhaps East Germany's best-known author. Wolf was in Switzerland and could have easily attended the congress had she chosen, but, as her letter explained, her absence was intentional. Recently, she expressed, socialist states had begun "a new thinking", producing "the first concrete steps of disarmament, the first reasons for hope for a viable future"[79]. Cloaking herself in Gorbachevian rhetoric, she proclaimed that if the union hoped to benefit from this new climate, it must first address "the aftermath of the signatures against the expatriation of Wolf Biermann in 1976 and the unjustified expulsion of an array of colleagues from the Writers Union in 1979"[80]. "I miss friends", she lamented, "I miss conversation and work partners, I miss their part in our intellectual life, even if in several cases I do not share their view"[81]. She did acknowledge positive developments in the GDR, but insisted the SV must do a better job supporting these changes, above all by initiating a dialogue with those who had left the country, choosing "integration" over "ostracism"[82]. Wolf used her letter to publicly profess disagreement over the expulsions, appealing, like de Bruyn, to the SV's obligations to members and its need to atone for past sins.

Hein, de Bruyn, and Wolf were not alone in broaching controversial topics. Several reinforced the attack on censorship and the need for greater openness in literature and the media. In the "literature and historical consciousness group", 29-year-old Holger Teschke argued that writers sought solutions to problems "in the hope that such a dialogue will promote a critical public sphere, which is the precondition for the development of our literature"[83]. Dieter Mucke, a 51-year-old author, pushed further, telling his group it was

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76 *Ibidem*.
77 *Ibidem*.
78 *Ibidem*, p. 130.
79 *Ibidem*, p. 131.
80 *Ibidem*.
81 *Ibidem*, p. 132.
82 *Ibidem*, pp. 132-133.
83 Holger Teschke, *X. Schriftstellerkongress: Arbeitsgruppen*, cit., pp. 86-88.

"paradoxical" and "grotesque" to demand "everything must be more public…but at the same time discuss publicness at the exclusion of the public"[84]. Forty-four-year-old Manfred Jendryschik also gave testy comments to his workgroup on "travel possibilities", criticizing writers as a "privileged" caste[85]. Still others commented on the poor prospects for younger colleagues, especially their lack of publishing chances and inability to participate in "events with an effect on the public"[86]. For Andreas Montag, a 31-year-old in the "literature and historical consciousness" group, the idea of "a priori generational conflict" was a "foolish myth". Instead, openness and honesty would, in his view, do much to heal the generational gap and redress the "lack of sincerity" in society[87]. For such authors, the problem was not merely censorship but a wider system of despotism.

Of all the controversial topics at the congress, the most discussed was environmentalism, with many calling attention to the SED's denial of such problems. Lia Pirskawetz, a 49-year-old writer, complained to the "literature and world" group that no one had discussed pollution on the congress' first day, wasting a chance to do so in front of SED leaders[88]. In the same group, Karlheinz Steinmüller, a 37-year-old science fiction author, criticized the idea that "people must be protected from [environmental] data", calling for "new thinking" in this area[89]. In the group "literature and reality", 51-year-old Wolf Spillner took issue with Honecker's denials of pollution, warning that "Repression [of truth] only produces, in the long run, further damage"[90].

The most impactful environmental speech came at the same plenary session where de Bruyn assailed censorship, when fifty-year-old Sorbian writer Jurij Koch decried the devastation of his homeland. He described recently hearing twin news reports, the first extolling a soon-to-be signed arms reduction treaty between the USSR and United States, and the second hailing a new strip mine. Listening to both, his initial optimism had turned to sober reflection. In his district, local SED officials promoted strip-mining with gusto, ignoring "the nationwide, if not continental, possibly even planetary damage" to the environment and its inhabitants[91]. "By the year 2000", he warned, "almost a quarter of the total territory of my district will be devastated", leaving only "photographic documentations and artistic memories"[92]. To close, he turned to

[84] Dieter Mucke, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß: Arbeitsgruppen*, cit., pp. 293-294.
[85] Manfred Jendryschik, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß: Arbeitsgruppen*, cit., p. 113.
[86] "Persönliche Eindrücke und Informationen vom X. Schriftstellerkongress der DDR", 3 December 1987, BStU HA IX 9705, pp. 101-102.
[87] Andreas Montag, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß: Plenum*, cit., pp. 149-51.
[88] Lia Pirskawetz, *X. Schriftstellerkongress: Arbeitsgruppen*, cit., pp. 182-183.
[89] Karlheinz Steinmüller, *X. Schriftstellerkongress: Arbeitsgruppen*, cit., pp. 218-221.
[90] Wolf Spillner, *X. Schriftstellerkongress: Arbeitsgruppen*, cit., pp. 35-39.
[91] Jurij Koch, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß: Plenum*, cit., pp. 153-154.
[92] *Ibidem*, p. 154.

the peace issue, stating "man has the power to prevent the apocalyptic atomic demise" but "it will require the same if not a greater human endeavor in order to meet the threatening ecological demise"[93]. In Koch's view, it was but a short leap from the world's ruin through NATO missiles to its ruin through pollution, problems that also implicated the GDR. As true Marxists, it was their duty to be good stewards of nature and point out when and why their society fell short. He apparently was not the only one who thought so, as his speech was met with "loud applause"[94].

In response to such provocations, union leaders and SED officials pushed back during the congress. In the same group where Hein spoke, playwright Rudi Strahl rejected the conflation of "censorship" and "publication approval process", as it maligned GDR publishing tsar Klaus Höpcke, a man he had come to view as a "partner" in efforts to publish "difficult" books[95]. Similarly, responding to Wolf's letter in the second plenary session, Kant lectured that contrary to what her letter suggested, union leaders had already reached out to the 1979 expellees, and had also tried in vain to include Wolf in "our very demanding work". But "out of democratic considerations it is simply not possible", he scolded, "on the one hand to inform a conference like this that one isn't interested in it or for various reasons is prevented [from attending], but on the other to appear at the last moment as its discussion participant"[96]. "For me that is, openly confessed, a backdoor, and this author is for me a little too big for a backdoor", he reproached[97]. Angered by this procedural violation, he nonetheless offered to meet Wolf so she could air her grievances in person. "I am", he emphasized, "all for this discussion", and recommended "much more controversial views" as the only way to "move forward"[98]. All the same, he ended by reminding the group that "associational democracy", like all democracies, required "participation"[99]. While Kant was willing to entertain opposing views, he stressed that breaches of protocol were unacceptable. He seemed aware that the space he had won for the union was being taken advantage of and might be lost unless non-conformists were reined in.

It fell to Klaus Höpcke to address attacks on censorship. Praising publishers as "the most intimate intellectual partners and like-minded colleagues of authors" he called it a "false characterization" to say they restricted literature's "informative function"[100]. In reality, publishers, the Ministry for Culture, and SV

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93 *Ibidem*, pp. 156-157.
94 Tenth Writers Congress Protocol, n.d., BStU HA IX/11 SV 332/87 vol. 2, p. 173.
95 Rudi Strahl, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß: Arbeitsgruppen*, cit., p. 271.
96 Hermann Kant, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß: Plenum*, cit., pp. 134-137
97 *Ibidem*, p. 137.
98 *Ibidem*, p. 138.
99 *Ibidem*.
100 Klaus Höpcke, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß: Plenum*, cit., p. 167.

together "work to reduce encumbrances, which stem from vague or uncertain positions *vis-à-vis* a manuscript"[101]. He admitted that in some cases the process for second or third print runs was inefficient, vowing to correct it "as quickly as we can"[102]. But he labeled the government's publishing office the "most tangible" and "most accessible" arm of the state for writers, noting most of its actions were conducted in "democratic, volunteer committees as advisory bodies and literature consortia, and not least in discussing these and other questions with the organs of the Writers Union, before the presidium of its steering committee"[103]. He then shifted to the mechanics of publishing, lamenting that they had been unable to keep up with demand, and spent several minutes discussing paper quality and other practical concerns[104]. Höpcke, after only briefly addressing censorship, dismissed criticisms by blaming technical problems. Moreover, his focus on SV participation in publishing decisions showed members' voices were heard, disarming complaints that his office was a distant, unresponsive authority.

The other government official to speak was Minister for Environment and Water Management Hans Reichelt, who lectured on the "relationship between man and nature, between material production, development, and protection of natural resources", a speech brimming with denials of environmental problems[105]. He underscored how East Germans, guided by the SED, had created an economy that tied "growing prosperity with an ever more considerate use of nature and its resources, with an ever more careful utilization of raw materials as well as regenerative natural riches, of the soil, of the water, of the animal and plant world"[106]. He then offered a laundry list of statistics on energy efficiency and ecological friendliness and even claimed exploitation of nature under capitalism had, for centuries, been far worse, accounting for "much ecological damage in the most varied parts of our world"[107]. His views were not widely shared, however, as his feeble justifications were met with escalating "expressions of protest" from delegates to the point where he could not properly finish his speech[108]. The frustrated minister then collected his notes and left the podium in a huff, prompting literary critic Dieter Schlenstedt to later muse, "In the middle or late period of the GDR I don't remember having ever seen anything like it"[109].

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[101] *Ibidem*.
[102] *Ibidem*, p. 168.
[103] *Ibidem.*
[104] *Ibidem*, pp. 169-170.
[105] Hans Reichelt, *X. Schriftstellerkongreß: Plenum*, cit., p. 184.
[106] *Ibidem*, p. 185.
[107] *Ibidem*, p. 190.
[108] Tenth Writers Congress Protocol, cit., pp. 92-94.
[109] Dieter Schlenstedt, "Der aus dem Ruder laufende Schriftstellerkongress von 1987", cit., pp. 16-31.

Writers had seized a chance to speak publicly – to their countrymen and the Western media – about socialism and its shortcomings. Regime officials, caught off guard, were at a loss to defend themselves. Even Kant, normally a pillar of loyalty, added support for Gorbachev and the idea of readmitting expelled members. At least for three days the balance had shifted to critical writers, who finally had a public platform. It was, without a doubt, one of the most remarkable events in GDR history. If author John Erpenbeck called the congress a "preliminary exercise in glasnost"[110], perhaps translator Thomas Reschke captured the spirit of the event better when he remarked, "Finally, a congress where one could discuss things. It was time"[111].

Responses

Before tackling the issues raised by the congress, SV leaders had to take stock of what transpired. When the presidium met in January 1988, they were awash in self-congratulation, as Kant boasted the event was "a product of intentions; it did not surprise those involved or really overtake them"[112]. As for future plans, some agreed "the procedural method" for approving publications did not always match official policies and thus needed revision[113]. The group also agreed to build a "literature and environment" group and "rights commission", to strengthen young authors' "active inclusion", and to address the situation in theater more robustly[114]. On the expellees, they easily decided to readmit renowned playwright Heiner Müller, ousted in 1961 because of his critical views, but disagreed on those thrown out in 1979[115]. Such acts suggested that SV leaders were aware reform was needed and resolved to guide it. Their lack of action on the 1979 expellees, however, suggested some reluctance to rethink all of their previous decisions.

For its part, the Stasi struggled to put a positive spin on the event as it assessed the views of rank-and-file union members. Some evaluations optimistically focused on delegates who tried to deflect critical statements and to defeat the proposal to readmit expellees[116]. Another was more frank,

[110] "Beschlussprotokoll (Entwurf)", 13 January 1988, SV 512, vol. 3, pp. 68-69.

[111] "Abschrift: Übersetzung aus der Bezirkszeitung der USAP 'Sopron Naplo'", n.d., BStU ZAIG 14.205, p. 2.

[112] Abt. Kultur, "Information über die Sitzung des Präsidiums des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR am 13. Januar 1988", 14 January 1988, SAPMO-BArch DY 30/27325, p. 6.

[113] "Beschlussprotokoll (Entwurf)", cit., pp. 68-73.

[114] "Information über die Sitzung des Präsidiums des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR am 13. Januar 1988", cit., pp. 7-9.

[115] "Beschlussprotokoll (Entwurf)", pp. 68-73. See also "Beschlussprotokoll", 13 January 1988, SV 512, vol. 3, pp. 64-65.

[116] "Information über die Ergebnisse des X. Schriftstellerkongresses der DDR und die sich daraus ergebenden politisch-operativen Schlussfolgerungen", Berlin, BStU HA XX Nr. 4808,

acknowledging most delegates approved of the "open and critical atmosphere", though again highlighting those seeking to put the genie back into the bottle[117]. The first line of a third report lauded the event as a "political success in the implementation of the cultural policy of the Party", but devoted eleven of twelve pages to analyzing controversial statements[118]. Indeed, it concluded by admitting that the congress "is looked at by negative and hostile powers as an example with a signal effect"[119]. Similarly, a fourth report worried that comments by Kant and others encouraged Western speculation about the readmission of expellees[120]. In trying to dismiss these challenges as the work of a small, hostile group, the Stasi missed the larger point in its own reports, namely that most delegates approved of the congress' "open and critical atmosphere". As with previous congresses, SED and union leaders framed the event to influence what could be said. And as at earlier events the Stasi deployed informants and agents to monitor preceedings. Yet while the vast majority of members had sided with the SED in earlier congresses, and while many, perhaps most, preferred a more restrained approach to reforming the GDR in 1987, those authors calling for open debate to improve society now plainly had the momentum.

What of the SED's response? One surprising result came in June 1988 when Klaus Höpcke announced a new "approval procedure", which would permit publishers to submit only their decision and rationale on whether or not to publish a manuscript, not the manuscript itself. This amounted to a drastic reduction of government oversight and, by extension, a decrease in the power of censors[121]. Yet despite these pronouncements, censorship continued to plague writers, especially in the realm of theater[122], and the SED decision later that year to ban a popular Soviet news magazine, *Sputnik*[123], only compounded frustration[124]. Similarly, in June 1989

pp. 8-11; "Persönliche Eindrücke und Informationen vom X. Schriftstellerkongress der DDR", cit., p. 103.

117 "Information über den X. Schriftstellerkongreß der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik vom 24. Nov. bis 26. Nov. 1987", 2 December 1987, Berlin, BStU AKG 4105, pp. 88-93.

118 "Information über die Ergebnisse des X. Schriftstellerkongresses der DDR und die sich daraus ergebenden politisch-operativen Schlussfolgerungen", pp. 12-23.

119 *Ibidem*, p. 23.

120 Kahl, "X. Schriftstellerkongress der DDR", p. 45.

121 J .K.A. Thomaneck, Bill Niven, *Dividing and Uniting Germany*, Routledge, London, 2001, p. 43; Abt. Kultur, "Information über die Sitzung des Präsidiums des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR am 28. Juni 1988", Berlin, 1 July 1988, SAPMO-BArch DY30/27325, pp. 1-2; Darnton, *Censors at Work*…cit, pp. 223-226.

122 HA XX/7, "Information über den Verlauf der Sitzung des Vorstandes des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR am 28.2.1989", BStU HA XX 13434, pp. 71-72.

123 Over the next six weeks the SED received eight hundred letters and petitions from the Leipzig district alone condemning the ban, half from Party members. Steven Pfaff, *Exit-Voice Dynamics and the Collapse of East Germany: The Crisis of Leninism and the Revolution of 1989*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2006, pp. 50-58/p. 54.

124 See for example, "Protokoll: Gruppengespräch vom 21. November 1988 im Verband der Schriftsteller der DDR, Bezirksverband Berlin", Berlin, 24 November 1988, BStU BV Berlin Abt. XX 4236, pp. 19-22.

the SED dispatched Reichelt to a consultation with the union's leadership, where authors described environmental problems in the GDR and Jurij Koch presented a petition to protect three villages from strip mining[125]. Yet when confronted with these statements, government officials defended the *status quo*. Reichelt, for instance, underscored that "socialist environmental policy is broader than just environmental protection" and regaled them with "facts" to show their "successes"[126]. Still, he promised to lead discussions about Koch's proposal with "responsible organs"[127].

On the surface, Reichelt's reply was little different than a year-and-a-half earlier. He satisfied writers' need to be heard, but appeared unmoved by complaints[128]. In fact, the proposal to protect the villages gained little traction until well after the SED had lost power[129]. But even if bureaucrats did not take writers' concerns seriously, it is still striking that the government felt obliged to dispatch its top responsible minister to consult with authors. At a time of rising public dissent and throngs of citizens clamoring to leave that summer via the suddenly liberalized Hungarian border, the SED could ill afford to further alienate writers. So even if Reichelt appeared nonplussed, perhaps the fact that he was made to go at all was a victory for writers. At the very least, members could see this engagement as a good start; even if Reichelt was unmoved at present, momentum might slowly begin to turn the wheels of bureaucracy in their favor.

Conclusions

The early 1970s were in many ways optimistic times in East Germany. Many, perhaps most, writers still had hope that for all its flaws the Party might still get it right. Thus when in the mid-1970s provocative SV members publicly challenged the SED's authoritarianism, such views, even if they generated sympathy, still struck many as destabilizing at a fragile moment. By the mid-1980s the faith the SED would get it right had faded. As problems emerged in youth policy, the environment, censorship, and other areas, even those who backed the regime in the 1970s began to question the direction of cultural policy and the country more generally. This was especially so when the SED rejected Gorbachev's reforms, choosing instead to rely on stale methods to revive a

[125] HA XX/7, "Information zum Auftreten des Schriftstellers Jurij Koch während der Tagung des Aktivs 'Literatur und Umwelt' des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR am 7.3.1989", Berlin, 1 May 1989, BStU HA XX 4810, pp. 19-20.

[126] "Information über die Sitzung des Vorstandes des Schriftstellerverbandes der DDR zum Thema 'Literatur und Umwelt' am 21. Juni 1989", 23 June 1989, SV 510, vol. 3, p. 32.

[127] *Ibidem*.

[128] *Ibidem*, p. 33.

[129] Cordula Ratajczak, *Mühlroser Generationen: Deutsche-sorbische Überlebensstrategien in einem Lausitzer Tagebaugebiet*, LIT, Münster, 2004, pp. 14-15.

country on life support. As dissatisfaction mounted, outspoken writers, especially those who had acted defiantly in the 1970s, were quick to call for greater freedom.

Given these tremors, it is little wonder that the Tenth Writers Congress became a watershed moment, echoing the intense controversies of earlier congress across the Soviet bloc. What is striking about the East German congress is less that Hein, Wolf, or Matthies challenged regime policies in a public venue – it is that the other delegates acquiesced to them doing so, whether out of sympathy, disenchantment, or resignation. No longer was there an overriding hope that working quietly within the system would achieve results.

After the congress, members pursued the issues they had raised there. Progress was made, yet the extent remained circumscribed. Bringing back a few prominent authors was not the same as readmitting the 1979 expellees. Promises to reduce censorship did not eliminate it. And winning Reichelt's pledge to consider saving three villages may have been little more than a calculating bureaucrat humoring his critics. The tenth congress thus provided a moment of optimism for a union hungry for change, but this morsel was not a meal. Members had broken down limits on speech in dramatic fashion, with even the most conservative leaders agreeing to more candid and public debate on critical problems so long as it was mediated by the SV. The congress reminded them of the possibility of change, shaking many out of the pervasive lethargy of the past several years. But despite shattering taboos and despite progress in vital areas, continued feet dragging by the SED only multiplied frustrations for increasingly assertive members. And if the controversial summit with Reichelt in June were any indication, the rest of 1989 promised to be momentous.