

Swapping Self-Righteousness for Solidarity

1 December 2014

Given the blanket German and international media coverage of the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin wall, I had planned to let the 9th of November pass without comment. But then friends at the German *telegraph* asked me to contribute a piece on secret service agencies for their anniversary edition. The *telegraph* is the self-styled “last authentic newspaper of the leftist opposition in East Germany,” “independent, recalcitrant, critical, ill-disposed to authorities and corporations – qualities that have been lost by many prominent so-called GDR civil rights activists.”

I first met the editorial team as a young lawyer shortly after reunification in what was then the House of Democracy and Human Rights at 165 Friedrichstraße, the former headquarters of the Socialist Unity Party in Berlin. My colleagues and I had offices in the first floor, across from the *Bürgerkomitee 15. Januar* (citizens’ committee on Stasi files) and the editorial staff of the publication *Horch und Guck*, two floors below the offices of the *Neues Forum* movement. As lawyers we represented not only victims of right-wing violence in the former East. We also helped Stasi victims to access their files, accompanied them to the Stasi archives and explained the legal paths open to them, including launching criminal proceedings and taking civil action.

Coming from West Germany, our knowledge of the extent and prevalence of surveillance and repression by the secret service in the GDR didn’t go much further than what we had read in the papers. In the course of our work, however, we heard countless stories of people who, before 1989, had risked much in order to pursue different politics or a different culture. In some cases it was small gestures such as having long hair or a drawing an “A” with a circle around it that led to persecution. I also represented gay victims, some of whom spent years in prison on grounds of “asocial behavior”, as well as many others whose political activism brought them to the attention of the state.

So far, so bad – and a steep learning curve for me. I realized then that as undogmatic West German leftists we should have acted earlier and taken a more vehement position. After all, it wasn’t simply a matter of East German bureaucrats on one side and anti-communists on the other, of Eduard Schnitzler (of TV show *Der schwarze Kanal*) versus Gerhard Löwenthal (*Deutschlandmagazin*). We should have been helping the people who, like us, wanted to be politically active and live their lives. If we had figured this out sooner then we could have joined forces with them, and then maybe together we could have made use of the glimmer of political hope that appeared after the wall fell and that is rarely spoken of today: the chance to fight for a real alternative to nominal socialism *and* to neoliberal capitalism.

But instead we are now faced with an economic and political global system in which the Northern and Central Europeans and the North Americans self-righteously celebrate how wonderful they are for using the profits earned around the world to prop up Western societies which – viewed historically as well as in comparison with the rest of the world – enjoy a relatively high standard of living and relatively democratic conditions. But this luxury comes at a price, namely the appalling conditions facing people in many other parts of the world as well as at the periphery of the European continent.

This is not a lament to lost opportunities. This is instead a call to us all to practice solidarity and to do more to bring down the walls of various kinds that still exist today.