

Who were 'the people'? Classes and movements in 1989 East Germany

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"For me," one protestor on the Leipzig street demonstrations of 1989 recalls,

the best moment was when I walked into the crowd – completely alone – and cried, at first quietly and then ever louder, "We are the people! We are the people!" [...] I saw police but felt no fear. I felt strong, raised my arms in the air, and shouted at the top of my voice.¹

'We are the people!' was the slogan that encapsulated the early phase of East Germany's 1989 revolution. It was a rallying cry, expressing a new-forged alliance of the powerless and signalling the desire for democratic change. It spoke of ordinary people seizing the political agenda and insisting upon their right to be heard and represented in the public sphere. It asserted the protestors' beliefs that their basic aims were shared by the bulk of the population and that this majority should determine the political process. It expressed a sense of unity that is commonly found during the first stages of revolutions when the working and middling layers of society unite against the old regime. It bore the imprint of the republican framing of political conflict whereby a patriotic 'people' unites against a dynasty or elite that is defined as illegitimate and, implicitly, alien. Invocation of 'the people' thereby challenged the Party's claims to a power monopoly; as one demonstration banner put it, 'The GDR belongs to the People, not to the SED.' Another proclaimed, in ironic play on the SED's claim to the 'leading role' in society, 'The people should take the leading role!'

But who were 'the people' that rose up to topple Eric Honecker's regime? Which social groups were represented? Was the uprising of 1989 of the people as a whole, or primarily of particular groups – the working class, or the 'intelligentsia'? Using secondary and unpublished and published primary materials, including archival documents and interviews, this article attempts to answer these questions. Along the way it investigates the class nature of the East German intelligentsia, the role of intellectuals within the 'civic groups' (such as New Forum), and the degree to which the movement entered the workplaces. It draws on primary materials but also reviews the relevant literature, including, especially, the distinct position of Linda Fuller's *Where Was the Working Class?*

'Scientist, artist, doctor, priest'

Probably the most influential reading of the Eastern European transformations of 1989-90 is that they were 'revolutions of the intellectuals.' According to one popular account, *Surge to Freedom*, "It was the intellectuals, in company with the young, who finally pushed through to liberty."² In the East German case, proponents of this interpretation emphasise that theatres and universities were central arenas of protest, and highlight the role played by students. The public face of the uprising was

¹ Bahr, *Sieben*, p.101; Lindner and Grüneberger, *Demonteur*, p.51

² Brown, 1991, p.1.

provided by the civic groups, whose cadre was drawn chiefly from the middle classes, and within those, from a layer that has been labelled 'postmaterialist intellectuals' or the 'humanistic intelligentsia.' For Jens Reich, a leader of New Forum who himself belonged to this stratum, intellectuals were the "catalyst and the subject of the revolution"; the uprising was "a protest movement of the intelligentsia. Its representatives provided the leadership personnel and formulated the proclamations."³

The case for the centrality of intellectuals in Eastern European oppositional movements had been advanced long before 1989. For much of the post-war epoch writers, artists, scientists and priests were among the most prominent dissidents in the region. Drawing upon traditions of thought that posit an inherent antagonism between *Geist* and *Macht*, Western scholars invoked the special interest and responsibility of creative intellectuals in speaking truth in the face of oppression. Although despotic power and bureaucratic apparatuses might succeed in co-opting much of the intelligentsia, there would always be those who resisted, defending the freedom of creative inquiry.

In Eastern Europe, sociological analyses of the intelligentsia's peculiar role were produced, notably by Marc Rakovski, Boris Kagarlitsky, György Konrád and Iván Szelényi. In Rakovski's view, the intelligentsia, globally but especially in the Soviet sphere, had experienced a process of proletarianisation. However, "intellectual workers who are in regular contact with the process of cultural and scientific creation," although not "constituting an autonomous class," remained a distinct social group, and one, moreover, that was "capable of forming an autonomous ideology [...] and even its own counter-culture and embryonic counter-institutions."⁴ The emphasis in Kagarlitsky's work was upon the traditional imperative for intellectuals to identify with the voiceless masses. Their duty was "not to defend their own interests but those of the oppressed; to speak out in the name of the people and of society, and to fuse their activities with the struggle for democracy."⁵ He too perceived that, like their counterparts in the West, the bulk of Eastern European intellectuals had undergone a process of "social degradation" as the relatively privileged petit-bourgeois conditions of the nineteenth century literati were replaced by a new world of order-taking and wage labour.⁶ For György Konrád and Iván Szelényi, by contrast, the East European intelligentsia, far from being crushed under the juggernaut of modernisation, had leapt to the helm and taken control. Intellectuals formed a faction within the Soviet-bloc ruling class, and a rising one at that. The socialist transformation in Russia and Eastern Europe, they proposed in *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power*, had been carried out by intellectuals whose goal was

to seize the commanding heights of political and economic power by revolutionary means, topple and destroy the landowning and capitalist classes and their legitimating principles, abolish every element of traditional rule [...] and, after joining hands with the bureaucratic apparatus [...] to lay the foundations for the class power of the intelligentsia.⁷

It is this framework that forms the basis of Linda Fuller's detailed and hard-hitting appraisal of the intelligentsia's role in the East German events of 1989, the title of which asks *Where Was the Working Class?* Quoting Konrád and Szelényi, Fuller

³ Reich, 1992, pp.9-11.

⁴ Rakovski, 1978.

⁵ Kagarlitzki, 1990.

⁶ Kagarlitsky, 1988, pp.102, 111.

⁷ Konrád and Szelényi, 1979, p.126. See also Szelényi, 1978-9, 1979.

proposes that

the class structure of socialist societies was basically dichotomous. Workers, who were 'deprived of any right to participate in redistribution,' were contrasted with intellectuals, who, on the basis of specialized knowledge acquired primarily through higher education, carried out the redistribution of the surplus that workers produced.⁸

Viewed through this prism, 1989 was nothing but a struggle within the ruling intelligentsia.

Sociologically speaking, one factor that stood out [throughout] the revolution was its single-class character. It was a revolution of the relatively privileged in East German society, a struggle that occurred largely between two segments of the intelligentsia – one defending the status quo and the other determined to overthrow it.⁹

In her empirical findings, Fuller concurs with the other scholars mentioned above but she is no cheerleader for the intelligentsia. Quite the opposite. She castigates the civic groups for ignoring the working masses, and accounts for this behaviour with reference to their privileged circumstances.¹⁰ Intellectuals were rewarded for their state-supporting roles as guardians of scientific progress, gatekeepers of opportunities and information, and managers of legitimation. For many, their occupations involved giving commands to workers. Elitist justifications of privilege were commonplace in intellectual circles, as was disdain for the common people, who were regarded as uneducated, greedy, slothful and pampered. Drawing upon interviews with intellectuals she documents a litany of their prejudices:

Workers had little concern for such "higher" principles as democracy and freedom; workers were too materialistic [...]; workers could not think for themselves, were untrustworthy, and did not bother to inform themselves; and workers had a hard time processing theoretical problems and comprehending the content and the language of intellectual discourse.

In support of her thesis Fuller produces two main pieces of evidence. On the basis of interviews with workers in various parts of the country she comes to the conclusion that in the autumn "they had stayed out of politics altogether, aside from sometimes discussing events among themselves." As autumn passed into winter this picture did not change. Workers, she notes, were "not well represented" at the round tables. Apart from internal workplace activities in the winter of 1989-90 (more on which below), this was a revolution characterised by "working-class noninvolvement."¹¹ The protests that brought down Honecker's regime and placed its successors under continuous pressure were dominated by the educated middle classes, with "numerous large demonstrations, sponsored" by intellectuals. One such, in Berlin, for example, was called by

a writers' and artists' association and was organised largely by New Forum and other citizens' opposition groups, with the cooperation of local officials. The most prominently featured speakers at this demonstration included well-known writers, actors, and journalists, who shared the stage with high-level government and party notables.¹²

On this point, Fuller's case is compelling. There is no doubt whatsoever that

⁸ Fuller, 1999, p.19.

⁹ Ibid, p.33.

¹⁰ Ibid, pp.98-100.

¹¹ Ibid, p.33.

¹² Ibid, p.37.

many of those who emerged from the 1980s opposition to found and lead the civic groups were more likely than the average citizen to hail from the middle classes and to pursue professional careers. Were a rhyme to be written listing their favoured occupations it would not be 'tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor' but 'scientist, artist, doctor, priest.' Surveys of the civic groups attest that graduates were hugely over-represented.¹³ One such, of the membership of Berlin New Forum, found that almost three-quarters were educated to the tertiary level, with forty per cent describing themselves as 'intelligentsia,' ten per cent as 'managers' [*Leiter*], and ten per cent as 'students and apprentices.' Only an eighth described themselves as 'workers' and one per cent as unskilled.¹⁴

Fuller's analysis of the elitism of sections of the dissident milieu and their detachment from the concerns of the common people is supported by the findings of other scholars. "The masses," according to research conducted by the Leipzig sociologist Detlef Pollack and his colleagues, appeared only at the margins of oppositionists' conceptions.¹⁵ Although, at times, they came into view as a "target of political activity" they were also seen as an "obstacle" to the achievement of reform.¹⁶ Many oppositionists, moreover, viewed workers as congenitally apolitical and "consumerist." It was assumed that they would keep their heads down so long as their calorific intake was adequate.¹⁷

If intellectuals showed disdain for workers these responded in kind. They would speak of the GDR as the 'dictatorship of the intelligentsia.' Intellectuals, Uwe Rottluff, a print worker and leading member of New Forum, told me, were seen by his colleagues as "people with nothing useful to say: they're incomprehensible and don't understand us."¹⁸ In this regard, distinctions were not always made between regime loyalists and dissidents. "The opposition in the 1980s was seen as a bunch of crazy artists who then left for the West," the same interviewee added. "It was a foreign world to us. After all, in Germany 'intellectual' is a four-letter word."

In 1989 similar criticisms attached themselves to the civic groups. Despite a preoccupation, bordering on an obsession, with the concepts 'communication' and 'dialogue' their attempts to communicate with the mass of the population were largely unsuccessful. Even in mid-November one New Forum leader, Bärbel Bohley, admitted that "none of the groups, not even New Forum with its 200,000 people, had yet actually entered a real process of communication with the population."¹⁹ This was in part the inevitable consequence of having begun to build networks during a fast-moving revolutionary situation. But that was not the only problem. As Bohley herself pointed out, the opposition groups from which the civic groups sprang "were detached and aloof from the problems faced by the people."²⁰

On the aloofness of the civic groups a considerable body of evidence can be found. Research on New Forum conducted by Wilfried Wilkens-Friedrich revealed that "the accusation arose, mainly from amongst its working-class membership, that it was purely a discussion group rather than one aimed at effecting change in the wider society."²¹ Letters to New Forum voiced similar concerns. One married couple, describing themselves as "ordinary poor East German citizens," wrote in to gently

¹³ Müller-Enbergs *et al.*, 1991, p.20.

¹⁴ Schulz, 1991, p.20-1.

¹⁵ Pollack *et al.* 1992, p.50.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.48.

¹⁷ See e.g. Bruckmeier, 1993, p.73.

¹⁸ Interview with Uwe Rottluff, Printer and leading member of New Forum, Berlin, October 1994.

¹⁹ Philipsen, 1993, p.301.

²⁰ Findeis *et al.*, 1994, p.53.

²¹ Wilkens-Friedrich, 'Beziehungen,' p.44.

explain that the organisation was “too intellectual – it isn’t our world, when, mainly in the church, highly educated people are canvassing for New Forum.” (“We are,” they added, “simple and -- to put it simply -- secular workers, but honest of heart.”) Another correspondent warned that in his locality New Forum was becoming a “playground for intellectuals.”²² Similar misgivings were communicated to me by Uwe Rottluff. “Of course hopes were invested in New Forum,” he said. But their activists were seen as “people with nothing useful to say. As intellectuals they encountered a fair dose of mistrust too.” They “seemed unable to bring us comprehensible arguments from their ivory tower. They would split hairs over their sectarian differences, ignoring the need to communicate”; they were “out of touch with reality.”

If social position and cultural milieu served to divide the intelligentsia from workers, they could simultaneously prove advantageous to those who trod the paths of dissidence and opposition. The working lives of professionals and managers are characterised by directing and controlling resources or people, and articulating and disseminating ideas. Doctors diagnose patients and prescribe remedies, priests preach to their flocks, writers create dialogues, construct narratives and design fictional worlds. These skills also happen to be vital to leadership positions in social movement organisations: the ability to diagnose symptoms of political malaise and to prescribe remedies, to write for and address a mass audience, and to draft blueprints for political change. “As local government representatives, political party stalwarts, workplace managers, and participants in professional, social service, and opposition political groups,” writes Fuller, many East German intellectuals

had frequent practice speaking before groups, leading, compromising, chairing meetings, debating, envisioning alternatives, raising money, building alliances, planning programs, recruiting supporters, isolating opponents, evaluating options, and so forth.²³

Social life within a middle-class milieu instilled intellectuals with a confidence in their ability to relate to and negotiate with powerful people and to intervene in institutional politics. Furthermore, the ‘political confidence’ of dissidents was in some cases (although by no means always) buttressed by a relative immunity from state sanctions. In the case of pastors, the contract between state and Church all but guaranteed their security. For others, it resulted from personal contacts, public prominence, or their unique skills. In short, oppositional intellectuals were not only advantaged in terms of the comforts of life and greater freedoms and responsibilities in their occupations but benefited from an array of resources, including skills and leadership qualities, that had been cultivated in their social milieux and professional lives.

Reflecting their class milieu, Fuller argues, the civic groups placed little emphasis on workplace or working-class issues. Activists would ignore or disparage workers “and in some instances purposely excluded them from their efforts.” It would be unfair to charge the civic groups with *discrimination* in their approach to workers; if anything, the opposite was the case. Yet, as this wry recollection by Gerd Sczepansky indicates, a positive attitude was not necessarily much more than tokenism.

At the end of September I was a founding member of New Forum in the Karl-Marx-Stadt district, belonged to its leadership and was, yes, the only worker. It was quite hilarious, because the doctors and professors and intellectuals who were in the committee would

²² Krone, *Briefe*, p.165.

²³ Fuller, 1999, p.84.

always say: 'You're a worker, you must take a seat on the podium, you'll be in the front row.' To which I'd reply: that's not what I want; that's how the SED always behaved too.

And, Sczepansky continues, it was those very same committee members – “the artists, paediatricians, intellectuals” – who insisted that “politics must stay out of the workplace.”²⁴ In some districts, such as Görlitz, workplace New Forum groups survived into 1990 but elsewhere, it was argued, resources should be concentrated upon local and ‘theme’ groups instead. “We were originally involved in groups based on locality, theme and workplace,” Uwe Rottluf recalls,

But in mid-November a resolution was passed to pull out of the workplaces – although I now know that was a mistake; it led to conflicts in our local groups too. Yet the dissenters were outvoted. The argument was that we should focus on one thing: *political* goals. The intellectuals [in the leadership] fought shy of any association with ‘union’ activity.

Was the intelligentsia a ruling class?

Fuller’s monograph is a pioneering study of East German industrial relations, but on two counts it is flawed. One is her thesis that the events centred on a struggle within a ruling intelligentsia. Her analysis draws a simple dichotomy between workers (who were “deprived of any right to participate in redistribution”) and intellectuals (who, “on the basis of specialised knowledge acquired primarily through higher education, carried out the redistribution of the surplus that workers produced”). It is an approach that assumes, mistakenly, that the tertiary educational experience that defined membership of the intelligentsia was of greater consequence than the distribution of graduates within the social hierarchy. A more serviceable starting point, I would suggest, may be found in the writings of Antonio Gramsci. Professional intellectuals, he argues, are distinguished not by “the intrinsic nature of intellectual activities” but by their function within “the general complex of social relations.”²⁵ A graduate’s matriculation certificate matters less than the position she takes within the social labour process. Applying this approach to East Germany one sees that the intelligentsia was anything but an homogenous mass. At one end of the scale a minority of graduates belonged to the *nomenklatura*. Their social function was defined not by their specialist knowledge but by their strategic decision-making power. This ruling elite was clearly distinguished from the rest of the intelligentsia through its relation to property, as manifested in its members’ ‘dispositional authority’: their power over resources, investments, and the production process in general. At the other end, a large proportion belonged to the working class. Although classified as ‘white-collar’ they exercised little control over their own labour and none whatsoever over resources or over the labour of others.

Between *nomenklatura* and intellectual proletariat lay individuals in middling positions. The scope of their sovereignty over immediate tasks and decisions was comparatively large. Senior administrative staff, middle managers, supervisors and some technicians exercised significant operational control over the day-to-day use of already-allocated resources. They were entrusted with a considerable degree of autonomy and discretion within their spheres and were rewarded generously to ensure compliance with the strategic decisions of their superordinates. Together with academics, journalists, scientists and artists they performed the lion’s share of

²⁴ Ibid, p.78; Hürtgen and Gehrke, *Aufbruch*, pp.42, 122.

²⁵ Gramsci, 1971, p.8.

creative intellectual work. That said, the spheres in which they exercised power were tightly demarcated and their freedom to wield it was strictly limited. Middle functionaries, for example, were engaged in directing tasks over the formulation of which they had had little say, yet would bear the brunt of criticism from those who carried them out. Other sections of the middle-class intelligentsia were subject to quite harsh regimes. Those who were professionally concerned with the articulation of ideas were especially constricted by the tightly controlled information flow, the stranglehold of censorship and the rigid imposition of conformity to state-decreed norms. Artists, although in many respects privileged in comparison to workers, were employed by the state which sought – with varying degrees of intrusiveness – to direct their labour. Like workers, they were given to understand that success depends upon performance (which prompted one film director to the rhetorical question, “The directive is always that it is performance that counts, but who calculates performance?”)²⁶ Control of the cultural sphere by apparatchiks provoked resentment. “It is not the duty of a Marxist-Leninist party to organise the production of poems like a poultry farm,” Brecht once complained, “otherwise the poems will resemble each other just like one egg and another – volkstümlich und funktionärstümlich.”²⁷ Elsewhere he summed up the complex relations between the state, artists and workers with inimitable wit:

The workers are pressed to increase production and the artists to beautify it. A high living standard is accorded the artists and promised the workers. The output of the artists, as of the workers, has an instrumental character and is seen neither as innately gratifying nor as free.²⁸

Socially and politically, there were forces that pulled the intelligentsia’s middling layers in different directions. Their position was elevated above the mass, with higher incomes and greater freedoms and responsibilities. They knew which side their bread was buttered on, and were on the whole supportive of the regime. Enjoying relatively rewarding work, and privileges that were usually tied directly to their position, even those of a more critical bent faced strong incentives to avoid any action that might jeopardise their career. Members of the intelligentsia were very likely to join the SED and were disproportionately represented in Party positions.

Yet, equally, the middling layers experienced continuous friction with the higher authorities. The “entire motley mass,” Boris Kagarlitsky has described in the case of Russia,

is certainly linked very closely with the Party bureaucracy but it also possesses its own interests – professional ones included – which it sometimes has to defend against its own protectors. Furthermore, these middle strata retain fairly close links with “the lower orders”, who frequently influence them.²⁹

The conditions of life of these strata perpetually generated dissidence, but typically of a kind that sought to achieve change through negotiation. The ‘natural habitat’ of such layers, Colin Barker has written, “is the activity of mediation between opposed social forces, of manoeuvring within the everyday institutions” of class society.³⁰ In

²⁶ Jäger, 1982, p.70.

²⁷ Flores, 1971, p.64.

²⁸ Jäger, 1982, p.67.

²⁹ Kagarlitsky, 1988, p.103.

³⁰ Barker, 1987, p.235.

East Germany numerous leaders and activists of the civic groups came from this 'middling layer.' Their political stance was characterised by the desire to compromise, seeking a balance between order and reform, between maintaining social stability and pushing for thoroughgoing political change. They also cultivated what is sometimes dubbed the petit-bourgeois illusion that the interests of ruling and working classes can be harmoniously reconciled.

Intellectuals were important in the 1989 movements but their role on the demonstrations should not be exaggerated. One study of Leipzig demonstrators found that "people holding a university degree on the average reported the lowest frequency of demonstration participation" – lower indeed than all categories of workers.³¹ They were certainly over-represented in those groups (functionaries, SED members) that were noted for their abstention from or opposition to the protests, and it may even be that they were *underrepresented* on the demonstrations.³² Moreover, there is reason to suppose that most intellectuals present were white-collar workers rather than from the middling layers (let alone the ruling class). According to eye-witness reports the regular participants at the Leipzig demonstrations were "overwhelmingly manual and white collar workers."³³ Elsewhere in Saxony and Thuringia the smaller industrial towns often witnessed higher rates of participation in protests than did the big cities, which, being centres of administration and higher education, contained higher concentrations of functionaries and middle-class intellectuals. At public protests in Plauen, middle-class participants were in a small minority; the decisive demonstration there on October 7 was initiated by workers, its advance publicity called for the right to strike and appealed to readers to "let the workers in the factories know," and participants, according to all accounts, were overwhelmingly working class.³⁴

Simple arithmetic suggests that these findings may be generalised. Between August 1989 and April 1990, 2,600 public demonstrations and over 300 rallies took place, as well as over 200 strikes and a dozen factory occupations.³⁵ The largest three of the demonstrations each attracted over one million people. No accurate figures exist for the total number of participants in demonstrations and public protests. That it was several million is indisputable. One researcher has estimated the figure at over five million.³⁶ Yet there were only 1.6 million graduates in the land. Even had they all mustered on the streets in long and learned processions, intellectuals would still have comprised only a minority of the crowds.

There is no doubt that intellectuals dominated the civic groups but these made up only a small proportion – perhaps two to five per cent – of the crowd.³⁷ To see in 1989 a 'revolution of the intellectuals' is to elide 'the people' with the intelligentsia and the intelligentsia with the mass movement. It is to mistake the composition of social movement organisations for that of the movement as a whole, and to allow the light shed upon its spokespeople to leave the crowd in shadow. The public prominence of intellectuals, moreover, was not a novelty in 1989. As any

³¹ Opp *et al.*, 1993, p.214; 1995, p.164.

³² According to a survey of some 5,000 demonstrators conducted by Kurt Mühler, Steffen Wilsdorf and Leipzig students, members of the intelligentsia made up between 17 and 33 per cent of Leipzig demonstrators between November 1989 and February 1990. While the former figure is low relative to the intelligentsia's weight in society the latter is not, and would appear to contradict the findings of Opp *et al.* Alternatively, it may signify a greater willingness of graduates to return questionnaires.

³³ Lindner, 1990, p.23.

³⁴ Gehrke, 2001a, p.239; Connelly, 1990 p.84

³⁵ Pfaff, 1999, p.506; Gehrke, 2001a, p.215.

³⁶ Lohmann, 1994, p.62.

³⁷ Gehrke, 2001a, p.215.

amateur historian knows, it is hardly uncommon for lawyers, doctors, priests and teachers to act as spokespeople in revolutionary situations. It is not the role of clergy and professionals in 1989 that excites wonder so much as the claim that it was remarkable.

The non-involvement of workers

What of Fuller's second argument, that the protest movement was characterised by "working-class non-involvement"? Before looking into this, I should specify what it does not entail. The suggestion is not that workers were passive during the revolution, or that they were apolitical. Fuller's book devotes attention to the cultures of criticism that existed in workplaces before 1989. When the revolution began, she shows,

solidarity did not need to be manufactured from scratch. It already existed within small pockets of workers across East Germany, and it provided the building block from which many worker activists launched their efforts for change.³⁸

As to what these efforts entailed, Fuller concentrates upon two overlapping arenas: workplace organisation, and issues involving the state-run 'trade union,' (the FDGB).

Workplaces, including 'trade union' issues, were undoubtedly important in the run-up to 1989 and the revolution itself. From the early 1980s labour turnover and absenteeism had been on the rise, likewise labour indiscipline and applications to emigrate. All these were recognised by the authorities as signs of discontent.³⁹ Reports on the 'mood of the population' prepared by the Stasi and FDGB give the clear impression that grumbling and complaints over such matters as shortages and price rises tended to increase over the course of the 1980s; by the end of the decade these dominated the agenda at innumerable FDGB meetings. Alongside wage, price, and consumer supply issues a common grievance amongst workers concerned problems of shortages and disruptions that affected the production process, and once again there is some evidence that the clamour grew louder in the 1980s. Other areas that were reportedly the subject of increasingly vociferous complaints included environmental degradation and the decaying social and industrial infrastructure.⁴⁰

East Germany's visibly deteriorating economic performance and social conditions contrasted with the triumphant official reports of relentless progress, and this did not go unnoticed. As the Stasi paraphrased a popular grievance, "workers are being fed false promises of a perfect world which doesn't exist in reality."⁴¹ The same document noted that the economic figures published each month "have become, increasingly and to a massive extent, the butt of ironic and dismissive remarks." Another warned that the SED is "provoking reactions from citizens by publishing positive reports on the economy that stand in stark contrast to workers' hands-on, everyday experience."⁴²

The FDGB was an organisation that ostensibly represented workers' interests but functioned in reality as a 'transmission belt' for Party directives. FDGB officials were 'pre-chewed':⁴³ they were passed through a system of selection, training and

³⁸ Fuller, 1999, p.140.

³⁹ Roesler, 2003b, p.48.

⁴⁰ See e.g. Mitter and Wolle, 1990, p.30; Steiner, 2004, p.219.

⁴¹ Ministerium für Staatssicherheit, Zentrale Auswertungs- und Informationsgruppe., 5353.

⁴² Grix, 1998, p.133.

⁴³ In Paul Gleye's phrase. Fuller, 1999, p.67.

monitoring to ensure their loyalty to the employing class. Union activities in the workplaces were thoroughly bureaucratic, with rank-and-file workers excluded from any meaningful influence. Yet there was resistance to this, and it was to impact upon the events of 1989. Already in 1987 there had been signs of open discontent with the FDGB.⁴⁴ By 1988 and even more so in early 1989 a new mood of criticism and combativeness could be discerned in some factories, as indicated by a sharp rise in the numbers of FDGB officials who were either voted out or whose share of the vote fell significantly, and of new and 'non-pre-chewed' candidates standing for such positions.⁴⁵ By September 1989 criticism of the organisation was mounting and many workplace officials began either to withdraw from workplace politics – with “an extraordinary number either falling ill or taking their vacations” – or to listen to and lend their voice to the concerns of grassroots members.⁴⁶ At the Bergmann Borsig factory in Berlin, for example, shop stewards wrote a letter to FDGB headquarters. “What we did was revolutionary,” one of them recalls.

We had another one of those party instruction meetings, and at the end of the debates comrade F. said, ‘OK, let’s adjourn until next time in four weeks.’ I could not believe it. I stood up and said ‘I do not agree that we should [...] carry on as if nothing has happened [...] The situation is so tense that we should, right here and right now, write up certain demands and send them to [FDGB chief] Harry Tisch.’ Of course, this meant revolting against our highest boss, but I immediately had everybody behind me.⁴⁷

Their letter – which addressed overtly political issues including the exodus and its portrayal in the media – received wide publicity, thanks to its release to the press by western contacts. Workers elsewhere transcribed it and pinned it on noticeboards at their own workplaces. By publishing in the western media, Bernd Gehrke has described, the Borsig shop stewards enabled

the whole of East Germany to discover that discontent with the political state of the country had reached far beyond the small circles of artists and intellectuals, who were regularly featured in the western media, and out into the workplaces and hence the majority of the population.⁴⁸

Their act encouraged others to follow suit, and contributed to a wave of letter-writing in workplaces and a torrent of mail arriving at FDGB headquarters.

The FDGB’s membership, meanwhile, was haemorrhaging. The Stasi reported “concentrated and massive resignations from the FDGB.”⁴⁹ Some individuals, Fuller describes,

merely stopped paying their monthly dues, while others chose to disaffiliate more dramatically, returning their membership booklets to the union, sometimes accompanied by an explanatory letter. Altogether, one million workers (approximately 11 per cent of all FDGB members) reportedly took this action in October and November.⁵⁰

Pressure grew for FDGB workplace officials to stand for re-election, and for the reform of the organisation at the national level. But even more troubling for the regime was that, as a Stasi report warned in late October, “in many districts there have been attempts to create an independent trade union, and to bring proponents of

⁴⁴ Klenke, 2005.

⁴⁵ Hürtgen, 2001b, p.201; Gehrke 2001a, p.211.

⁴⁶ Fuller, 1999, p.147.

⁴⁷ Philipsen, 1993, p.119.

⁴⁸ Gehrke, 2001a, p.235.

⁴⁹ Pechmann and Vogel, 1991, p.284.

⁵⁰ Fuller, 1999, p.149.

independent unions into FDGB positions at the workplace level.”⁵¹ The most widely publicised of these was the call for the formation of an independent trade union (‘Reform’) that was issued by employees at an engineering factory in Teltow, near Potsdam. They justified their move on the grounds that the FDGB had abdicated its responsibility for representing workers interests. In its press release, ‘Reform’ raised issues that the official union neglected. It called for the legalisation of strike action, freedom to travel, and for the SED’s workplace organisations to be shut down. It broached themes of social justice and class division in its demand for the “abolition of the privileges of particular individuals and of entire social groups.” Although Reform did not come to much (in part because its leading proponent was promptly despatched on ‘official business’ to Bulgaria), it, together with other similar projects (notably the Initiative for Independent Trade Unions) did stimulate widespread discussion over whether new union organisations were needed -- as the FDGB’s own newspaper was obliged to admit.⁵²

A second area of workers’ initiative involved pushing back the frontiers of managerial control. The weakening of the SED’s power monopoly and the widening of political opportunities in society at large were replicated within each office and factory. The successes of the public protests lowered morale amongst managers and encouraged workers to gather, discuss, formulate demands and take action within the workplace. Employees demanded the firing of certain managers, or the abolition of the SED’s workplace organisations and the factory battalions. At Bergmann Borsig, by way of example, a group of skilled workers organised a meeting of the workforce that pushed successfully for the resignation of the General Director.⁵³ Elsewhere prominent demands were for free speech within the workplace and for the freedom to pin critical statements or oppositional literature on ‘wall newspapers.’ Widespread too, particularly in the later autumn and winter, were calls for company accounts (or, less frequently, ecological data), to be opened to scrutiny by the workforce.

Efforts to increase workers’ influence in company decision-making led in some cases to the establishment of independent workers’ representation. By November a variety of ‘works councils’, ‘spokespersons’ councils’ and ‘social councils’ had been formed. In the Teltow factory mentioned above a group of four or five workers found one another, came to agreement on the need for a works council, and proceeded to collect signatures from colleagues in support of this goal. Over one thousand signed, and a ‘provisional works council’ was convened which pushed for a recognised workers’ voice in company decision-making, the resignation of the plant’s SED leadership and the dissolution of its factory battalion.

These areas of workers’ activity are discussed in Fuller’s *Where Was the Working Class?* But they are portrayed as running alongside and essentially separate from the main stream of the uprising: the working class, or rather a section thereof, was active in workplace and FDGB politics but not in the civic groups, street demonstrations or public meetings. Fuller does concede that there was passive sympathy for the civic groups. “Many workers who passively supported the opposition” expressed this in the

numerous meetings, forums, and dialogues held at many workplaces; through the print and broadcast media; in petitions; and in wall newspapers, which cropped up at workplaces and other public gathering spots and attracted large crowds of readers.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Pechmann and Vogel, 1991, p.284.

⁵² *Tribüne*, 30 October, 1989.

⁵³ For this and similar examples, see Hürtgen 1999, Hürtgen and Gehrke, 2001.

⁵⁴ Fuller, 1999, p.148.

If one overlooks the idiosyncratic use of ‘passive’ to denote this frenzy of activity, it is the case that in most workplaces the civic groups were not a vibrant organised force. However, there were important exceptions, as I discuss below. More generally, what Fuller’s thesis downplays is the tremendous politicisation that occurred in 1989, of which workers partook. In the spring of that year an unusually high number of workers refused to carry banners on the official Mayday demonstration, or to vote in the elections.⁵⁵ In the (rigged) elections of that month many districts workers made up a clear majority of non-voters. By the summer, and more so in September, discussions on the shop-floor and in union meetings were addressing key political themes of the day: Gorbachev’s reforms, Tiananmen Square, the exodus via Hungary, the SED’s muzzling of the media, and environmental problems.⁵⁶ In addition, for the first time in years, the lack of democracy in the FDGB was subjected to widespread critique.⁵⁷ One Berlin skilled worker I interviewed mentioned that although “not a great deal of activity took place” in his firm in 1989, there was “an incredible buzz of political discussion, that went back to around 1987, over issues such as the local election gerrymandering, Tiananmen Square, and the exodus.”⁵⁸

This ‘buzz’ in the workplaces did not translate automatically into support for the civic groups, for reasons detailed above. However, there were many exceptions to the rule. New Forum in particular received a good deal of support from workers. Consider one published page of signatories to its manifesto (*Awakening ’89*), from September.⁵⁹ The occupations listed are almost all working class – six nurses, a plumber, a mechanic, a teacher, a fitter, a stoker, an engineer and a chartered engineer. This may not have been typical but was not unusual either. There were factories in which entire work teams aligned themselves with New Forum or the SDP,⁶⁰ and some workforces used strike threats to force management to permit civic group activities on site. Scores of New Forum factory groups were established, some of which involved themselves in workplace campaigns – to depose managers or to establish works councils, for example.⁶¹

The street demonstrations and civic groups on the one hand, and workplace discussion, protest activities and FDGB meetings on the other, were not separate worlds. They intertwined. In many workplaces, colleagues would gather after work to walk to a demonstration. (And when workers at one factory were told that they would be barred from taking part in a local demonstration they replied that they would leave by climbing over the fence.⁶²) From out of political discussions at work, small groups of oppositional spirits would crystallise, arranging to meet in order to deliberate as to what further activity was appropriate. One salient example is the shop stewards at Bergmann Borsig. When they penned an open letter to FDGB leader Harry Tisch this was not on internal workplace grounds alone. They had been inspired by news of a recent political storm in a neighbouring factory where a group of technicians had dared to take a petition to the Chinese embassy in protest at the Tiananmen massacre.⁶³ Or take the case of ‘Margrid Sch.’, a socialist (but non-SED)

⁵⁵ Stolle, 2001, pp.95-7.

⁵⁶ For examples see Gehrke, 2001a, p.225, Hürtgen, 2001b, p.201.

⁵⁷ Hürtgen, 2001b, pp.202-3.

⁵⁸ Interview with Uwe Bastian, engineer and founder member of Initiative for Independent Trade Unions, July 1990.

⁵⁹ Eigenfeld, *Bürgerrechtsbewegungen*.

⁶⁰ Gehrke, 2001a, p.228.

⁶¹ Eigenfeld, *Bürgerrechtsbewegungen*; Klenke, *Rationalisierung*.

⁶² Grix, *Collapse*, p.111.

⁶³ Gehrke, 2001a, pp.229-34.

shop steward in a steelworks north of Berlin. Hearing of the police brutality against demonstrators in Berlin, she determined that “something has to be done.” She drafted a protest letter and presented it to her FDGB branch, where it received ninety per cent support.⁶⁴ Consider, finally, the recollections of Marianne Pienitz in Leipzig. At the hospital in which she worked, “colleagues would regularly meet and formulate demands – for instance for the sacking of management, and for new trade unions.” This, she added, “was a demand both on the demonstrations and in the hospital.”⁶⁵ She also remembers that “workplace collectives would meet up in order to walk together to the demonstration.”⁶⁶

According to Francesca Weil, a Leipzig University sociologist, this sort of experience was quite common: workplaces were the ‘relay stations’ of the protest movement. In some Leipzig workplaces, she relates, those who attended the Peace Prayers in the early autumn would return to work the next day and describe the experience to colleagues, sparking political discussions.⁶⁷ Indeed, some workplace networks of militants originated not in factory discussions but at peace prayers or civic group meetings.

The notion that the civic groups and workplace militancy were separate worlds is, then, a myth. And there is evidence that the authorities recognised took the matter very seriously. “New Forum is becoming active throughout our republic,” the head of the Stasi’s Department XVIII warned in late October, “and is seizing above all upon problems – and this is where the real danger lies – that are the concerns of workers in particular.” A very real threat was facing the regime, it continued: ‘the enemy’, i.e. the civic groups and other ‘anti-socialist’ forces, could

succeed in gaining a foothold in the working class. It is imperative that we ensure that order reigns in the enterprises and workplaces and that production is not disrupted by go-slows, labour indiscipline or strikes. Provocateurs, ring leaders and those who whip up a negative atmosphere must be recognised in time and rendered harmless.⁶⁸

In early November another Stasi document warned that

the influence of ‘New Forum’ is rising steeply amongst sections of the working class. This is apparent e.g. in the increasing attendance of workers and at times whole work collectives at ‘New Forum’ meetings, in the rising influence of ‘New Forum’s’ forces amongst workers as compared to that of managers and functionaries as well as, in some cases, the intervention of workers against measures taken in workplaces to thwart the activities of ‘New Forum.’

The same document went on to mention that “strikes in connection with activities of ‘New Forum’ have been threatened” in several workplaces.⁶⁹ In one factory, where the SED leadership removed a New Forum leaflet from the wall newspaper, more than fifty workers downed tools until it was restored to its position. In another district a Stasi document reported that “New Forum has recruited medical personnel and many construction apprentices.” A third such report noted that “The view at the cable factory is that New Forum is necessary because of the lack of information. Although lacking activists, it has many sympathisers.”⁷⁰

For all the anxieties of Stasi generals and SED chiefs that the ferment in the factories could boil over, however, the crucial part played by workers was not in

⁶⁴ Ibid, pp.229-30.

⁶⁵ Interview with the Marianne Pienitz, Psychotherapist, Leipzig, October 1994.

⁶⁶ Letter to Geoff Brown and Judy Paskell, 25 October, 1989.

⁶⁷ Weil, 1999, p.536.

⁶⁸ General Lieutenant Kleine, in Bastian, 1994, p.34.

⁶⁹ Mitter and Wollé, 1990, p.247.

⁷⁰ Peterson, 2002, pp.180, 191, 216.

workplaces but in the public squares and streets. It was when the public protests in Plauen, Leipzig and elsewhere were joined by tens of thousands of ordinary working people that the SED's hard-line tactics were defeated. In Dresden, Gerhard Spörl reported, although

the pastors from the civic groups delivered the key words, the tone was set by the workers. New Forum called for a halt [to demonstrations] before and on October 7. Ever so protestant and German, they proposed to apply themselves to contemplation and to programmatic issues. But the workers were thinking about the next day and the demonstration of counter-power at the SED's fortieth anniversary celebration. They possessed the better arguments: silence and restraint are signs of weakness [...]. The SED is beginning to take the civic groups seriously now that the workers have got involved.⁷¹

Similarly, the Leipzig sociologist Hartmut Zwahr has pointed out that "The greatest pressure for change came directly from the non-party majority of employees in the workplaces. It was here that the driving force of the systemic change was concentrated."⁷²

General strike or Round Table?

Analyses of the 1989 movements in East Germany commonly point to the divergence between two streams of protest: "the one emanating from dissident groups and the church-oriented; the other based on the [...] working class, fed up with urban overcrowding and material and ecological privation."⁷³ The two streams were quite different in character, but to some extent they ran together, and in one week in early December they could quite conceivably have merged.

That week represented the climax of a phase of radicalisation. Following the fall of the Wall the numbers of protestors taking to the streets had fallen back, but before long they resumed, and numbers reached and surpassed previous levels. Stasi headquarters were attacked or occupied. Prison riots broke out. "The mood in the factories," *Der Spiegel* reported, "is becoming ever more explosive."⁷⁴ In mid November this latter development had been raised with concern at the SED's Central Committee meeting, with one delegate warning that "the working class is so enraged they're going to the barricades! They're shouting: get the Party out of the workplaces!"⁷⁵ A few days later the Central Committee was informed by another of its number that SED secretaries in the factories were being "slaughtered in droves."⁷⁶ Workers were demanding purges of functionaries and control over production. On the streets, demands for industrial action were coming to the fore in the shape of slogans such as:

- 'Workers, chase the SED functionaries out of your workplaces!'
- 'For the right to strike!'
- 'Legalise New Forum; Be prepared to strike!'

⁷¹ *Die Zeit*, 27 October, 1989, quoted in Renken, 1999.

⁷² Zwahr, 1995, p.219.

⁷³ Maier, *Dissolution*, p.374.

⁷⁴ *Der Spiegel*, 11 December, 1989.

⁷⁵ Otto König, speaking to the SED Central Committee on November 9. BA-SAPMO, Parteiarchiv. IV 2/1/709.

⁷⁶ Hertle and Stephan, 1997, p.446.

- ‘SED, leave the crease, or strikes will be our masterpiece!’⁷⁷

In early December a wave of industrial action swept through over a hundred workplaces, involving tens of thousands of workers. Its motivations were various. One source of inspiration was a two-hour general strike in neighbouring Czechoslovakia. This event across the border, according to Gehrke, “was followed by East Germans, and especially by protest participants, with great attention and sympathy, and it sparked discussions in the workplaces as to the potential for a general strike here too.”⁷⁸ Another spur came from media exposés of the high life and corruption of members of the *nomenklatura*. Although these had focused upon senior functionaries of the old regime, their appointees were still at their posts in factories and offices, and the inquiries underway at the national level encouraged employees to follow suit in their workplaces. Thus, potash miners in the west of the country took strike action in support of pay claims and for an inquiry into management corruption. Works councils were elected and charged with investigating management corruption and the abuse of office. A third motivating factor was the demand that institutions of the old regime be driven from the workplace. Strikes were threatened or carried out where SED secretaries declined to exit the workplace or if the company director refused to resign when the workforce so requested.⁷⁹

Momentarily, it appeared that this upsurge in industrial action would be provided with a national political focus by a general strike call raised by Karl-Marx-Stadt New Forum. The potential for industrial action to be mobilised behind political demands was clear; in Saxony the signs were “overwhelming,” according to New Forum leader Jens Reich.⁸⁰ Then, on 3 December, a New Forum leadership meeting was informed of a further strike call. “Representatives from all parts of the country were at the meeting,” one of those present recalls, when Jochen Tschiche, a New Forum leader,

arrived from Magdeburg and said the town square was overflowing, 100,000 people wanted him to tell them what should now happen in East Germany, and the workers from SKET – a heavy engineering factory of 12,000 workers, a gigantic thing – had told him that they were resolved to take strike action and would he suggest some demands? So, Tschiche arrived at the meeting and asked: ‘What should I tell them, what demands should be proposed?’⁸¹

It was, one would imagine, a happy scenario for New Forum. A mobilised public had taken the streets but not the institutions. The latter had begun to occur with the occupations of Stasi premises and now, it appeared, the regime could be toppled. That was the significance of the strike issue: it would galvanise, mobilising wider layers and testing the movement’s capacity to dictate terms to government. With the government in disarray and a general strike a real possibility, the question of power was at hand. Following the Napoleonic maxim ‘on s’engage, puis on voit,’ the call to action would reveal the extent of support for such a course of action.

In exactly the same period, however, the regime had been engaging the civic groups in talks preparatory to ‘Round Table’ negotiations. Although they feared the Round Table could become a mere talking shop, with negligible influence on policy they hoped it would offer the prospect of influence over the process of democratisation while evading the uncertainties inherent in the alternative course of

⁷⁷ “SED, tritt zurück, oder Streik wird Meisterstück!”

⁷⁸ Gehrke, 2001b, p.256.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p.254.

⁸⁰ Joppke, 1995, p.163.

⁸¹ Interview with Klaus Wolfram, member of New Forum’s national steering committee, Berlin, October 1994.

mobilising for the overthrow of the regime. With this hope in view, they set out to squash all calls for industrial action. "The readiness to strike," recalls Leipzig New Forum leader Jochen Lässig,

was at that time greater among the workers than in the divided opposition movements in which intellectuals and pastors set the tone and which the Stasi had clearly helped to confuse. The call for a general strike at this time, which came from places like Plauen and Magdeburg, was ridiculed within our own ranks. When the time was ripe we did not act.⁸²

"We tried to calm the workers down," his colleague Jens Reich recalls: because "our goal was not to usurp power but to push for elections."⁸³ From a critical perspective, another New Forum leader, Klaus Wolfram, recalls the discussions in this way:

In the committee meetings where these requests were discussed, nobody had any idea why strikes should take place. The opinion was, they should participate in the reform process, they should attend district public meetings in the evenings and at weekends, or meetings in the workplaces. Or they should elect their managers. But why on earth should they strike?! In short, we had no ideas on the subject, nor issued any active encouragement to strike, even though we knew that there was a great readiness for such action.⁸⁴

In short, just as the movement on the streets was veering towards direct confrontation with the regime the civic groups' leaders were discovering in the latter a 'dialogue partner' with which, rather hesitantly at first, they commenced a *pas de deux*. For the forces of the old regime, Dieter Rucht has written, "the Table was an unwillingly accepted but necessary means to retain power by a strategy of co-optation."⁸⁵ Its aim was to drive the wedge between the two branches of the movement deeper. Jens Reich – who did not participate at the Table, claiming to have seen through the 'lullaby function of that talking shop' – has written its epitaph: "In early December a popular uprising and general strike were very real threats, and the Round Table was set up as a tranquilliser;" the regime and civic groups "united in an unspoken alliance to ensure that the self-dismantling of the system proceeded in the form of palaver. They succeeded."⁸⁶

Why did the civic groups behave in this way? The answer lies in part in their innate ambivalence towards mass action. But strikes also threatened to propel their movement to power, and this its leaders would not countenance. For some, the reluctance was justified in terms of their lack of political experience and preparation. One leading member of the SDP told me that "we knew already in early November that the SED had effectively lost power, but we didn't have adequate structures of our own with which to effect a transition."⁸⁷ Others, such as Wolfgang Thierse (before his elevation to the post of SDP leader) confessed to "a basic feeling that rejects power."⁸⁸ The political culture from which they hailed emphasised individual, ideal, and evolutionary change. In so far as they sought political influence it was to be achieved not through encouraging protests to escalate to the point at which the regime would topple but through seeking to *mediate* between mass movement and SED. The aim was to reap concessions (the legalisation of opposition and democratic reform) from the government on the basis of pressure from the mass movement. In this schema a premium was placed upon appearing 'respectable' in the eyes of the

⁸² Pfaff, 1999, p.508.

⁸³ Joppke, 1995, p.163.

⁸⁴ Klaus Wolfram; as for fn 81.

⁸⁵ Rucht, 1996, p.41.

⁸⁶ Reich, *Abschied*, p. 17.

⁸⁷ Interview with Martin Gutzeit, Founder member of the SDP, Berlin, October 1994.

⁸⁸ Gorholt and Kunz, 1991, p.331.

regime whilst simultaneously supporting, and identifying with, the movement. In this balancing act, strike action was deemed to be dangerous – and even street demonstrations posed a threat as well as a promise. Without them the government would not even consider negotiation, yet too close an association with what they termed ‘actionism’ threatened to stigmatise civic groups leaders as irresponsible and unfit to negotiate the future of the land.

Conclusion

In this article I hope to have dispelled some widely held myths about the 1989 upheaval in East Germany. The protest movement was not made up predominantly of intellectuals. University graduates were prominent members of political organisations and were disproportionately represented in the media, but the public face of the movement should not be confused with its actual membership. Although it was not comparable with those in which workers’ collective action play a central role, such as 1953 East Germany or in 1980-1 Poland, the bulk of demonstrators in 1989 were from the working class. So too was a substantial section of the civic groups, and between them, the workplaces, and the street protests, important interactions took place, with workplaces functioning as ‘relay stations’ of the movement. Moreover, although the decisive part played by workers was on the streets a rapid politicisation was experienced in most workplaces, many of which experienced industrial action. The potential for further radicalisation of workplace-based struggles was palpable in December, but this potential clashed with the interests of the civic groups. Their strategy was based upon tugging the regime towards inter-elite negotiation rather than challenging it through movements from below. They chose to accept the olive branch proffered to them by the SED in the form of ‘Round Table’ negotiations and did their utmost to stymie further radicalisation.

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