ARTICLES

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GDR WRITERS AND THE REVOLUTION: SOME REMARKS ON THE "INTELLEKTUELLEN DEBATTE" OF SUMMER, 1990

"So waere der Herbst 89 schon gescheitert?"
Christa Wolf

INTRODUCTION

The GDR revolution of fall 1989, though comparable in many ways to the upheavals in the rest of Eastern Europe, also exhibits some unique characteristics. One of these has to do with the role played in the events by the East German writers. Unlike Poland, Hungary or Czechoslovakia, where the participation of writers, artists and other intellectuals was extraordinarily high both before and after the overthrow of the respective communist regimes, the revolution in the GDR was apparently achieved without the leadership or even direct participation of prominent writers. A short moment of unity between writers and the people did occur after the streets were conquered: on November 4, writers called a mass demonstration on Alexanderplatz which was attended by over 60,000 people. Four prominent writers spoke—Christa Wolf, Stefan Heym, Christoph Hein and Heiner Mueller—and the public response to their words, which stressed the magnificent achievement of the first successful revolution on German soil, as well as the glowing opportunity for commonly creating a humane socialism, was tremendous. Five days later, however, the Wall came down, and the euphoria of artists and workers dreaming the same dreams came to an end. The chant of "Wir sind das Volk," applauded by the writers on the Alex as proof of the people's democratic awakening, was replaced by
"Wir sind ein Volk." As an expression of the increasingly impatient cry for unification with West Germany, this slogan was received by many intellectuals with scepticism and alarm.

The reaction to these developments on the part of a number of writers and other intellectuals, headed by Heym and Wolf, was to publish an emotional appeal, entitled "Unser Land." Here they pleaded for citizens to use the historical opportunity to develop "eine sozialistische Alternative zur Bundesrepublik," building upon the antifascist and socialist-humanist ideals on which the GDR had originally been founded. The appeal, which garnered over 10,000 signatures, was an immediate source of controversy, especially when Egon Krenz' name appeared among the signatories, suggesting an unholy alliance of these intellectuals with the discredited SED. The appeal was so contrary to the rising tide of public sentiment, that it ushered in a period of hostility towards intellectuals which was articulated in the East German press, and which was reflected in the new antagonisms of the demonstrations. Soon after the new year, the flames of conflict were further fanned by the addition of voices from the West. First it was former East German writers forced into exile in the West who took the GDR writers to task, and finally the West German critics entered the fray, carrying out a bitter debate within the pages of the FRG press in June and July that centered largely on Wolf. The result was a criticism of GDR writers unparalleled in the other post-revolutionary societies of Eastern Europe, and one that is doubly amazing considering the popularity and esteem these writers had previously enjoyed on both sides of the Wall.

It is the aim of this article to provide a basis for understanding the attitudes of and toward East German writers in the period following the opening of the Wall. The impassioned voices of the debate that unfolded, culminating on the one side in accusations of collusion with Stalinism, and on the other in feelings of denunciation and betrayal, revolve around two key questions: Did GDR writers help to prepare the overthrow of the SED regime? And, how are we to understand the initial opposition of these writers to unification with West Germany? Indeed, a

1. Printed in various East and West German newspapers between November 29 and December 1.