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## **The Last Hurrah: Hanna Wolf's and Wolfgang Schneider's May, 1989 Defense of Stalinism**

### *Abstract*

In May, 1989 the political power monopoly of the Communist parties in Eastern Europe was eroding. Political reforms in Poland and Hungary had essentially ended the rule of the Communist parties there. In the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost* had fundamentally changed the face of Communist rule, in Czechoslovakia, Romania, and East Germany did the hardliners hold on. True, in the German Democratic Republic there were also calls for reforms from both inside and outside the ruling Communist party, the Socialist Unity Party (SED), but the party's Politburo, led by Erich Honecker and Günter Mittag, resisted all calls for reforms and innovation. They were supported in this stance by an article entitled "On the History of the Comintern (*Zur Geschichte der Komintern*)" which appeared in the May 6/7 of *Neus Deutschland*, the SED's official newspaper,

The authors of this contribution, Hanna Wolf and Wolfgang Schneider, were well-known figures among the SED's intellectual establishment. Wolf had been rector of the *Parteihochschule "Karl Marx"* from 1950 to 1983, and in 1989 she was a personal advisor to Erich Honecker. Schneider was a long-time faculty member at the *Parteihochschule*. The authors' article was a response to a number of Soviet publications, which, using the new freedoms under *glasnost* were critically analyzing Stalin's dictatorship. In their rebuttal Wolf and Schneider insisted, on the contrary, Stalin had never been a dictator; he was always subject to the democratic control of the CPSU's Central Committee. And even if Stalin had been guilty of some shortcomings, exposing them was counterproductive in the on-going class struggle. Any *Fehlerdiskussion* (discussion of [past] mistakes) only served as ammunition for the imperialist enemy. Instead of indulging in self-critical research, Soviet historians should underscore that throughout history the Communists had always been on the right side of the barricades.

The reaction to Wolf's and Schneider's article was mixed. Most East German historians were predictably appalled. They feared that their historical research was being thrown back to the dark days of the Zhdanovchina. In contrast, the SED's Central Committee passed a resolution praising the article as "exemplary." Needless to say, Wolf's and Schneider's publication did nothing to halt the unravelling of Communist rule in East Germany.

After the fall of Communism in the GDR Wolf and Schneider went on decidedly different ways. Wolf, who died in 1999, spent her last years a bitter and disappointed woman. She blamed Gorbachev for destroying the socialist society which Lenin, Stalin, and Brezhnev had so gloriously built. Schneider, on the other hand, in 2008 published a self-critical analysis of the failure of Marxism-Leninism. In his book, entitled, *Die Marxsche Vision—Ansprüche, Scheitern, historisches Schicksal: Theoriegeschichtliche Reflexionen* (The Marxist Vision – Claims, Failure, Historical Fate: Historical-theoretical Reflexions), he came to the conclusion that socialism in the GDR failed because of the economic crisis in the country, the paralysis of the SED's leadership in the fall of 1989, and, interestingly enough, the regime's violations of human rights.

The May 6/7 1989 weekend edition of *Neues Deutschland* (New Germany, ND), the official newspaper of East Germany's ruling Communist party, the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (Socialist Unity Party of Germany, SED), contained a two-page long article entitled, in the pedestrian manner of Communist publications, "Zur Geschichte der Komintern" (On the History of the Comintern).<sup>1</sup> The piece was buried on pages 9 and 10 of the paper, and the type-face discouraged all but the most motivated readers,<sup>2</sup> but the publication created a minor sensation that, contrary to the authors' intentions, further eroded the SED's political power monopoly in the German Democratic Republic.

The authors, Hanna Wolf and Wolfgang Schneider, were well-known figures in the SED's intellectual establishment. Wolf was born in 1908, the daughter of a merchant and rabbinical teacher. She described her family background as "Zionist-bourgeois." Wolf studied philosophy at Berlin's Humboldt University, but, as she put it one of her autobiographical sketches that were periodically required for the personnel records of Communist functionaries, her real life began in 1932, when, following in the footsteps of her sister, she moved to the Soviet Union. She stayed in the USSR until after World War II, becoming a fervent Stalinist. As the SED established itself as the ruling party in the GDR, Wolf moved back to Germany and became a full-time party functionary. She served in the Central Committee's bureaucracy, but in 1950, she assumed the position with which she was to be associated for most of the rest of her professional life. She was appointed rector of the *Parteihochschule "Karl Marx"* (Advanced Training Institute for Party Cadres, PHS). She retired as rector in 1983, and from 1983 to 1989, she was a "personal advisor" to Erich Honecker, the SED's general secretary and the GDR's de facto strongman since 1971.<sup>3</sup>

Schneider also had a long relationship with the PHS. By training, he was a "textile engineer," but his career was more that of a party functionary. Schneider joined the SED in 1947. He attended the PHS and, in 1961, obtained his PhD at the school. His dissertation was entitled, in the stilted manor of communist publications, "Der Kampf der SED um die Erziehung der Arbeiterklasse zur Freundschaft mit der Sowjetunion: Eine objektive Bedingung für den Übergang zur sozialistischen Revolution in der DDR (1948–1959)" ("The SED's Struggle for Educating the Working Class about Friendship with the Soviet Union: An Objective Pre-Condition for the Transition to the Socialist Revolution in the GDR (1948–1959).") After obtaining his doctorate, Schneider stayed at the PHS, becoming a full professor in 1969 and,

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<sup>1</sup> *Neues Deutschland*, 6/7 May 1989. An excerpt is reprinted in, Andreas Herbst, Gerd-Rüdiger Stephan, Jürgen Winkler (eds.): *Die SED. Geschichte, Organisation, Politik. Ein Handbuch*, Berlin, Dietz, 1997, pp. 808–812.

<sup>2</sup> Hermann Weber: *Die SED und die Geschichte der Komintern*. In: *Deutschland Archiv* 22 (1989), 8, pp. 890–903.

<sup>3</sup> See the various autobiographical statements in her *Kaderakte*, Bundesarchiv Berlin, Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR (hereafter: SAPMO-BArch), DY 30/IV/2/ 11 vorl. 5533. Incidentally, not all of Wolf's siblings were drawn to Communism and the Soviet Union. She had a brother who lived in Nebraska and a sister in Tel Aviv. Wolf noted proudly and pointedly that she had no contact with either of her siblings. See also, Rudolf Herrstadt: *Das Herrstadt-Dokument. Das Politbüro der SED und die Geschichte des 17. Juni 1953*, Reinbek b. Hamburg, Rowohlt, 1990, pp. 213–14 n. 120; Gerd-Rüdiger Stephan: *Vom Mauerbau 1961 bis zur Wende 1989*. In: Herbst e.a., *Die SED*, pp. 56–100. For an early example of these questionnaires see, Christel Dowidat: *Personalpolitik als Mittel der Transformation des Parteiensystems der SBZ/DDR (1945–1957)*. In: Hermann Weber (ed.): *Parteiensystem zwischen Demokratie und Volksdemokratie. Dokumente und Materialien zum Funktionswandel der Parteien und Massenorganisationen in der SBZ/DDR, 1945–1950*, Köln, Verlag für Wissenschaft und Politik, 1982, pp. 470–471.

in November 1970, head of research at the school. The evaluation in his *Kaderakte* from this period are overwhelmingly positive. They described Schneider's "deep attachment to the Soviet Union," and attest that "he possesses great abilities" to conduct scientific research about Marxism-Leninism.

In 1970, Schneider was sent out into the "field" as the SED's party secretary at the *Textilkombinat* Cottbus. Here, things did not go well. The entries in his *Kaderakte* note essentially that he was not qualified to lead a party collective. The commentators also wrote that Schneider recognized his failings and tried to improve, but in the end to no avail. The problem seems to have been that Schneider was unable to motivate the employees and managers at the *Kombinat* to enthusiastically carry out the decisions of the SED's party congresses and the Central Committee's resolutions. In July 1973, Schneider was dismissed "because of insufficient leadership activities." He returned to the PHS and stayed there for the rest of his career.<sup>4</sup>

There was a long-range and a short-range background to Wolf's and Schneider's publication. The long-range issue concerned the SED's historic self-image. Officially, of course, the SED was the union of the Communists and the Social Democrats in the Soviet Zone. There was an iconic picture from the SED's founding congress in April, 1946. Entering from the left, was Wilhelm Pieck, the leader of the East German Communists, and from the right of the stage Otto Grotewohl, the chairman of the Social Democrats. They met in the middle of the stage and shook hands. That handclasp remained the center of the SED's emblem for the all of the party's existence.<sup>5</sup>

The SED's hardliners, Erich Honecker and Hanna Wolf foremost among them, had never liked the symbolism of that picture. From their perspective – and essentially they were right – the SED was not the union of two equal parties, but the takeover of the Social Democrats by the Communists. From the Communists' point of view, the Social Democrats' only contribution to the union was their acknowledgement – finally – that "Social Democratism" had always been wrong-headed, and that only what in 1946 was still called Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism could pave the way for the establishment of true socialism in Germany. Over the years the SED had increasingly emphasized its Communist heritage, and in 1987 the hardliners could celebrate a particular triumph. On the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of Germany (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*, KPD), the SED published a series of "36 Theses," which did indeed proclaim that the SED was the true successor organization to the KPD.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Schneider *Kaderakte*, SAPMO-BArch, DY 30/J IV/ 3 A/1951, 1746, 2022, and 2362; and Tiedke to Hager, 20 Dec. 1988, SAPMO-BArch, Bestand Büro Kurt Hager (hereafter: Best. Hager), DY 30/26474.

<sup>5</sup> Werner Müller: Der Transformationsprozess der SED. In: Weber (ed.), *Parteiensystem*, pp. 91 ff.

<sup>6</sup> The "Theses" were published in *Neues Deutschland*, 14 June 1988, and *Einheit*, 43 (no. 7, 1988), 586ff. On Wolf's fervent identification of the SED and Leninism see, Hanna Wolf: *Ausgewählte Reden und Aufsätze*, Berlin, Dietz, 1979, pp. 223, 234, 343, and 430–431. See also Hermann Weber: *Geschichte als Instrument der Politik. Zu den Thesen der SED zum 70. Jahrestag der Gründung der KPD*. In: *Deutschland Archiv* 22 (1988), 8, p. 873; and Oskar Anweiler e.a.: *Wissenschaft und Bildung in der DDR. Politische Instrumentalisierung und deren Folgen heute*. In: *Deutscher Bundestag, Enquête-Kommission SED (ed.): Überwindung der Folgen der SED-Diktatur im Prozess der deutschen Einheit*, Baden-Baden, Nomos, 1999, IV/1, p. 131.

But that triumph was jeopardized by developments in the Soviet Union. Under Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost* Soviet historians were now permitted to engage in what the East Germans called *Fehlerdiskussion* (discussion of [past] mistakes). Not surprisingly, Soviet revisionists concentrated their critical researches on the Stalin era, exposing the dictator's crimes and errors in a variety of publications. Included in these narratives of Stalin's rule was the Soviet leader's ironfisted control of the Comintern, the international organization of Communist parties. Soviet historians now exposed the manner in which Stalin had used the Comintern to purge the international Communist movement of his presumed enemies and establish control over the Communist parties outside of the Soviet Union, just as he had subjected the Soviet Communist party to his personal rule.<sup>7</sup> Incidentally, the hardliners in the Soviet Union were also free to publish their views. In April, 1988, a historian named Nina Andreeva published an article in *Sovetskaia Rossiia* which proclaimed that the name Stalin "evokes a great accomplishment that has no equal for a whole generation of Soviet people".<sup>8</sup>

The immediate trigger for Wolf's and Schneider's article was an interview by two Soviet historians, Fridrikh Firsov and Kirill Shirinia, entitled (in German translation) "*Komintern—Zeit der Prüfungen*" (Comintern – the Time of Testing). The interview was published in the April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1989 edition of *Pravda*, the official organ of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Firsov and Shirinia were well known historians, who had previously written widely on the history of the Comintern. The authors' central thesis was that Stalin controlled all important decision making in the Comintern, and that he used the organization not to advance the Socialist revolution or to benefit the working classes, but solely to enhance his personal power. Firsov and Shirinia also demanded that Communist historians had to "overcome entrenched stereotypes" in pursuing their research. Incidentally, it is indicative of the widespread reception of *glasnost* among Soviet intellectuals that the *Pravda* interview was edited for publication by G. L. Smirnov, the director of the Soviet Communist Party's Institute for Marxism-Leninism.<sup>9</sup>

It should be recalled that this line of revision fit in well with the tumbling of the old verities in the Communist bloc. Poland had just elected a government not dominated by the Communists for the first time since 1945. Hungary was about to embark on political pluralism. But in East Germany, widespread voting fraud by the authorities during the recent local elections, and, above all, the prohibition of the German language edition of the Soviet revisionist periodical *Sputnik* demonstrated that the hardliners were determined to keep *glasnost* out of the GDR despite the unpopularity of their actions.<sup>10</sup>

The SED's agitprop functionaries countered the wave of *glasnost* writing in the Soviet Union as best they could. For example, in November, 1987, there appeared a publication "for official use only" that was to be used as part of the SED's schooling for functionaries. It was

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<sup>7</sup> Weber, *Komintern*, p. 892–893.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Fred Oldenbourg: *Das entgleiste Bündnis. Zum Verhältnis DDR-Sowjetunion im Zeichen von Perestroika und ‚neuem Denken‘*. In: Eberhard Kuhrt e.a. (eds.), *Die SED-Herrschaft und ihr Zusammenbruch*, Opladen, Leske und Budrich, 1996, p. 209.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>10</sup> In one of his memoirs the economic historian Jürgen Kuczynski called the *Sputnik* prohibition the "greatest stupidity under Honecker". See Jürgen Kuczynski: *Ein linientreuer Dissident. Memoiren 1945–1989*, Berlin, Aufbau Verlag, 1992, p. 377.

entitled "Handout (*Handreichung*) for the Course of the History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union", and attempted to "correct" the *Fehlerdiskussion* among Soviet historians.<sup>11</sup>

Wolf's and Schneider's primary purpose in writing their diatribe was not only to answer the *Pravda* article, but, more importantly, to fortify the eroding verities of Marxism-Leninism. They began their rejoinder in the traditional manner of Communist intellectual writings: by citing the classics of Marxism-Leninism. They quoted Marx to the effect that history is the most important of all the "sciences" because it can predict the future. Then, turning to Lenin, they cited the Soviet leader's dictum that history must be written the right way: from an unwavering class perspective, using the methodology of historical materialism, and grounded in *Parteilichkeit* (partisanship, loyalty to the party doctrine). From this it followed that only true Communists can write the history of Communism; contributions by "reactionary, bourgeois historians" could not contribute anything positive to the historiographic discourse. As a sort of preemptive strike against any hopeful revisionists among their GDR colleagues Wolf and Schneider reminded them that the history of the SED would be written by the party itself, not by any self-proclaimed independent historians.

Next the authors turned to the issue of the *Fehlerdiskussion* itself. Here Wolf was in her element. For many years she had consistently objected to any discussion of past mistakes. She argued that the real question was not what mistakes the Communist movement had made in the past (and she would insist there were no significant ones), but *cui bono*, who benefitted from any such *Fehlerdiskussion*? The answer was the class enemy, the imperialists, because they would use any admission of past errors as ammunition in their relentless struggle against the truths of Marxism-Leninism. As Wolf and Schneider put it, "We must not give the enemy any additional arguments for his falsification of our glorious (*ruhmreichen*) history."<sup>12</sup>

Turning to the historiographic controversies of the day, the authors vehemently rejected the totalitarianism and convergence theories, which were popular in some quarters at this time. They insisted Communism and fascism were not both forms of totalitarianism; Stalin and Hitler were not comparable. Nor would Marxism-Leninism and capitalism evolve together into some sort of Social Democratic welfare state. The class struggle was constantly intensifying, and would end only with the inevitable victory of the working class as predicted by Marxism-Leninism. Similarly, any dialogue with bourgeois historians was a useless enterprise. Dialogue there should be, but only among historians who accepted the methodological and historiographic premises of Marxism-Leninism.

Wolf and Schneider did eventually get to the issues raised by the authors in the *Pravda* interview, and when they did their counter arguments were a series of preposterous distortions and falsifications of the historical record. According to the authors, the Comintern was not an organization dominated by Stalin's hand-picked apparatchiks, but an institution with an independent, collective leadership that reached decisions on the basis of democratic procedures. Moreover, the Comintern did not invariably endorse the policies of the

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<sup>11</sup> Oldenbourg, Bündnis, p. 208.

<sup>12</sup> See esp. her remarks at the December, 1965 meetings of the SED's Central Committee, SAPMO-BArch, SED/ ZK Sitz. 15.-18.12.1965, DY 30/IV/2/1/336. Excerpts from the discussion at the meeting were published in Günter Agde (ed.): Das 11. Plenum des ZK der SED 1965. Studien und Dokumente, Berlin, Aufbau Verlag, 1991<sup>2</sup>.

Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The Comintern supported the Soviet Union as the model of a socialist society, and because it was the best hope for success in the class struggle.

When Wolf and Schneider turned to Stalin as the leader of the Soviet Union and the Russian Communist party, the picture of the Soviet dictator that emerged was certainly one that no independent historian would have accepted. To begin with, they once again denied that Stalin was a dictator. His decisions as leader of the USSR and CPSU were always subject to the approval and vote of the CPSU's Central Committee. As for Stalin's crimes and errors, for Marxist-Leninist historians that was the wrong focus. For a *parteilich* historian, the emphasis should be on the manner in which Stalin led the Soviet Union to become a socialist society that was able to resist and eventually defeat the fascist-imperialist aggressor.

The authors did admit that crimes and errors had occurred during the Stalinist purges, but these events also needed to be put into perspective. The CPSU had dealt with this topic at its 1956 congress. Subsequently all of the truly innocent victims had been posthumously rehabilitated, so this matter was closed. Moreover, whatever misdeeds were committed under Stalinism, they paled in comparison with the "*unermesslichen Verbrechen*" (immeasurable crimes) which the imperialists had committed against the world's proletarians and continued to commit against the workers. In good Marxist-Leninist fashion, Wolf and Schneider concluded that history showed the Communists were always right, and the imperialists were always wrong. Or to use their melodramatic image, the Communists had always been on the right side of the barricades.

The reaction to the article was mixed. The overwhelming number of the GDR's professional historians were outraged. The economic historian Jürgen Kuczynski, a long-time curmudgeon among East German intellectuals, (he called himself a "loyal dissident") and frequent critic of Hanna Wolf, asked if the postulate that the Communists had always been right included Stalin's pronouncement in 1939 that France and Great Britain had started the Second World War?<sup>13</sup> The historians had hoped that under *glasnost* they would be free from the shackles of *parteilich* history writing, and this piece, which they assumed was published on direct orders of Erich Honecker, threatened to put them back to the darkest days of the 1940s and 1950s. They were also very much afraid that as reforms were the watchword in the other countries of the Eastern bloc, the GDR's historians would become increasingly isolated. Not surprisingly, the Soviet historians who were the target of Wolf's and Schneider's diatribe (although Firsov and Shirinia were never mentioned by name in the *N.D.* article) were also severely critical of the German authors' piece. So were political circles in Gorbachov's Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast, the SED's reaction was far more positive. The party's Central Committee passed a resolution, praising the article as "exemplary." The piece was also reprinted in the July,

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<sup>13</sup> Jürgen Kuczynski: *Schwierige Jahre – mit einem besseren Ende? Tagebuchblätter 1987–1989*, Berlin: Tacheles Verlag, 1990. See also Günter Benser: *DDR. Gedenkt ihrer mit Nachsicht*, Berlin, Dietz, 2000, p. 414.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Joachim Petzold: *Parteinahme wofür? DDR-Historiker im Spannungsfeld von Politik und Wissenschaft*, Potsdam, Verlag für Berlin-Brandenburg, 2000, p. 358; Fritz Klein: *Drinnen und Draussen. Ein Historiker in der DDR. Erinnerungen*, Frankfurt am Main, S. Fischer, 2000, p. 333; Markus Wolf: *Im eigenen Auftrag. Bekenntnisse und Einsichten. Tagebuch 1989*, Berlin, edition berolina, 2016, p. 97; and Weber, *Komintern*, pp. 899 and 903.

1989 edition of the pedagogical journal *Geschichtsunterricht und Staatsbürgerkunde* (History Teaching and Civic Education.)<sup>15</sup> Hanna Wolf wrote to Honecker that she had received about 100 spontaneous reactions from readers. She claimed most of these were positive, although some exhibited what she called an anti-party attitude. Among the latter group, she identified specifically the well-known East German historians Fritz Klein and Eberhard Czichon.<sup>16</sup>

Wolf's and Schneider's attempt to put Stalin back on a pedestal had no effect on the larger scheme of things, of course. Throughout 1989 Communist rule in Eastern Europe was relentlessly unravelling. But the piece did have an aftermath of sorts in that the two authors took quite divergent paths after the *Wende* in the GDR and German re-unification.

Hanna Wolf remained true to her convictions and loyal to Erich Honecker. On October 18, 1989 the SED's Politburo forced Honecker out as the party's general secretary and replaced him with Egon Krenz. The general secretary's closest associates, Günter Mittag and Frank-Joachim Herrmann, were also dismissed. (Officially Honecker asked to be relieved of the burden of the office for health reasons.) The next day the Politburo presented the decision to the full Central Committee (some 200 members and candidates), and asked for that body's endorsement of the personnel changes. The Politburo expected a unanimous decision, and this was almost true. There was only one member of the CC voting against Honecker's dismissal: Hanna Wolf.<sup>17</sup>

As her world crashed about her, Hanna Wolf spent the last years of her life a bitter and disappointed woman. Along with several other hardliners (including Honecker), the SED's successor organization, the Party of Democratic Socialism (*Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus*, PDS) expelled Wolf from its ranks, ironically for "anti-party activity". Wolf was particularly disappointed by developments in the Soviet Union. Or to be more precise, by the role played by Mikhail Gorbachev. She blamed the originator of *glasnost* and *perestroika* for destroying the successful socialist society that Lenin and Stalin had built.<sup>18</sup> Although throughout her career Wolf had consistently celebrated the friendship between East Germany and the USSR, after the collapse of the GDR, she concluded that, "[i]n the final analysis, until the end, the Soviets looked upon us and treated us as a colony."<sup>19</sup> As a final act of defiance in 1992, she joined one of the groups calling itself a resurrected KPD (Honecker was also a member). This KPD was a pathetic attempt to resurrect the supposedly glorious Stalinist past of the Weimar-era German Communist Party. It was also

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<sup>15</sup> *Geschichtsunterricht und Staatsbürgerkunde* 31 (1989), 7/8, pp. 551–562; and Stephan, Mauerbau, p. 96. See also, Wolfgang Leonhard: *Meine Geschichte der DDR*, Berlin, Rowohlt, 2007, p. 171; and Manfred Uchner: *Die zweite Etage. Funktionsweise eines Machtapparates*, Berlin, Dietz, 1993, p. 135.

<sup>16</sup> Hanna Wolf to Honecker, 7 July 1989, SAPMO-BArch, Bestand Büro Erich Honecker (hereafter Best. Honecker), DY 30/ 2559.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Kunze: *Staatschef a. D. Die letzten Jahre des Erich Honecker*, Berlin, Ch. Links Verlag, 2001, p. 37.

<sup>18</sup> Alfred Neumann: *Poltergeist im Politbüro*, ed. by Siegfried Prokop, Frankfurt an der Oder, Frankfurter Oder-Edition, 1996, p. 65.

<sup>19</sup> Gerhard Fricke: *Geschichte und Politik der KPdSU als Lehrfach in der Parteihochschule „Karl Marx“*. In: Uwe Möller (ed.): *Die Parteihochschule der SED. Ein kritischer Rückblick. Beiträge zur Geschichte der Parteihochschule „Karl Marx“*, Scheunitz, GNV Verlag, 2006, p. 44.

a dismal failure; the KPD never had more than 40 members.<sup>20</sup> Hanna Wolf died in Berlin in 1999.

In contrast to Wolf, Schneider wrote a *mea culpa* book of sorts. Entitled *Die Marxsche Vision: Anspruch, Scheitern, Historisches Schicksal – Theoriegeschichtliche Reflexionen* (The Marxist Vision: Claims, Failure, Historical Fate – Theoretical Historical Reflections), it was brought out by an obscure publisher and did not contain any particularly original insights or profound conclusions, but Schneider did attempt to explain why, in his view, Marxism-Leninism failed. Rather than relying on the *ad hominem* argument of simply blaming Gorbachev and the “revisionists,” Schneider went out of his way to depersonalize Marxism-Leninism. The Marxist leaders, – Ulbricht, Honecker, even Lenin – appear only on the margins of the argument. It was as though the one thing that the author learned from the fall of communism was not to overburden his account with quotations from the “classics”.<sup>21</sup>

In assigning blame and shortcomings Schneider began by criticizing the cult of the classics. He attacked the assumption, no, certainty, that the classical thinkers of Marxism-Leninism – Marx, Engels, and Lenin – had provided valid answers to any societal problems that might arise. Intricately related to the cult of the classics was the citation syndrome. Especially at the PHS, research on Marxism-Leninism essentially consisted of searching for and finding an appropriate citation from the classics to prove – once again – that they had been absolutely right. (Jürgen Kuczynski called this form of “research” the “citation disease.”<sup>22</sup>) During his years at the PHS no one had been a more enthusiastic practitioner of the cult of the classics than Wolfgang Schneider,<sup>23</sup> but in his retrospective analysis, he now realized that Marxism-Leninism had been a cult-like ritual. Schneider admitted that socialism had become an abstraction devoid of any link to reality.

Schneider also criticized the SED’s version of Marxism-Leninism for its failure to create the “new socialist man”. Despite cradle to grave indoctrination programs (Schneider called them political-pedagogical measures), the selfless, self-collectivized human being was never the norm in the GDR. Worse, the regime’s leaders deluded themselves that they had succeeded in their quest. They insisted that the thousands who marched past the reviewing stands did so because they embodied the new socialist man. In reality the demonstrators were there because they had been ordered to be there. In 1989, even many SED members, who presumably had internalized the doctrine of Marxism-Leninism most fervently, readily abandoned the faith. In the course of the year literally hundreds of thousands of party members quietly turned in their party books. As Schneider summed it up: The pedagogy did not create a new human being.

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<sup>20</sup> Henrik Eberle: Anmerkungen zu Honecker, Berlin, Schwarzkopf und Schwarzkopf, 2000, p. 131.

<sup>21</sup> Wolfgang Schneider, *Die Marxsche Vision. Anspruch, Scheitern, historisches Schicksal. Theoriegeschichtliche Reflexionen*, Hamburg, Kovacz Verlag, 2008, p. 329.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Horst Haun: *Kommunist und „Revisionist“*. Die SED-Kampagne gegen Jürgen Kuczynski (1956–1959), Dresden, Hannah-Arendt-Institut für Totalitarismusforschung, 1999, p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> See Schneider’s contribution in Kurt Tiedke e.a.: *Die führende Rolle der SED bei der weiteren Gestaltung der entwickelten sozialistischen Gesellschaft*, Berlin, [PHS], 1989, p. 86. See also, PHS (ed.): *Kaderschmiede der Partei, Schule für das Leben*, Berlin, [PHS], 1986, pp. 76–77 (Heinz Wedler); Tiedke to Hager, 3 Feb. 1987; and Tiedke, „Forschungsarbeit“, Dec. 1988, SAPMO-BArch, Best. Hager, DY 30/26472.



Since there was no new socialist man, the party had to deal with the old specimen, but that ran counter to the premise of Marxism-Leninism. Consequently, the ruling elite in the GDR decided the individual and his or her needs were less important than the over-arching societal goals. The individual's desires were subordinated to the needs of the collectivity. Or, as Schneider put it, Marxism-Leninism "paid too little attention to the tensions between [individual] freedom and [societal] justice [*Gerechtigkeit*]". As a result, "the people of the GDR saw the political demands that the welfare of the individual had to be subordinated to society's needs as constraints on their individual well-being". And this feeling eventually became an "existential danger for the socialist system."<sup>24</sup> Non-Marxists agreed with Schneider's conclusions. In his memoir, Joachim Gauck, before 1989 a dissident theologian in the GDR and after reunification head of the Stasi archive and from 2012–2017, Germany's federal president, wrote that Marxism-Leninism was an experiment imposed on real human beings. "And we, imprisoned behind the Wall, had no choice but to cooperate".<sup>25</sup> But that was true only as long as the regime remained firmly in control. As the events of 1989 showed, once the East German people had a choice they decisively rejected Marxism-Leninism and its societal experimentations.

Like virtually every other commentator Schneider also discussed the problems of the East German economy. After all, there was general agreement after the *Wende* that the regime's economic problems contributed in a major way to its downfall. Schneider's take on the economy was rather interesting. Unlike other Monday morning quarterbacks, the author did not simply blame Günter Mittag's decisions to ignore economic reality or Honecker's massive social welfare programs for the GDR's economic difficulties. Instead, Schneider pointed to a fundamental flaw in the regime's running of the economy. The primary goal of the SED's economic decision-making, Schneider argued, was not increased productivity and efficiency, but to maintain the party's political power monopoly. The last chairman of the GDR's Central Planning Bureau, Gerhard Schürer, reached the same conclusion. He also criticized the "priority of politics over the economy in the GDR".<sup>26</sup>

Like many other commentators, Schneider belatedly recognized the profound and negative impact which the digital revolution – what the East Germans called the "scientific-technical revolution" – had upon the East German economy. Until the fall of the regime, the researchers at the PHS, Schneider among them, trumpeted the official line that the digital revolution was part of the laws of history as predicted by the classic thinkers of Marxism-Leninism.<sup>27</sup> Hanna Wolf vehemently denied the argument advanced by some Soviet scholars in the 1980s that the scientific-technical revolution had superseded the significance of the social revolution as proclaimed by Marx and Lenin.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Schneider, *Vision*, p. 291.

<sup>25</sup> Joachim Gauck: *Winter im Sommer, Frühling im Herbst. Erinnerungen*, Berlin, Siedler, 2009, p. 333.

<sup>26</sup> Schneider, *Vision*, p. 260. Schürer is quoted in Gerhard Wettig: *Niedergang, Krise und Zusammenbruch der DDR*. In: Kuhrt (ed.), *SED-Herrschaft*, p. 438. See also, Carl-Heinz Janson: *Totengräber der DDR. Wie Günter Mittag den SED-Staat ruinierte*, Düsseldorf, Econ Verlag, 1991, pp. 135–137 and 257–258.

<sup>27</sup> Schneider, *Vision*, pp. 349–350.

<sup>28</sup> Wolf, „Information... Konferenz... Internationale... Lenin... Schule... 18. 25.5.1982...Moskau," and Wolf to Hager, 25 May 1989, SAPMO-BArch, Best. Hager, DY 30/26468.

Part of the “evidence” for the superiority of the digital revolution in the socialist countries lay in the distant past, notably the early success of the Soviet space program, symbolized by the launching of the *Sputnik* satellite in 1956.<sup>29</sup> Kurt Hager, the member of the Politburo responsible for culture and education wrote in January 1958 that “*Sputnik* proved the correctness of our scientific ideology. Today the question is no longer that socialism must catch up with capitalism, but rather that the imperialists cannot compete with socialism”.<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, Jean Monnet, the long-time president of the European Commission, predicted as early as the 1960s that the digital revolution would lead to the collapse of the Soviet empire.<sup>31</sup>

After the fall of the GDR Schneider was honest enough to recognize that the old Communist beliefs were nonsense. He concluded that the SED’s leaders ignored the significance of the digital revolution for far too long. When they did appreciate the significance of the new technologies, Western capitalism had achieved a head start that the socialist economies could not overcome. The digital revolution, wrote Schneider, was the “actual gravedigger of socialism”.<sup>32</sup>

In summing up his arguments, Schneider listed three fundamental reasons for the final failure of socialism in the GDR: the “manifestations of the economic crisis”, the self-imposed paralysis of the SED’s leadership in the fall of 1989, and, interestingly, the regime’s violations of human rights.<sup>33</sup>

What, then, was the significance of Wolf’s and Schneider’s article? The piece had consequences, but they were the opposite of what the authors had attempted to achieve. The effort to resurrect Stalin’s reputation certainly did not help to stabilize the regime’s rule. Rather, it further alienated the country’s intellectual elite because the publication of the article demonstrated that the hardliners were still in charge. Evidence for that was readily at hand. Not only was it obvious that *Neues Deutschland* would not have published the piece without approval from the highest levels of the regime, but the SED Central Committee’s formal endorsement of the article showed that, in May 1989, Honecker and his allies firmly rejected *glasnost* and any political and economic reforms. They stood firmly for the “dogmatic narrowing” of the concept of Marxism-Leninism. A few months later, they would be swept from power.

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<sup>29</sup> August H. Leugers-Scherzberg: Die Wandlungen des Herbert Wehner. Von der Volksfront zur Grossen Koalition, Berlin, Propyläen, 2002, p. 227.

<sup>30</sup> Hager is quoted in Haun, Kommunist, p.114.

<sup>31</sup> Brigitte Seebacher-Brandt: Willy Brandt, München, Piper, 2004, p. 258.

<sup>32</sup> Schneider, Vision, pp. 251–252 and 349–350.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, pp. 10 and 229.