COMING OUT INTO SOCIALISM:
THE EMERGENCE OF A POLITICAL SCHWULSEIN IN
THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

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By
David Brandon Dennis, B.A.

The Ohio State University
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Master's Examination Committee:

Dr. Alan Beyerchen, Adviser

Dr. John Davidson

Dr. Robin Judd

Approved by

Dr. Alan Beyerchen
Adviser
Graduate Program in History
During the last half of the 1980s the “regimented” public sphere in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) began to advocate tolerance and acceptance for lesbian and gay East Germans. The public discussion about the place of gays and lesbians in East German socialism culminated in 1989 with Heiner Carow’s DEFA film, *Coming Out*. Models of total state control over public life in socialist dictatorships fail to adequately explain this public discussion and the production of *Coming Out*. The explanation lies, rather, in the historical development of a gay movement in the GDR and the East German state’s reaction to that movement. Historical evidence suggests that the East German state responded to the disaffection of its lesbian and gay citizens with multiple and often conflicting voices rather than a uniform and consistent one. The overwhelmingly positive representation of homosexuality in the GDR’s *imperfectly* regimented public sphere contrasts with the Politburo’s silence on the subject and the Stasi’s suspicion and repression. These divergent reactions indicate that different parts of the state apparatus responded differently to the activism of an indigenous East German gay movement, a movement that originated in the Lutheran Churches and, increasingly, spread to “official” sites of cultural production in the GDR. Significantly, the developmental history of the
East German gay movement follows a distinctive path among the histories of gay liberation movements in the twentieth century. Furthermore, it provides evidence that totalitarian models cannot fully account for either the development of cultural policy or shifts in cultural norms and values in the GDR. As a case study, Carow's *Coming Out* powerfully illustrates the form and substance of GDR's discussion of *Schwulsein* in the late 1980s.
For Ben and Michelle
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I first had the idea for a project on gay politics in East Germany during my stint at the Goethe Institute in Berlin in the summer of 2003. The idea came as I explored the Prenzlauer Berg district of eastern Berlin. I came across Stargarder Strasse 77, East Berlin’s Gethsemanekirche, a now famous site of peaceful protests and candlelight vigils during the heady days of October and November 1989. To my surprise, the church was located in the middle of eastern Berlin’s gay quarter along the Schönhauser Allee. The overlapping locations of East German reformist politics and gay East Berlin seemed to promise a connection worth further investigation, a promise borne out by my research over the past two years.

Working on any research topic for several years inevitably makes it personal in one way or another. This topic was personal for me from the beginning. I discovered it only a few months after beginning my own journey toward coming out. I found much more that summer in eastern Berlin than a master’s thesis topic. For the first time in my life, I found the tolerance and acceptance advocated in GDR during the late 1980s. I also began to find my own sense of individual self, of Eigen-sinn. There are many people
who encouraged me during those first difficult months, but for leaving her phone on all night, pushing me gently forward, and offering her unwavering love when others failed I am most grateful to Julie Harms Cannon.

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VITA

August 19, 1979 . . . . . . . . Born - Pampa, Texas

2003 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . B.A. Mathematics and German Language,
Texas Tech University

2003 – present . . . . . . . . . Graduate Teaching and Research Associate, The
Ohio State University

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: History
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapters</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Abstract</strong></td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dedication</strong></td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Acknowledgments</strong></td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vita</strong></td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>List of Abbreviations</strong></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapters:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The Emergence of an East German Gay Movement, 1968-1990</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 (East) German Political Schwulsein from Magnus Hirschfeld to Decriminalization, 1897-1968</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 From Subculture to Church Group, or How “Everyday” Integration Failed, 1968-1982</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 From Church Group to the Regimented Public Sphere: “Integration” Revisited, 1983-1989</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Unintended Legacies: An Epilogue, 1989-Present</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Conclusion</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The Dialogue Between Political Schwulsein and State-Socialism: Heiner Carow’s Coming Out as a Case Study</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Coming Out: The Antifascist Path from Teacher to Schwul</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Conclusion</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Conclusion</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bibliography</strong></td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DEFA  Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft (German Film Corporation)
FDJ   Freie Deutsche Jugend (Free German Youth)
FRG   Federal Republic of Germany (Bundesrepublik Deutschland)
GDR   German Democratic Republic (Deutsche Demokratische Republik)
GLBT  Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered
HIB   Homosexuelle Interessengemeinschaft Berlin (Homosexual Interest Community Berlin)
KPD   Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Communist Party of Germany)
SBZ   Sowjetische Besatzungszone (Soviet Occupation Zone)
SED   Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Socialist Unity Party of Germany)
SPD   Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany)
SVD   Schwulenverband in der DDR (Gay Alliance in the GDR) (1990)
SVD   Schwulenverband in Deutschland (Gay Alliance in Germany) (1991-1999)
BVH   Bundesverband Homosexualität (Federal Alliance Homosexuality)
WhK   Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee (Scientific-Humanitarian Committee)
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On November 9, 1989 a cinematic barrier collapsed in the German Democratic Republic. The topic of homosexuality had never before been broached in an East German feature film. This prohibition was not removed even during the short-lived cultural thaw that followed Eric Honecker’s 1971 proclamation at the Fourth Plenum of the Central Committee that “providing one starts from an established socialist standpoint, there cannot, in my opinion, be any taboo subjects for art and literature.”¹ East German director Heiner Carow’s film, *Coming Out* (1989), finally broke the feature filmic taboo against representing gay experience, just as the GDR itself began to crumble politically under the weight of popular unrest in the streets. On the same night that thousands of East Berliners streamed down *Unter den Linden* toward triumphant celebrations at the Brandenburg Gate or poured out one of the numerous openings into West Berlin, audiences in East Berlin theaters crossed, for the first time, the cinematic barrier erected against representations of same-sex love. And theatergoers kept crossing that barrier. As the Socialist Unity Party’s dictatorship crumbled and a stunningly quick reunification

¹ Quoted in Seán Allan, “DEFA: An Historical Overview” in *DEFA: East German Cinema, 1946-1992*, ed. Seán Allan and John Sandford (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 1999), 15, author’s translation. The original quote can be found in the December 18, 1971 issue of *Neues Deutschland*. 1
with the Federal Republic ensued, Carow’s tale of a young Berlin teacher’s “coming out
found such resonance with East German audiences that it became the box office hit of the
year.\textsuperscript{2}

Coming Out’s success was the popular culmination of an unprecedented
discussion of homosexuality that began in the GDR in the late 1980s. In these last years
of the GDR, the topic was treated with surprising openness. Calls for the tolerance and
acceptance of lesbians and gays echoed across many sectors of GDR state and society.
Interpreting this public discussion through the lens of totalitarian theory might suggest
that it was merely staged to manipulate public opinion to serve the needs of the Party-
state.\textsuperscript{3} In contrast, this thesis argues, centrally, that the unprecedented discussion resulted
not from a program of well-planned social engineering on the part of the Socialist Unity
Party (\textit{Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands}, or SED) controlled state, but from the
dynamic engagement of an indigenous East German gay movement with the state; more
precisely with certain sectors within the state’s \textit{imperfectly} “regimented” public sphere.\textsuperscript{4}
These sectors, namely the medical and academic establishments, the press, and the mass
media, take on significance because they have the power to shape public opinion through
the cultural production and reproduction of norms and values.

\textsuperscript{2} Denis Sweet, “Bodies for Germany, Bodies for Socialism: The German Democratic Republic Devises a
Gay (Male) Body,” in \textit{Gender and Germanness: Cultural Productions of Nation}, ed. Patricia

\textsuperscript{3} In Friedrich and Brzezinski’s classic and influential model of totalitarianism, one of the famous “six
points” of totalitarian control was the state’s monopoly over the media. See Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew

\textsuperscript{4} Jürgen Habermas coined the term “regimented public sphere.” See Jürgen Habermas \textit{The Structural
Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society}, trans. Thomas
As an analytical category, the "public sphere" has been imbued with so many
different meanings as to make it, without further explanation, almost meaningless. At its
most basic, the term refers to the intermediary realm between society and the state that
encompasses the source, substance, and institutional structure of public opinion
formation. In Jürgen Habermas' classical formulation of the "bourgeois public sphere,"
during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries private (British, French, and German)
people—i.e., educated propertied men—came together to form a critically reasoning
public grounded in the emergence of a "literary public" of critical readers from its
beginnings in the bourgeois family. By the late-eighteenth and nineteenth century the
"literary public" had become engaged in a "political public sphere" expressing their
critique through democratic institutions and a critical press. Differences in historical,
social, and political conditions make problematic any attempt to apply this definition
without qualification to the GDR. Despite being economically and politically socialist,
the bourgeois cultural foundations of the GDR continued to have an impact on public life
and opinion. Habermas briefly mentions two "variants of the public sphere of bourgeois
society." One of them he defines as the "plebiscitary-acclamatory form of regimented
public sphere characterizing dictatorships in highly developed industrial societies."
Implicit in this definition is a variant form of public sphere based on regimented
"publicity" staged by the dictatorial state.\footnote{Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, xviii.} For Habermas, "publicity" describes the
formation of public opinion (whether "critical" or "staged") within the public sphere.\textsuperscript{6}

Existing in a highly industrialized socialist dictatorship, the GDR's public sphere fits into Habermas' framework as a regimented one.

Habermas purposefully ignores the regimented form of public sphere, maintaining that despite formal similarities to the bourgeois public sphere, it does not have the "literary character of a public sphere constituted by private people putting reason to use."\textsuperscript{7} If we analyze the GDR using Habermas' framework, because it lacked a "rational-critical" debate emanating from the press and reading public, its public sphere merely shadows Party and state designs for the purpose of staging publicity in order to manufacture public opinion. However, this theoretical understanding fails to explain how the social critique of gays and lesbians, a minority group that the SED-state never officially recognized, found its way into the public discourse of the GDR. Such an approach lacks sufficient explanatory power because it uncritically accepts the SED's ideological claim to power, namely that the Party-state equals society, thereby completely collapsing the public sphere into the state.

In his history of East German cinema, Joshua Feinstein questions the identity of state with public sphere in the GDR:

[An] "official" public sphere existed in the GDR. Like any state with democratic pretensions, the GDR sought to legitimate itself through the court of public opinion, even if the latter was transparently "manufactured" by the press or "choreographed" through rituals of mass acclamation. Moreover, the regime's attitude toward media was not entirely cynical...socialist ideology purported to value Enlightenment discursive principles. Expressions of this investment

\textsuperscript{6} Habermas, \textit{The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere}, 235-244.

\textsuperscript{7} Habermas, \textit{The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere}, xviii.
included the insistence that Marxism-Leninism was a scientific doctrine and the central role that the notion of education played in official culture and rhetoric.  

I take Feinstein’s implicit critique of Habermas one step further and suggest that, while the public sphere in the GDR was an “official” form regimented from above, the SED’s ideological nod to public opinion, Enlightenment discursive principles, science, and the role of education and, more concretely, the everyday functioning of the institutions in which these principles were enshrined opened up space for critique to percolate upward from below. Therefore, regimentation was imperfect.

It was precisely from the sectors of cultural production within the state’s imperfectly regimented public sphere that the surprising discussion of homosexuality emanated. For the sake of brevity, I refer to these sectors as “regimented public spheres” or “regimented publics,” always keeping in mind that state control over them was never complete. Among the many examples of the encounter between lesbian and gay East Germany and the state’s regimented publics belong an academic working group on homosexuality at (East) Berlin’s Humboldt University, a series of medical and psychological conferences on homosexuality, the publication of gay activist Jürgen Lemke’s interviews with gay men, and indeed, Carow’s Coming Out. In each of these examples, politically active lesbian and gay individuals took part in and often shaped the discussion.

I have suggested that the discussion of homosexuality took place in GDR because the SED-state could not completely regiment its public sphere. Additional prerequisites

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for such a discussion were the forms of behavior, the position outside of the state and society, and the reformist strategies of lesbian and gay East Germans acting as individuals or in groups. Thomas Lindenberger argues in the vein of German historian Alf Lüdtke’s notion of *Eigen-Sinn* (‘individual sense of self’) that concerning the relationship between a dictatorial state and its individual citizens:

> It is important to focus not only on mechanical conformity to rules and orders—or on open defiance—but also on the vast realm of other forms of behavior such as compromise, bargaining, limited reciprocity, and shared interests between rulers and ruled.⁹

It is precisely these forms of behavior that allowed for the creation of common ground between the lesbian and gay individuals who came together as part of the gay movement and the SED-state. On the whole, the movement imagined gay emancipation in decidedly socialist terms: it intended to leave the closet behind, not for the rights of a civil society, but for the social justice of a socialist utopia. The state’s position on homosexuality was largely reactive and ambivalent; it was particularly interested in integrating all of its citizens into the socialist project. The tenuous common ground between a socialist gay movement and a reactive and ambivalent SED-state allowed for a dialogue aimed not at questioning the fundamentals of socialist politics, but rather at reforming socialist society. Indeed, in this particular case, it is important to recognize that gay and lesbian East Germans found themselves in the unique position of having to negotiate a tenuous relationship with the state, while simultaneously dealing with social ostracism; these were two distinct but not entirely separate tasks.

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The dissent of the gay movement was thus directed simultaneously toward state and society. The convergence (or divergence) of the interests of the gay movement, the state, and society is fundamental to understanding what gay “dissent” means in the context of the GDR. The typologies of dissent that have emerged in the historiography of the GDR typically understand dissent as a two-way process between society and state. These fail to capture the gay movement’s unique position outside of state and society. To illustrate this position we need only look at the debate coming from the movement: On November 17, 1989, barely eight days after the Wall fell, the first meeting between politically active gays and lesbians from the GDR and the Federal Republic (FRG) began. This Waldschlößchen conference, held in Göttingen, came at the culmination of seven years of continuous gay political action in the GDR. In attendance was Bert Thinius, an instructor of Marxist-Leninist Philosophy at Humboldt University and one of the key philosophical voices in the movement. While discussing a list of programmatic demands, Thinius remarked:

In some ways, Stalinist socialism had its macabre advantages: namely the implementation of certain reasonable demands (provided those with power were enlightened). Under current conditions, the abolition of Paragraph 151 would have been hardly as simple to effect, if, given present needs and attitudes, it would have been discussed among the whole [East German] populace. And a number of other changes to the criminal code and the constitution could have easily been implemented under former [pre-Wende] constraints. They are

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11 Paragraph 151 was the homosexual “age of consent” law in the criminal code of the GDR between 1968 and 1988.
certainly still possible now, but that is exactly the question: how do we organize consensus across the entire social dimension?\textsuperscript{12}

Colored as they are by the excitement and trepidation of those last weeks of 1989, Thinius' comments reveal an intricate alignment of interests between the gay movement and the state directed at society. If the SED-state could be convinced to support political Schwulein it would be a powerful ally in the mission to change a homophobic society. Despite the risk of drawing artificially stark lines between "state" and "society," it is nonetheless safe to say that, in general, the gay movement challenged society by being gay; it challenged the SED-state by being a movement.

In certain ways the East German gay movement pursued strategies of reform unique to the GDR and a socialist society. It articulated concerns and demands common to all gay movements in the 1980s including, for example, anti-discrimination laws, state recognition of gay and lesbian partnerships, mitigating a high rate of suicide among gay men, and the looming AIDS crisis. Unlike its western analogues, the East German movement reformulated an antifascist discourse, which had historically been tied with antihomosexuality in the GDR, to support its demands. Furthermore, in socialist societies the youth take on particular significance as the means toward a future utopia. The SED-state historically had seen gay men as a threat to socialist youth.\textsuperscript{13} Thus, a

\textsuperscript{12} Bert Thinius, "Von der Segelfreiheit der Schwulen, 1. Gesprächsrunde," in Die DDR. Die Schwulen. Der Aufbruch. Versuch einer Bestandstafnahme, ed. Jean Jacques Soukup, (Göttingen: Die Schriftenreihe des Waldschlößchens, 1990), 18, my translation. All translations from the original German are mine unless otherwise noted. This book contains the proceedings of the Waldschlößchen conference held in Göttingen, Germany 17 – 19 November 1989.

\textsuperscript{13} The gay-man-as-pederast stereotype was and is common across Europe and North America. I do not suggest that the existence of such a stereotype was unique to socialist societies; the uniqueness lies in the significance the stereotype took on in light of the teleological goals of Marxism-Leninism.
central concern of the movement and its expression in the regimented public sphere was countering this fear of Verführung, or the supposed “seduction of youth” by gay men.

Fleshing out these arguments about the remarkable discussion of homosexuality in the late 1980s GDR requires placing it in the historical context of the East German gay movement and analyzing political Schwulsein’s manifestation in certain cultural products of the GDR’s regimented publics. I organize the structure of this project along parallel lines. The first chapter explores the history of the movement. It pays particular attention to the political and social forces that shaped the movement’s path toward a tenuous common ground with the GDR’s regimented publics. The second chapter expands a film analysis of Coming Out, examining the production history, the content, and the formal construction of the film. I argue that the film and its history mirror the dialogue between the gay movement and the state in the late 1980s as Carow steered his project through the institutional structure embedded within the GDR’s regimented cinematic public, the Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft (DEFA).

I utilize four overlapping terminologies in this thesis: gay, lesbian, Schwulsein, and homosexual.\textsuperscript{14} In doing so, I have tried to be as clear as possible. The terms that people who do not fit sexual norms use to describe themselves and the terms by which they are described by others vary widely. Such terms are fraught with national, historical, and political implications.\textsuperscript{15} Because this is the history of a political movement that is historically related (if nothing else than by its emergence in the second

\textsuperscript{14} The German word Schwul, like the English gay, carries with it the connotation of male-to-male sexuality. Schwulsein, similar in grammatical construction to the German word Dasein (“existence,” literally “being there”), is best translated as “being gay.”

\textsuperscript{15} One could choose from gay, queer, GLBT, lesbian, homosexual, among others, or alternatively, one could use the German words for gay, Schwul, and lesbian, Lesben.
half of the twentieth century) to a worldwide gay and lesbian movement, I have chosen to use the English terms “gay” and “lesbian” when referring to the movement and those who participated in it. However, this history also covers a time period before the widespread use of “gay” and “lesbian” and, additionally, deals with legal and state terminology. In these cases I have chosen to use the word “homosexual” because it was the term used by states, legal systems, and early homosexual rights activists themselves.

At the same time, this project’s title uses the German term Schwulsein to remind us of the movement’s national setting and historical specificities of time and space. The choice of Schwulsein (rather than Lesben- und Schwulsein) for the title is also appropriate because, from the perspective of the state and occasionally the movement, lesbians were often invisible. This is not meant to imply that they were not active in the movement—Ursula Sillge, for instance, was the leader of the most influential “secular” group.\(^{16}\) However, I want to recognize that the discourse, more often than not and particularly in the regimented publics, dealt almost exclusively with the concerns of and about gay men. Nevertheless, when I use the term Schwulsein I am referring to both lesbians and gay men who participated in the movement.

Additionally, in the context of this project, Schwulsein refers specifically to “being politically gay” rather than simply “being gay.” In modern urban Germany, some form of identity based on sexual otherness was commonly available (though certainly not commonly acceptable) at the latest by the 1890s. As Germans who did not fit the sexual mold claimed this shared identity, they began to form sexual subcultures. The growth of

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a political consciousness from shared sexual identities and subcultures came as early as the late 1890s. So political *Schwulsein* could presumably refer to all twentieth century German gay movements, whether active before or after the Third Reich or situated on one side or the other of the post-war East-West divide. I use the term generally in all of these cases and particularly to denote “being politically gay” in the GDR.

By “being politically gay” I reference those individuals or groups who, on the basis of their shared identity of sexual otherness, began to recognize the need for social change and, more importantly, began to take action to further such change. This project is a history of activism. There were hundreds of thousands of East Germans who would have identified as gay or lesbian and/or would have participated in the subculture—i.e. bars, cruising parks, informal friendship circles—who never participated in political activism. Any boundary we draw between subculture and political activism is artificial, quite permeable, and necessary only for the sake of analytical convenience. Indeed, political *Schwulsein* emerged out of the subculture. Nonetheless, the subculture is not the focus of this project. The history of the subculture in East Germany (particularly the “scene” in East Berlin) has yet to be and needs to be written.

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17 In 1985 the Interdisciplinary Working Group on Homosexuality of the Humboldt University in Berlin estimated between 700,000 and 800,000 “homophile” (i.e. homosexual) citizens of the GDR. See “Positionspapier des Interdisziplinären Arbeitskreises Homosexualität der Humboldt-Universität Berlin: ‘Zur Situation homophiler Bürger in der DDR’” in *Un-sichtbare Frauen*, ed. Ursula Sillge, 150.

18 Any history of the gay and lesbian subculture in the GDR would need to take into account Günter Gaus’ famous 1983 description of an East German “niche society,” where private worlds and spaces of friendship and family circles constituted a substitute for public civil society. However, even in liberal democracies, which theoretically have intact civil societies, gays and lesbians have traditionally been excluded. Only since the 1970s have they experienced what is still, in many liberal democracies, a tenuous inclusion in civil society. See Günter Gaus, *Wo Deutschland liegt* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1983).
CHAPTER 2
THE EMERGENCE OF AN EAST GERMAN GAY MOVEMENT
1968-1990

Whatever is useful to the revolution is moral; whatever is harmful to it is immoral and intolerable. - V.I. Lenin

The point of departure for the evaluation of sexual relations between people of the same sex must be that Homosexuality just like Heterosexuality represents a variation of sexual behavior. Homosexual people are thus not excluded from socialist Society, and warrant civil rights like all other citizens - Supreme Court of the GDR, 1987

My endeavors do not aim to prove the normality of homosexuality, of same-sex love and Schwulen, rather to expose antihomosexuality for the abnormality it is. - Eduard Stapel

By most accounts, the relatively short history of the East German gay movement begins at an event held by the Evangelical Academy of Berlin-Brandenburg on February 9, 1982. The topic that day, chosen by academy director Elisabeth Adler would be "Theological Aspects of Homosexuality." In attendance were several gay theological students from Leipzig, including a young vicar named Eduard Stapel. Stapel and his friends were so emboldened by the breach in the church's wall of silence that in the fall

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22 Sillge, Un-sichtbare Frauen, 97.
of the same year they formed a gay working group they named *Arbeitskreis “Homosexualität” der Evangelischen Studentengemeinde Leipzig.*

For this reason 1982 looms large in recollections of politically active East German gays and lesbians. However, I suggest that in order to adequately understand the unprecedented level of dialogue in the late 1980s we must extend our analysis well before 1982. The first section provides a brief historical sketch of (East) German political *Schwulein.* The second section follows the story after the GDR’s decriminalization of (male) homosexuality in 1968 through the 1970s. Here I demonstrate that, while the path to an autonomous gay movement was blocked by the state’s policy of individual integration into the socialist project, a number of political developments opened up an alternative—specifically under the roof of the Evangelical Church. In the third section I show that, as the movement emerged from under the roof of the Church, it engaged state and society within the GDR’s intermediary regimented public sphere and thereby initiated the unprecedented level of “public” conversation about homosexuality. Finally, in the epilogue, I argue this dialogue between the East German state and gay movement had unintended consequences for lesbian and gay rights in reunified Germany. I organize these sections into a more-or-less chronological narrative framework. Each section frames a specific thematic part of my argument rather than encompassing an exhaustive history of political *Schwulein* during the period at hand.

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23 “Working Group ‘Homosexuality’ of the Evangelical Student Community of Leipzig”
2.1 (East) German Political *Schwulsein* from Magnus Hirschfeld to Decriminalization

1897-1968

The history of German socialism and political *Schwulsein* in the first half of the twentieth century reveals certain patterns that continued into the 1980s, namely the tendency of German gay movements to look toward socialist parties for support, the subordination of German socialism’s lukewarm support for homosexual rights to the needs of political convenience, and the ideological association of antifascism with antihomosexuality. From the Nazi rise to power until the late 1960s and early 1970s political *Schwulsein* was reduced to a murmur in all three German regimes that cover the period. In the GDR, male homosexuality continued to be punishable under the criminal code until 1968. The need for socialist revolutionaries to accommodate a persistent “bourgeois” linkage of respectability with sexuality in the GDR and the fear that homosexual men would seduce and lead astray socialist youth were key reasons that homosexuality continued to be criminalized and treated as a and taboo.\(^{24}\)

The history of organized gay emancipation politics does not begin with the dynamic June 1969 Stonewall riots in New York City.\(^{25}\) It begins, rather, in the quiet Berlin apartment of Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld on May 15, 1897. That day, three men, researcher Hirschfeld, publisher Max Spohr, and lawyer Eduard Oberg, formed the first

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\(^{24}\) George Mosse argues convincingly that the socialist “overthrow of bourgeois society meant the retention of bourgeois morality.” See George Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1985), 185.

\(^{25}\) In the early morning hours of June 28, 1969, New York City policemen made one of their frequent raids on the *Stonewall Inn*, a gay bar in Greenwich Village. For the first time, the patrons at the bar fought back and rioted. This point is often seen as the turning point toward a worldwide activist gay movement.
political gay movement, the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee (*Wissenschaftlich-
humanitäres Komitee*, or WhK). Building on the writings of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs,
Hirschfeld theorized a new sexual category—"the third sex"—into which he placed
"homosexual" men and women. Indeed, because of Hirschfeld's writings
"homosexuality" came to be *the* twentieth century descriptor of same-sex love.
Working under the motto "neither sickness nor crime," Hirschfeld and the WhK put
theory into action. Hirschfeld and lawyer Kurt Hiller, the WhK's leading activist for
legal reform, lobbied tirelessly for the repeal of Paragraph 175 of the Wilhelmine
criminal code. In place since unification in 1871, Paragraph 175 was the Reich's anti-
sodomy law. In principle, the WhK was politically independent, but in the quest for
decriminalization it needed sympathetic allies with political power. Over the course of its
existence, the various parties of German socialist workers' movement, the
*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD) and the *Kommunistische Partei
Deutschlands* (KPD), seemed to offer the most hope. Both of these parties advocated the
repeal of Paragraph 175, while at the same time playing on homophobic sentiments in
German society to further their own political goals.

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26 The WhK's powerful confluence of scientific research, publishing, and legal advocacy allowed it to become the most influential gay organization in Germany until its violent end in the flames of a Nazi bonfire. On May 10, 1933 a group of Nazi students and the SA raided WhK headquarters and burned most of its large collection of books and photographs. Hirschfeld was abroad on a lecture tour and decided not to return to Germany. For an account of the destruction see James D. Steakley, *The Homosexual Emancipation Movement in Germany* (New York: Arno Press, 1975), 105.


28 Hirschfeld popularized the term "homosexuality" originally coined in 1869 by Hungarian doctor Károly Mária Kertbeny (originally Benkert) in a letter to Prussian Minister of Justice Leonhardt protesting the Prussian law against sodomy. Steakley, *The Homosexual Emancipation Movement in Germany*, 11-12.

29 Sex between adult women was never subject to criminal punishment under any German regime.
Paragraph 175, however, was not repealed. It was sharpened under the Nazi regime and continued to exist in one form or another in the GDR until 1987 and in the FRG until 1994. In 1945 German socialists and communists who had survived the Nazi concentration camps or the Stalinist purges in exile returned to the Sowjetische Besatzungszone (SBZ), or Soviet Occupation Zone in eastern Germany to build state-socialism. With them they carried the experiences and prejudices that emerged from the Röhm Affair and Stalinist re-criminalization of homosexuality.\textsuperscript{30} Even before the proclamation of a German Democratic Republic on October 7, 1949, two tendencies that would color the relationship between the SED’s state socialism and East German political Schwulsein were in place. First, while at times sympathetic to the homosexual rights movement, particularly regarding decriminalization, Geman political socialism in its multifarious forms, nevertheless, tended to instrumentalize the so-called “homosexual question” for political purposes. Second, the association of fascism and homosexuality in what would become a life and death struggle for many of these communist men colored the meaning of antifascism with hues of antihomosexuality. Moreover, Magnus Hirschfeld and the WhK set a precedent for future (East and West) German gay movements by relying upon various forms of socialism to give political voice to their demands.

\textsuperscript{30} The head of the Nazi SA, Ernst Röhm’s homosexuality had been a lightening rod for criticism from leftist newspapers and ideologues in the early 1930s. During this so-called Röhm Affair, Stalin ordered the recriminalization of (male) homosexuality in the Soviet Union. By 1934, Röhm had become a political liability for Hitler. His attempt to replace the traditional German military with the SA had threatened the Reichswehr leadership and thus to Hitler’s need to stabilize his new Reich. In a strategic public relations maneuver Hitler cast his June 28, 1934 purge of the top leadership of the SA as both a preemptive action against the instability advocated by Röhm and an anti-homosexual purge. See Ronald Smelser, \textit{Die braune Elite} (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989); and Alexander Zinn, \textit{Die soziale Konstruktion des homosexuellen Nazionalsozialisten} (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 1997).
Mary Fulbrook, among others, has argued that "the basic legitimation of the GDR was its status as the truly 'anti-fascist' state."\(^{31}\) As their central antifascist role was transformed from warrior to protector, many leading German communists became eager to defend socialist youth and society against homosexuals. The need to protect the youth from *Verführung* became the key justification for continued criminalization of sodomy in officially antifascist East Germany. Despite a number of early attempts at decriminalization in the GDR, a modified version of Paragraph 175 remained in force until decriminalization in 1968.\(^{32}\) That year, the GDR finally received a new penal code. It formally decriminalized "mere" homosexuality.\(^{33}\) The old Paragraph 175 became Paragraph 151, which reads, "An adult who has sexual intercourse with a youth (defined elsewhere in the code as under eighteen years of age) of the same sex will be punished with three years of imprisonment or with a sentence of probation."\(^{34}\) In contrast, the age of consent for heterosexual sex was set at sixteen, and the punishment for ignoring it entailed two years of prison time rather than three.\(^{35}\) Lurking between these lines of legal code remained the fear of youthful *Verführung*. Nevertheless, the penal code of 1968

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\(^{32}\) For example, in 1951 the parliament of Saxony had decided to abolish Paragraph 175. The Saxon president, Wilhelm Koenen, who had supported decriminalization in 1929 as a KPD representative in the Reichstag, supported the parliament’s work toward decriminalization. But these efforts failed due to the firm opposition of SED Chief Walter Ulbricht, who had, not incidentally, spent the Nazi years in exile in Moscow. The 1952 draft penal code of the GDR would have eliminated (without replacement) Paragraph 175. But the worker’s uprising on June 17, 1953 made an increasingly insecure SED leadership averse to change, and the draft was abandoned. See Sillge, *Un-Sichtbare Frauen*, 88-89; and Gunter Grau, "Return of the Past: The Policy of the SED and the Laws Against Homosexuality in Eastern Germany Between 1946 and 1968," *Journal of Homosexuality* 37, no. 4 (1999): 10.

\(^{33}\) "Mere" homosexuality refers to sexual acts between consenting adults. Thus the definition of adult became key to the legal control of gay men’s sexuality.

\(^{34}\) Paragraph 151 of the *Strafgesetzbuch (StGB) DDR* (Berlin/GDR: Staatsverlag der DDR, 1981), 56.

\(^{35}\) Paragraph 149 of the *Strafgesetzbuch (StGB) DDR*, 55.
was the first since 1871 in which any German state had decriminalized homosexuality.\textsuperscript{36} Decriminalization was one of major prerequisites for the organization of modern gay emancipation movements in both Germanys.\textsuperscript{37}

2.2 From Subculture to Church Group, or How “Everyday” Integration Failed

1968-1982

Following decriminalization, the East German state pursued a policy of individual integration of homosexuals into everyday socialist society: lesbian and gay individuals could join society separately, but not in groups. When these individuals tried to form action groups inspired by a developing gay and lesbian movement in West Germany, the state responded with suppression. The particular combination of integration via individual dispersion and suppression of activist groups blocked lesbian and gay critique from the GDR’s regimented public sphere and ultimately failed to quell their disaffection. However, due to the SED-state’s 1978 policy of rapprochement with the Lutheran Church, a new vent for gay and lesbian dissatisfaction opened up “under the roof of the church.” Via the church, the political consciousness that had grown in the subculture of the 1970s translated into a movement in the 1980s.

\textsuperscript{36} Paradoxically, the implementation of Paragraph 151 also was the first time in German history that any form of sex between women was legally punishable.

\textsuperscript{37} Decriminalization of homosexuality occurred in the Federal Republic (FRG) in 1969. However, Paragraph 175 remained in force in the form of an unusually heavy-handed discriminatory age of consent law until 1994. The showing of Rosa von Praunheim’s film \textit{Nicht der Homosexuelle ist pervers, sondern die Situation, in der er lebt} at the 1971 Berlin Film Festival is typically referenced as the spark that started the West German gay movement.
If the state intended in 1968, as it retroactively claimed in its first official statement on the subject in December 1978, that decriminalization would mark the beginning of a process of integrating gays and lesbians into the socialist project, it did so as the understanding of what that project would look like was shifting. By 1968, a cognitive shift from forward-looking heroic utopianism to sobering “everyday” socialism was well under way in the GDR. That year, instead of a socialist utopia, East Germans received the idealism-crushing news that Warsaw Pact tanks had quashed the liberalizing efforts of the Prague Spring.

In addition to the devastating news from Prague, a number of developments in East German political, economic, intellectual, and cultural life in the early 1970s paralleled and reinforced this shift. In 1971 there was a changing of the guard at the Palast der Republik. Erich Honnecker replaced Walter Ulbricht, who had fallen out of favor with Moscow, as SED chief. Honnecker’s 1976 “unity of social and economic policy” marked a corresponding shift from sacrificing for the utopian future to consuming in the socialist present. By the early 1970s East German artists and intellectuals had adopted a term for this shift: Alltag, or “everyday.” Even DEFA films exhibited a “triumph of the ordinary,” best illustrated by Heiner Carow’s wildly popular 1973 film

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Die Legende von Paul und Paula. Carow’s love story, is “ultimately about preserving [the everyday cyclical renewal of life that] Paula embodies against the relentless pressures of supposed progress.”

In 1973, as before, most love stories between women or between men in the GDR would have begun in the subculture of bars, cruising parks, and small private circles of friends (and even this was almost non-existent outside of Berlin and Leipzig). The state’s official position in 1978 followed one particular integrationist line that these men and women should make the journey from subculture to socialist project by a process of individual dispersion into the broader society:

So that the positive position of our society and the active social mission is not hindered, homosexuals, just like other citizens of their disposition, can apply themselves without delay to the socialist project, without founding their own organization or association.

But certain groups of gay men and women had other notions of how integration would proceed.

Many lesbian and gay East Germans who came to prominence in the 1980s movement remember the night in spring 1973 when West German gay activist and film director, Rosa von Praunheim’s Nicht der Homosexuelle ist pervers, sondern die Situation, in der er lebt was shown on West German television as their very own Stonewall.

In the fine East German tradition of nightly emigration westward over the

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41 Feinstein, Triumph of the Ordinary, 211.
airwaves, they saw the film that Ursula Silge—who in the late 1980s would lead one of the main “secular” lesbian and gay groups, the Sonntag Club—has called “the signal.” In August this signal emboldened a man named Peter Rauch and his friends to unfurl a banner at the tenth annual World Festival of Youth and Students in East Berlin, which read, “We Homosexuals of [East] Berlin Welcome the Participants of the Tenth World Festival and are for Socialism in the GDR.” Stasi agents immediately suppressed their political action. Nevertheless, at the festival Rauch met Manfred Herzer, a West German activist working with Homosexuelle Aktion Westberlin. Herzer inspired Rauch to create a gay action group of his own. In fall 1973 he founded the Homosexuelle Interessengemeinschaft Berlin (HIB). The group began holding meetings in the basement of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf’s Grünerzeit Museum in the Mahlsdorf quarter of East Berlin. Already famed for her collection of Bismarckian antiques, the cross dressing Charlotte (Lothar Berfelde) was fast becoming a local East Berlin celebrity. Between 1974 and 1976, the HIB petitioned, among others, the police and the Volkskammer (“People’s Chamber” – the East German Parliament), and it organized a discussion forum. But the state responded with silence and suspicion. That HIB understood itself to be a “family of choice for lesbians and gays” illustrates that it never quite outgrew its beginnings as an informal group of friends. Political activity waned after 1976.


Silge, Un-Sichtbare Frauen, 89.

“‘Sozialistische Moral und Homosexualität,””

“Homosexual Action West Berlin”

“Homosexual Interest Community of Berlin”

Silge, Un-Sichtbare Frauen, 90.
In April 1978, a group of lesbians headed by Sillge planned once more to hold a meeting in Charlotte’s basement. The Stasi intercepted the event’s invitations, and on the day of the meeting two agents showed up at Charlotte’s door and informed her that the meeting would not take place. Charlotte recalls the encounter as follows: Presumably fishing for a list of names, the agents asked, “What kind of guests are they?” “Gay girls like me,” she quipped, “Why all the questions?” Some days later, she received a letter from the Ministry of Culture informing her that she would no longer be able to hold meetings in the basement of the museum.

Remaining true to its official position, the state apparatus shut down every attempt to organize a lesbian or gay group in the 1970s. That these groups were imagining themselves as “families of choice” shows the deep need for solidarity and recognition in the lonely gay and lesbian Alltag of “real existing socialism.” More importantly, within these informal families a number of lesbian and gay East Germans began to grow conscious of the need for a political Schwulsein. Inspired, in part, by the West German gay movement, this political consciousness began to ferment and bubble upward toward the GDR’s regimented public sphere. But it had yet to find a way to circumvent the state’s restrictive policies.

The state’s blocking of autonomous groups in favor of integration via social dispersion looked to have succeeded in 1978. But an altogether separate chain of events would provide an unlikely channel for gay and lesbian emancipation from social alienation. Due in part to both international and domestic developments, society-wide

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49 Von Mahlsdorf, I am My Own Wife, 159.
50 Von Mahlsdorf, I am My Own Wife, 160.
disaffection began percolating up through the East German Alltag of the late 1970s. On August 1, 1975 the GDR, along with 34 other European and North American states—including the Soviet Union—signed the Helsinki Final Act, the culmination of two years of East-West diplomacy under the auspices of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. With the signing of this accord, the East German state bound itself to the protection of human rights behind the so-called Iron Curtain. Whatever the SED's intentions in following the accord, East Germans had noticed. The Helsinki guarantees prompted over one hundred thousand to apply to emigrate.\(^1\) The now (in)famous 1976 Biermann affair—the forced emigration of singer and loyal communist Wolf Biermann for his criticism of SED policies—and the firestorm of disaffection it ignited in intellectual and artistic circles, illustrates the reaction to a particularly harsh climate of cultural censorship in the late 1970s. It was in this climate of increasing disaffection that Honecker decided to pursue a new policy of rapprochement with the Evangelical churches:

Such secular dissent doubtless worried the state, particularly given the potential for linkages between secular and religious dissent. This fear, combined with the continued moderate course of the [Evangelical] Kirchenbund under [Bishop Albrecht] Schoenherr, led the state to make the March 1978 overture.\(^2\)

The policy of rapprochement created a quasi-independent space for public discourse in the churches. Mary Fulbrook maintains rightly that the state had a vested interest in rapprochement with the Church leadership as means to “controlled ventilation of


\(^{2}\) Goeckel, *The Lutheran Church and the East German State*, 241-42.
dissent.53 The early 1980s saw a number of interest and citizens’ movements find shelter under the roof of the church. In 1982 when the Church began asking questions about homosexuality, a space opened to “vent dissent” created by the state’s flawed and failed policy of “everyday” homosexual integration. With Eduard Stapel’s founding of the working group in Leipzig, a political Schwulsein in the GDR began to emerge from the “gray closet” of the GDR. Unlike its analog in the West, the movement did not emerge into a “rainbow ghetto.” It came out into the shelter and oversight of the church sanctuary.

2.3 From Church Group to the Regimented Public Sphere: “Integration” Revisited 1983–1989

The movement did not remain entirely within the church for long. By the mid-1980s secular offshoots began to form within various state organizations, official houses of culture and the GDR’s official youth organization the Frei Deutsche Jugend (FDJ) in particular. Despite differences within the movement, this shift from church to state was accompanied by an unprecedented public discussion of homosexuality. Although neither “church” nor “secular” groups questioned the validity of state socialism, both engaged the state within intermediary regimented publics—first the academic and medical establishments, followed by the press and the mass media. This engagement and the resulting dialogue forced the state to revisit its 1978 policy of integration via individual

53 Fulbrook, Anatomy of a Dictatorship, 206.
dispersion. By the late 1980s certain sectors of the state responded by allowing lesbian and gay organizations, promoting acceptance and tolerance of homosexuals, and finally abolishing the discriminatory Paragraph 151 of the GDR legal code.

It is one of those ironic happenstances of history that the birth of Martin Luther in 1483, or rather the 500th anniversary celebrations of his birth in 1983 (Lutherjahr), provided the means by which Stapel broadened his network of gay working groups. In a strange Realpolitik brew of rapprochement and Abgrenzung, the officially Marxist-atheist GDR state became co-organizer of Lutherjahr celebrations. During five of the seven days of celebration, Stapel and his group stood in the entryway of the courthouses in Leipzig, Dresden, Erfurt, and Halle and simply invited passersby to join their group. From these meager beginnings the gay movement in the church expanded to include groups in twenty-two East German cities. These groups worked closely together, holding quarterly meetings. But there were deep fault lines running beneath them: one along the axis of religion and the other along that of gender. Many of these women and men were not religious. A backlash among conservative elements in the church further sharpened the differences between religious and non-religious activists. The mostly male leadership had a tendency to focus on gay male issues thereby alienating lesbian women, though many remained active in the church groups. These two factors along with the

54 Abgrenzung, or “demarcation” refers to the SED’s goal of creating a “GDR national identity.” It was the ironic response to West German Chancellor Willi Brandt’s 1969 conciliatory Ostpolitik-inspired policy of Annäherung, or “coming closer.”
55 Eduard Stapel, interview with Kurt Starke (9 April 1994), Schwuler Osten, 98.
56 For an account of the backlash in the church see Günter Grau, Und diese Liebe auch: Theologische und sexualwissenschaftliche Einsichten zur Homosexualität (Berlin/GDR, Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1989).
increasing willingness of state institutions to incorporate lesbian and gay groups meant that by the mid 1980s, a parallel secular movement began to find shelter within the GDR’s imperfectly regimented public sphere.

A public discussion beginning in 1985 within the academic and medical establishments of the GDR prefigured the emergence of the movement from protection within the church to incorporation within state organizations.58 Certainly, homosexuality had been a topic for research in these circles prior to 1985. Internationally recognized endocrinologist Günter Dörner of the Humboldt University-Berlin conducted, perhaps, the most famous GDR research on the subject. In the 1970s, Dörner advanced the hypothesis that prenatal stress was a significant factor in causing male homosexuality. He advocated the use of prenatal manipulation to do away with homosexuality. The public discussion in 1985 began with an interdisciplinary conference on the “Psychosocial Aspects of Homosexuality” held at the Karl Marx University in Leipzig.59 Significantly, Dörner was not invited to the conference and his view of homosexuality as pathology was explicitly rejected.60 Instead the organizers invited Eduard Stapel, Ursula Sillge, Bert Thinius, and Günter Grau, among others, to present papers. This 1985 conference was a first. The participation of leaders from the gay movement marks the

58 Since the fall 1984 a discussion on the subject had taken place within the academic community of Humboldt University under the banner of the “Interdisciplinary Working Group on Homophilia (later ‘Homosexuality’).” In April 1985 this group of academics made a number of recommendations to the state regarding the situation of homosexual citizens of the GDR in a report entitled “Zur Situation homophiler Bürger in der DDR.” The report is reprinted in Sillge, Un-sichtbare Frauen, 149-165.
59 The conference was sponsored by The Marriage and Family Section of the Society for Social Hygiene of the GDR and the Andrology Section of the Society for Dermatology of the GDR. It was the first of three such conferences held in Leipzig (1985), Karl-Marx-Stadt (1988) and Jena (1990). For selected papers presented at the first two conferences see Günter Amendt, ed., Natürlich anders: zur Homosexualitätsdiskussion in der DDR (Cologne: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1989).
beginning of a shift within the medical and academic regimented publics from pathologizing homosexuality toward acknowledging the concerns and demands of lesbian and gay East Germans.

The papers given by politically active gays and lesbians at the conference presented these concerns and demands in Marxist and antifascist terms. Bert Thinius writes in the last few lines of his paper:

Communism, according to Marx and Engels, is a society “wherein the free development of every one is the prerequisite for the free development of all.” Our society cannot, in full measure, freely develop if it constrains the development of its individual members, homosexuals for example, and homosexuals cannot develop themselves more freely than other members of society.  

For Thinius, the writings of Marx and Engels justify the free development of homosexuals as individuals. Additionally, several of the papers link the fate of homosexuals under fascism with that of communists, social democrats, and Jews. For instance, Rainer Warczok writes:

Anticommunism, race baiting, and war mongering characterized fascist ideology. With the most strident terrorist methods, the Nazis pursued the representatives of all progressive parties and political organizations: communists, social democrats, and trade unionists in particular. For the achievement of their goals they declared the elimination of members of different minorities—like Jews, Gypsies, and homosexuals—as an integral part of their struggle.

To legitimate his (valid) characterization of Nazi ideology and goals, Warczok uses the politically powerful terminology of fascist ideology. The implication here is that to be fascist is to be antihomosexual and, conversely, to be antifascist is to be pro-homosexual.

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Moreover, he identifies the suffering of homosexuals under fascism with that of political dissidents—communists social democrats, and trade unionists—and racial minorities—Jews and Gypsies.

Because Marxism-Leninism was an ideology officially legitimated by science and education, the endorsement of the medical and academic communities carried great weight and opened more doors to a discussion of homosexuality in the GDR. When the informal circle around Ursula Sillge formed the Berlin Sonntags-Club in 1986, the movement expanded out from underneath the roof of the church. They petitioned the city of Berlin for official group status, which was forthcoming in 1987. The Sonntags-Club was now officially associated with the House of Culture in Berlin-Mitte. Similar groups followed suit across the GDR, many of them, like RosaLinde in Leipzig, were incorporated into the FDJ. Under the slogan, “We, as members of the SED, know how just it is to do gay rights (Schwulen) work,” six party members founded the group Arbeisgemeinschaft Homosexualität Courage, and claimed to speak for the “all the gays” of the GDR.63 Not surprisingly, this stance aroused suspicion, especially among the church groups, and controversy within a fracturing movement.

If the movement was fracturing along gender and religious lines, was ideology next? When it came to socialism (ideals and practice), where did members of the movement stand? A programmatic comparison between the two strains of the movement reveals, by almost all accounts, that the church groups were more political than the

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63 “Working Group Homosexual Courage”
secular groups. Did “more political” equal less Marxist? Even in November 1989, after state censorship had crumbled, the core group of (church and secular) activists published a statement saying:

As left wing lesbians and gays, as people who believe in the categorical imperative of Marx and who believe in “overthrowing all relationships in which the human being is an abased, enslaved, forsaken, or contemptible creature,” we want love and sexuality to be freed from surviving patriarchal constraints.

For these activists, lesbian and gay emancipation would be Marxist. They continued to hold these beliefs, even after the state collapsed. Perhaps “more political” meant opposed to state socialism? During the month after the Wende, academic and gay activist Günter Grau, who had been tapped as editor for the first book the East German Lutheran Church published on homosexuality in 1989, was asked how he envisioned the future for the GDR. He replied: “I don’t know the direction in which GDR society will develop, if it will become a socialist or capitalist society. Personally, I hope for a socialist one.”

Grau’s statement is particularly striking if we keep in mind that the movement—fraught as it was—always worked within the system. “More political” did mean a greater willingness to fight for autonomy within the system, and a willingness to recognize and attempt to reform the patriarchal implications of a welfare dictatorship. But it did not mean fundamental opposition to SED rule.

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67 Fürsorgediktatur, or “welfare dictatorship” is Konrad Jarausch’s attempt to capture the contradictory care and coercion exhibited by the SED-state apparatus. The term allows for recognizing the GDR “as part
If 1985 signals an initial step forward out of academic and medical closets, 1987 marks a full-fledged coming out into the GDR’s press and mass media. Between 1987 and 1989, as many lesbian and gay groups were finding homes within the apparatus of the state, a media blitz on the topic of homosexuality pierced the relative silence outside of academic, medical, and church environs. East Germans were informed that their fellow gay (male) citizens suffered from persecution and that tolerance and acceptance would be the order of the day. The first scientific monograph on the subject of homosexuality appeared in 1987 and would go through two editions with over 100,000 copies.68 A second book regarding the work of the church groups and the ensuing church controversy appeared in 1989.69 Over 200 articles about homosexuality appeared in almost every major daily newspaper, magazine, and journal. Gay activist Jürgen Lemke edited and published a collection of Protokolle, or “interviews,” with gay men entitled Ganz normal anders (“Quite Normally Different”) in 1989.70 The topic was treated several times in GDR television programming (including the program “Visite” in 1987 and again in 1988 and the youth program “Hautnah” in 1989). The popular youth radio program “DT 64” broadcast a Q&A session with gay and lesbian youth. In association

68 The book was published by Rainer Werner, a forensic psychologist at the Humboldt University in East Berlin, who from 1984 was also the original head of the “Interdisciplinary Working Group on Homophilia” at Humboldt. See Rainer Werner, Homosexualität. Herausforderung an Wissen und Toleranz (Berlin/GDR: Verlag für Volk und Gesundheit, 1987).
70 Lemke’s Protokolle, or interviews, were conducted in 1978, but he was not allowed to publish them in the East until March 1989. The English translation of Lemke’s book is titled Gay Voices from East Germany. Jürgen Lemke, Ganz normal anders. Auskünfte schwuler Männer (Berlin/GDR: Aufbau-Verlag, 1989).
with the Central Institute for Youth Research – Leipzig, DEFA produced a “sex education” documentary, *Die andere Liebe* (1989) featuring gay and lesbian youth.\(^7\) Carow’s widely popular film *Coming Out* marks the peak of this swell of public discussion.

A quick glance at a number of these products of the GDR’s mass media shows that the message of tolerance and acceptance was aimed at the youth in particular. Axel Otten and Helmut Kißling’s documentary *Die andere Liebe*, for instance, carried an educational message to the youth of the GDR. It asked its target audience (it even features an onscreen discussion with skeptical “straight” students) to put aside their prejudices and incorporate their gay and lesbian peers into socialist society with tolerance and acceptance. The documentary shifts between shots of dance floors filled with young gay and lesbian couples and interviews with gay and lesbian youth. One interview with a middle-aged man and his much younger boyfriend is featured prominently. Scenes of the two sitting together and describing their love and relationship are spliced with an interview with the younger man’s mother. She tells the story of how at first she feared that the older man had seduced her son and made him gay. But as she grew to understand their relationship, she realized that her son was simply gay and their relationship was based on love rather than seduction. Her acceptance stands as a symbolic challenge to the fear of *Verführung*. Without leaving a socialist framework, the documentary

\(^7\) The documentary’s title translated into English is “The Other Love.”
incorporated a message of tolerance and acceptance of gays and lesbians into socialist educational discourse and thereby went further than merely challenging the *Verführung* stereotype.\(^{72}\)

Despite the regimented publics' message of tolerance and acceptance, an official pronouncement of gay liberation from the Politburo was never forthcoming.\(^{73}\) In a private conversation with former First Secretary of the SED-Berlin and Politburo member Günter Schabowski, Eduard Stapel asked if the Politburo had ever discussed the topic of homosexuality. The answer was no; it had never come up.\(^{74}\) On the other hand, activist Klaus Laabs recalls a phrase that had been floating around Humboldt University in 1984 around the time of the first big wave of emigration: "We separate ourselves from all those who have a false relationship to our state, to work, and to the opposite sex."\(^{75}\) He had heard it from a minor bureaucrat but later found out that the quote had come from Politbüro member Hermann Axen, former Nazi concentration camp prisoner, committed antifascist, and architect of East German foreign policy from the late 1960s onward. More significantly, there is a host of mounting evidence that the Stasi infiltrated, intimidated, and tried to sow dissent among the various gay groups.\(^{76}\) Indeed,

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\(^{72}\) *Die andere Liebe*, dir. Axel Otten and Helmut Kißling, 45 min., DEFA, 1989, VHS-PAL.

\(^{73}\) In 1986 Ursula Sillge initiated an exchange of letters with the *SED-Bezirksleitung*. She addressed her letter to Günter Schabowski. Schabowski did not respond in person. The response came from the Director of the Department for State and Rights Questions. Sillge reports that, after this exchange, she and members of her group were able to meet irregularly with representatives of the department to express their demands. This exchange of letters is reprinted in Sillge, *Un-sichtbare Frauen*, 168-170.

\(^{74}\) Stapel, interview with Kurt Starke (9 April 1994), Schwuler Osten, 95.

\(^{75}\) Klaus Laabs, interview with Ulli Klaum (November 17, 1989), in Die DDR. Die Schwulen. Der Aufbruch, 120.

according to Stapel, at least nine people were paid to report on him while he lived in Magdeburg and Thuringia. Nevertheless, paranoid Stasi responses to unsanctioned political activity were not limited to the gay movement. Whether or not Stasi tactics against the gay movement were particularly invasive or brutal remains an open question for further archival research.

The judicial sector of the East German government did, however, weigh in on the question of gay and lesbian liberation. On August 11, 1987 the Supreme Court of the GDR passed judgment on a case involving the age of consent in Paragraph 151. The accused was a thirty-one year old man from Leipzig. He had met a seventeen year old at a gay bar. The younger man no longer lived at home, but needed a place to stay. The older man invited him to stay in his apartment. The younger man, who had been active in the gay subculture, initiated sexual contact. After it became known that they were sleeping together, the district court in Leipzig convicted the older man under Paragraph 151. But the conviction was short-lived. Not only did the Supreme Court overturn the conviction, it ruled the law unconstitutional and ordered the Volkskammer to solve the problem. On December 14, 1988 the East German parliament unanimously struck the offending paragraph without replacement from the criminal code. The irrational fear of Verführung had been eliminated from state law. Pairing this legal shift with the order issued in 1988 by the FDJ’s administration that all youth clubs were to incorporate lesbian and gay youth it seems safe to say that the state no longer required the protection of youth from homosexuality.

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77 Stapel, interview by Kurt Starke (9 April 1994), Schwuler Osten, 102.
78 The court case is recounted in detail in Starke, Schwuler Osten, 62.
The swell of discussion coming from the academic, medical, and mass media sectors of the GDR’s regimented public sphere, the expansion of the gay movement from church to state, and the ensuing elimination of the discriminatory Paragraph 151 suggest that in the late 1980s, certain sectors of the state began to reconsider the failed policy of “everyday” integration by dispersion. Despite becoming “more political” (i.e. demanding reform of the patriarchal system and recognition of gay groups) the movement continued to walk an arduous path between Schwulsein and socialism. After 1987, as the GDR’s imperfectly regimented public sphere moved toward embracing Schwulsein, and the gay movement continued its general loyalty to socialism, they began to find common ground. But this was no “third way” between socialism and capitalism. It was a political Schwulsein that had come out into and adapted to the distinctive socialism of the GDR.

2.4 Unintended Legacies: An Epilogue

1989 - Present

Even after 1989, the effects of the dynamic between the gay movement and SED-state continued to manifest themselves in surprising ways. The pictures of thousands of East Berliners dancing in front of the Brandenburg Gate and “tearing down that wall” seem to mark, if not the end of history, then certainly a demarcation in history books. That night one could almost believe that the “wind of change” could blow the past away
and make room for the "children of tomorrow to dream away." But 1989 was no second Stunde-null. The history of Paragraph 175—and the homophobia it codifies—shows that 1945 marks no zero hour for the homosexual question in Germany. Similarly, 1989 was not a zero-hour in the history of the East German gay movement. In February of that hopeful year between Wende and Reunification, Eduard Stapel and eighty-one members of the East German gay movement founded the Schwulenverband in der DDR with the intention of working for gay rights on a national level. After the elections held a month later in March, it became clear that the definition of "national level" was about to change.

The November 1989 Waldschlösschen conference in Göttingen between leaders of the East German and West German gay movements failed to produce a cohesive organization. Instead, the Schwulenverband in der DDR remained separate from the West German national-level Bundesverband Homosexualität (BVH). Most organizations from the east that had redundant functions were subsumed into their western analogs after reunification. The Schwulenverband proves an exception to this rule. With a name change to the Schwulenverband in Deutschland (and in 1999 adding Lesbend- und . . . ) the movement continues to thrive at a national level. In fact, with the dissolution of the BVH in 1997, it is now the only lesbian and gay organization working on the national level in Germany. Still advocating a program of "emancipation and integration," the

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79 These lyrics represent the hopeful response of the West German rock band "The Scorpions" to the fall of the Wall in their 1989 ballad, "Winds of Change." Scorpions, "Winds of Change" from Crazy World, Mercury Records, 1990, CD.
80 "Gay Alliance in the GDR"
81 Lesbend- und Schwulenverband in Deutschland - "Lesbian and Gay Alliance in Germany."
organization has added a third goal: "participation."\textsuperscript{82} It now functions in the deregulated public sphere of reunified Germany. The women and men who founded the SVD in February 1990 could never have intended or imagined that it would become the lesbian and gay organization of a unified Germany.

Similarly, the Supreme Court of the GDR could not have known that their 1987 decision to toss out Paragraph 151 and the legal inequality it represented would prove to be a major stumbling block in the path to legal reunification. This legal stumbling block would be the impetus to finally realize Magnus Hirschfeld's dream of legal equality (in regard to the criminal code) for "homosexuals" in Germany. Under the terms of the treaty that guided reunification, the GDR's legal protection of abortion and the gender-blind Paragraph 151 would continue to apply in the five new eastern Bundesländer. But eventually the laws had to be reconciled with the West German code. After spirited debate in the Bundestag, during which the PDS, the successor party to the SED, came out as one of the strongest advocates for lesbian and gay equality, the Western 1973 age-of-consent version of Paragraph 175 was abolished.\textsuperscript{83}

\textbf{2.5 Conclusion}

The historical and political development of the East German gay movement shows that the extraordinary discussion of homosexuality in the late 1980s GDR was

\textsuperscript{82} Stapel, interview with Kurt Starke (9 April 1994), \textit{Schwyzer Osten}, 104. \\
\textsuperscript{83} The FRG's June 1969 version of the version of Paragraph 175 set the age of consent for male homosexual acts to twenty-one. The West German movement won concessions in 1973, when the government reduced the age of consent for gay men to eighteen.
neither planned nor organized by the SED-state. Instead, the discussion represents the state’s imperfectly regimented public sphere’s reaction to impulses coming from the movement. East German political Schwulsein originated in the 1970s among informal circles of friends—“families of choice”—and turned into a movement as it spread to and from certain areas where norms and values are formed (i.e. sites of cultural production). Due to the relatively free atmosphere in the Lutheran Church following the state’s 1978 policy of rapprochement, the movement first found a within the Church, outside the realm of explicit state control. Then it engaged the academic and medical establishments, followed by the press and the mass media.

Focusing on perspective of the gay movement we can clearly see Thomas Lindenburger’s “vast realm of other forms of behavior such as compromise, bargaining, limited reciprocity, and shared interests between rulers and ruled.”\(^{64}\) The movement was made up of individuals who exhibited a vast array of needs, motivations, and behaviors so it was certainly not a monolithic entity. Nevertheless, despite friction and fraction within the movement, on the whole, it did not oppose state socialism and, indeed, tended to embrace Marxism. Taking this ideological position allowed for compromise and shared interests with state-socialism; it made the movement all the more palatable to a conflicted state apparatus. The movement experienced limited reciprocity with the state, particularly once the regimented publics began to embrace Schwulsein. By framing antihomophobia as antifascist, the movement demonstrated that it could adapt to the interests of an officially antifascist GDR. These forms of behavior characterized the

\(^{64}\) Thomas Lindenberger, “Creating State Socialist Governance: The Case of the Deutsche Volkspolizei,” 125.
movement's "dissent." They allowed for common ground with the state from which socialist society, rather than the fundamentals of socialist politics, could be reformed.

Neither can the position of the state be viewed as monolithic. In dealing with the gay movement it was deeply ambivalent. Shifts in the dictatorship's stance on homosexuality were not the result of planned social engineering as totalitarian models might suggest. They were the reactions of a conflicted state-socialism to the dissatisfaction of its gay and lesbian citizens and the resulting ferment of an activist movement. As a result of the movement's initiative, the mid-1980s witnessed shifts in the SED-state's policies (explicit or de facto) regarding its lesbian and gay citizens. As the abolition of Paragraph 151 demonstrates, the state began to shift from fears of Verführung—"protecting" the youth by excluding gay men—to advocating the "protection" gay men from the homophobia of GDR society. Furthermore, the integrative impulse of state-socialism began to shift from dispensionary integration (individuals into society) to inclusionary integration (groups into the state's regimented public sphere).

Analysis breaks down in the attempt to explain state motivations. Was it benevolence? Was it cooptation? Was it something darker? Simply put, there were no state motivations, rather there were multiple here divergent and there convergent motivations among those with the power to decide who would be and how they would be part of GDR society. The jagged path the state took in dealing with political Schwulsein between 1968 and 1990 suggests differentiated levels of interaction within the state apparatus. If the emergence of a gay movement was a non-issue in the Politburo, it was
certainly not for the Stasi. We must keep in mind, however, that the gay movement was a threat merely by virtue of being a movement, particularly since it came out of the state's primary institutional rival within GDR society—the Evangelical Church. If the Politburo reacted with silence and the Stasi with suspicion, the continued existence of a public sphere in the GDR, imperfectly regimented as it was by the state, ultimately allowed for the public expression of political Schwulsein.

The shift from the mid 1980s onward from near silence about Schwulsein to frequent, open, and overwhelmingly positive discussion resulted from the dynamic created by the movement's pliant activism directed toward the state's reactive ambivalence. Encountering silence from the Politburo and suspicion from the Stasi, activist gays and lesbians directed their political Schwulsein precisely at those intermediary sectors most concerned with creating and defining public opinion through cultural production—medicine, and academia, the press, and the mass media. The resulting public discussion ultimately aimed at reducing homophobia in GDR society by advocating the acceptance and tolerance of lesbians and gays. In the late 1980s the state's regimented public sphere began to ally itself with the interests of East German political Schwulsein and its critique of GDR society. The cultural products created by the discussion included, among others, academic reports, medical and scientific conference proceedings, a feature film, a documentary, and literature. It is to one such product of interaction that I turn in the next chapter. I ask how Heiner Carow's feature film Coming Out mirrors the dynamic I have outlined here, paying particular attention to
how the film was produced, who produced it, its intended audience, and its use of strategies to convince the East German audience that gay men should be tolerated and, indeed, accepted.
CHAPTER 3

THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN POLITICAL SCHWULSEIN AND STATE-SOCIALISM: HEINER CAROW’S COMING OUT AS A CASE STUDY

Where should minorities, including gays and lesbians, ... be fully acknowledged and secure in their way of life, if not in socialism?85

- Heiner Carow

In this chapter I examine one of the cinematic products of the unprecedented discussion of homosexuality in the GDR during the late 1980s: Heiner Carow’s feature film, Coming Out. Released in 1989, Carow’s film entered the discussion after the conversation between the gay movement and the SED-state had been playing out for a number of years. As an artifact of this conversation, Coming Out represents a cinematic response within the GDR’s imperfectly regimented public sphere driven not by SED policy, but rather by politically active gay (male) individuals who remained loyal to state-socialism but who, nonetheless, demanded social reform. The content and form of the film reveal a critique not from without, but from within East German socialism.

The state-run East German film corporation, Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft (DEFA), produced Coming Out. DEFA was the institutional structure within the GDR’s regimented cinematic public. The status of cinema in the GDR as a potential instrument

for influencing public opinion within broader programs for social change has been well
documented in the literature. The overall message that *Coming Out* expresses clearly
aims for social change. The film places on screen the calls for the tolerance and
acceptance of gay (male) individuals that had already been expressed within the broader
discussion of homosexuality.

Specifically, this case study responds to Dennis Sweet’s analysis of *Coming Out.*
From Sweet’s point of view, the film constructs a particular “gay (male) body for
socialism.” He contends that this construction “propagated by different interest groups,
served an inherently conservative agenda: bolstering socialism in its final years.” He
never clarifies, however, to whom he is referring as “different interest groups.” For
Sweet, the purpose for this gay body is clear: bolstering socialism and thereby the
“conservative agenda” of the state, and hence, it *was constructed so that “the GDR in its
last years could appear progressive toward an historically persecuted minority.”
However, these “different interest groups,” which I identify as politically active gays and
lesbians, the regimented public sphere, and the state apparatus, were simply not united in
one monolithic purpose. In contrast, I understand *Coming Out* as a cultural product of

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86 Lesbians are not prominently featured in *Coming Out.* In one particular scene at the gay bar, the only
“female” character, a drag king, drunkenly complains, “There just aren’t any women around here any
more!” Ironically, this complaint reflects the lack of lesbian representation in the GDR of the late 1980s.
87 See Denis M. Sweet, “Bodies for Germany, Bodies for Socialism: The German Democratic Republic
Devises a Gay (Male) Body,” in *Gender and Germainess: Cultural Productions of Nation,* ed. Patricia
Herminghouse and Magda Mueller (Providence: Berghahn, 1997). This article includes a cinematic
reading of *Coming Out.*
88 Denis M. Sweet, “Bodies for Germany, bodies for Socialism: The German Democratic Republic Devises
a Gay (Male) Body,” in *Gender and Germainess: Cultural Productions of Nation,* ed. Patricia
Herminghouse and Magda Mueller (Providence: Berghahn, 1997), 249.
89 Sweet, “Bodies for Germany, Bodies for Socialism,” 260.

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the conversation between these interest groups resulting not from "an inherently conservative agenda" but rather from the state response to the active participation of gay and lesbian East Germans and their allies.

3.1 *Coming Out*: The Antifascist Path from Teacher to *Schwul*

*Coming Out* can best be imagined as the product of a conversation between the political views and experiences of the artists who created it and the institutional structures of censorship that existed in the regimented public of GDR cinema. Though it never strays from socialist ideology, the film makes a powerful critique of GDR society from within the GDR’s officially antifascist framework. Moreover it carries a message of *Eigen-sinn*, in both content and form, that gay men can take charge of their own destiny, should they choose to. That message of self-determinism in the face of social alienation explains the popular and powerful attraction the film held for East German audiences who were also experiencing their own "coming out" from behind the Wall.

Carow’s tale of a young East Berlin high school teacher’s path toward realizing his homosexuality is neither particularly innovative in form nor grand in filmic ambition. The film stands out because it was the first in the GDR to deal with homosexuality. For its thematic ambition it won the Silver Bear Award at the (West) Berlin Film Festival in 1990.⁹⁰ At the beginning of the film, Philipp Klarmann (Matthias Freihof), an earnest and involved high school teacher, popular with his students, seems poised for success at

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⁹⁰ The Silver Bear is the highest cinematic honor given in (West) Germany.
work. He literally runs into a fellow teacher, Tanja (Dagmar Manzel), in a school hallway and a romance quickly blossoms. They move into Tanja’s apartment, although Philipp keeps his small efficiency with its breathtaking view of the East Berlin skyline. On the surface they appear happy, but when Tanja introduces Philipp to her friend Jacob (Axel Wandtke), he has a breakdown. Philipp and Jakob had had an affair when they were young school friends. Try as he may, Philipp simply cannot return to normalcy. He wanders into a gay bar where he meets a young man named Matthias (Dirk Kammer). Still masquerading as straight with Tanja, Philipp begins an affair with Matthias against the backdrop of the nightlights of the Alexanderplatz. When Tanja and Matthias find out about each other Philipp loses them both. Finding only meaningless sex in the cruising parks and further rejection by Matthias, Philipp is finally forced to confront his sexuality by a concerned older gay gentleman, Walter (Werner Dessel). At the end, with love life and professional reputation in shambles, Philipp has, nevertheless, confronted his demons and grown stronger.

Sweet suggests that Coming Out was “for East Germans flocking to the movie theaters in that key year, a film not so much about homosexuality, as about the courage to stand up and be counted for what one really was.”91 In doing so he underestimates the significance of homosexuality as the filmic subject. The metaphorical leap made by millions of straight East Germans from gay experiences to their own cannot be separated from how the film quite literally frames gay experience in East Germany. More importantly, how can we disregard the meaning this film certainly held for audience members, actors, and filmmakers alike who did not fit within the sexual walls of GDR

91 Sweet, “Bodies for Germany, Bodies for Socialism,” p. 250.
society? This analysis seeks to take the film’s subject—a gay man’s path from the straight world to the gay world—seriously, and to ask how the film treats this experience thematically and formally.

Yet by taking a DEFA film seriously, do we not run headlong into the thorny debates between the former SED regime’s opponents, its apologists, and everyone in between? Opponents of the regime posit a black and white world of totalitarian horror, monolithic party power, a nameless, faceless bureaucratic system, and absolute political control over cultural endeavors that produced propaganda geared solely towards furthering state goals. The central flaw that underlies this approach is its reductionism.

Sweet’s argument, while certainly not so black and white as the totalitarian world described above, falls dangerously close. He reduces Coming Out to a mere tool of state-socialism aimed at co-opting a potentially subversive element of society through pedantic calls for tolerance and gay integration into socialist society and at gaining political capital by appealing broadly to the Marxist mantra of “progress”.92

This narrow explanation fails on two noteworthy accounts. First, stumbling into the all too common trap of totalitarian theory, it takes the state’s claim to total control as the method rather than object of analysis.93 Second, in explaining away the film’s call for tolerance and acceptance of homosexuals as state-socialism’s attempt to gain political capital, it rests on the flawed assumption that GDR society was predisposed to associate progress with homophilia (an assumption further belied by the early association of

92 Sweet, “Bodies for Germany, Bodies for Socialism,” p. 253.
93 I agree here with Corey Ross. See Ross, The East German Dictatorship, 34.
anthomosexuality with antifascism in the GDR). Surely state bureaucrats and censors would have chosen a less controversial and politically safer film topic to help shore up the state's image.

Film culture in "real existing socialism" involved a much more complex process than Sweet's analysis might lead us to believe. When considering cinema in the GDR it is important to recognize certain key players in the creative process: the party, power structures within DEFA, the artists, and the filmic subject—each with its own power to shape the final product. In his history of East German cinema, Joshua Feinstein makes a compelling argument that recognizes the interaction among these key players and rests on film analyses that take seriously the content and form of a number of DEFA films. Theoretically, his argument rests on the premise that art and politics formed a close, reciprocal, and evolving relationship in the GDR. Based on this theoretical formulation of the relationship between culture and politics in the GDR, Feinstein employs a methodology that explores cinematic history by tying film analysis to the specific historical actions of political leaders, cultural bureaucrats, and artists that led to the production of the film. I take this theoretical standpoint on politics and culture in the

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95 I agree with Feinstein's characterization of the relationship between politics, society, the artist and art in East German cinema: "In any society, the autonomy of art is more valid as an ideal than as an adequate description of actual conditions. While the forms its dependency assumes were more obvious in the GDR than in other places, art was still accorded a unique importance within that society. Many filmmakers also took their calling as artists seriously. They struggled to find original solutions to conflicting political and artistic imperatives. Ironically, some of the most innovative East German artists, especially during the period of this study [1949-1989], were not those whose estrangement from the government was obvious, but rather those whose loyalty to the Party seemed absolute. See Feinstein, *The Triumph of the Ordinary*, p. 18.
GDR and follow a similar methodology in my analysis of *Coming Out*. I begin with a sketch of the film’s production history, focusing particularly on Carow’s role.

Heiner Carow was the driving institutional and creative force behind the picture. He is best known for directing *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (1973), arguably the most popularly successful DEFA film. With *Paul und Paula* we see Carow’s adept hand working to tap into the realism of everyday experiences and emotional honesty. We see this artistic sensibility again in *Coming Out*. This time the subject matter was, perhaps, nearer and dearer to Carow’s heart. Feinstein reminds us that “the picture would never have gotten off the ground save for the resourcefulness and courage of its director.”

Carow’s long and distinguished career at DEFA coupled with the popular success of *Paul and Paula* had given him a position of power within the cultural bureaucracy of the GDR. Illustrating the prestige Carow enjoyed, DEFA allowed him the resources to film *Coming Out* on Kodak film stock. Most DEFA films were filmed using lower quality East German stock. Still, the project faced serious objections from the studio, making it necessary for Carow to go outside typical DEFA channels and ask Politburo member Kurt Hager for his endorsement, which, in the late 1980s, was begrudgingly forthcoming.

Why would Carow go to such trouble to make a gay-themed film? He was a family man. Indeed, after a quick review of the film’s credits, it seems that *Coming Out* was a Carow family project: his wife, Evelyn as editor, his daughter Susanne in charge of

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96 However, my argument runs counter to Feinstein’s claim that *Coming Out* was “politically immediately obsolete” because it premiered with the fall of the Wall. See Feinstein, *The Triumph of the Ordinary*, p. 252.
costumes, and his son Stefan in charge of music. However, a digital article that accompanies the English language DVD release of the film identifies Carow as “a gay man himself.”99 Engaging in the politics of public “outing” one risks stumbling through the quagmire of self-definition or, alternatively, stepping out onto thin ethical and historical ice. Keeping such dangers in mind, it still seems safe to say that Carow had a complex sexuality. More importantly, he had strong ties to the gay community in East Berlin. In an interview with the magazine Zitty, Carow said he made the film for the GDR “because where should minorities, including gays and lesbians, ... be fully acknowledged and secure in their way of life, if not in socialism.”100 Taking an ideological stance similar to that of most politically active lesbian and gay East Germans, Carow believed gay emancipation would be best accomplished in a socialist framework.

Although he was the key figure, Carow was not the only artist behind the film’s creation. Dirk Kummer, who plays Matthias in the film and is openly gay, connected Carow directly to the gay community in East Berlin. Kummer studied film direction under Carow at the Technical Institute (Hochschule) for Film and Television of the GDR. In addition to playing one of the film’s protagonists he worked as the assistant director on the film. Kummer, clearly a well placed individual in the cinematic world of the GDR, expressed the following reformist sentiment in a 1989 interview with the newspaper Sonntag: “Whenever society reaches a certain state, as it has now, where the people can no longer bear their situation, the topic of coming out, however conceived, becomes

much more important.” Charlotte von Mahlsdorf (Lothar Berfelde), the East Berlin gay scene’s most famous personality, makes a cameo appearance as herself. Charlotte hosted some of the early efforts in the 1970s to organize a gay movement in the basement of her Gründerzeit museum. In Coming Out we find her tending bar. Carow filmed the bar scenes at authentic gay bars in the Prenzlauer Berg district of East Berlin. Indeed, most of the supporting cast members are gay (men) playing themselves. The voices of these gay men are surely not exhaustive and it would be a stretch to argue they are representative of all gay, and even less so lesbian, East Germans. However, the artists—illustrated by Carow, Kummer, and Charlotte—were deeply and intimately connected to both gay culture and gay politics. They stand poised at the nexus of their own gay experience, artistic sensibilities, and reform minded socialist politics. Accordingly, their work, Coming Out, mixes their particular experiences and politics with the demands of DEFA censors, and SED party leaders. What, then, were they trying to say?

Taking as our point of departure the film studies truism that the opening scene frames the rest of the film, we begin there. Fireworks light the night skies over Berlin—presumably New Year’s celebrations. A siren wails. An ambulance traverses the streets of East Berlin. Cut to a hospital emergency room. A medical team is busy pumping the stomach of a young man, Matthias. He had overdosed on pills. Cut to Matthias sobbing in a hospital bed. When the attending physician asks him why he did it, he responds, “Because I’m gay. I’m homosexual.”

102 In referencing dialogue from Coming Out, I use translations from the subtitles of the English language DVD except in this instance. The subtitle translates Matthias’ “Ich bin Schwul. Bin Homosexuelle” as “I’m queer. A homosexual.” I choose “gay” instead of “queer” for the sake of consistency.
Sweet reads this suicide attempt as “the emblem for homosexuals’ inherent suffering, brought about by their difference from the normal:” suicide signifies the “gay body for socialism” in Coming Out. But what if the opening sequence does not frame the rest of the film? The suicide theme is completely missing elsewhere on the screen. Even Sweet finds its absence “quite puzzling.” As a matter of fact, in every other scene we see a sensitive but quite well adjusted Mathias. At his birthday celebration, for instance, he is surrounded by a supportive family and has no trouble showing affection and kissing Philipp in their presence. Sweet’s reading works well for the opening sequence, but does not hold up when viewing the film as a whole. After all, “coming out” is not a moment, but rather a process.

Immediately following Matthias’ attempted suicide, the opening credit sequence begins to subvert the image of the gay male as an emblem of suicide. Cut to a stable camera shot of an intersection. The light is green. Cars stream into the intersection. The elevated train speeds powerfully across the screen. City life buzzes on the soundtrack. “COMING OUT” in bold white letters fills the screen. The sound and mise-en-scène of this scene evoke the power and motion of the train and cars, the bustling life of the city, and the steadfastness of perspective (the camera remains rooted in place) taking it all in. Framing the title and topic—the process of “coming out”—with power and steadfastness, these formal elements give lie to the weakness and instability of the suicide.

If the credit sequence does not destabilize the suicide theme enough, we cut to Philipp on his bicycle, self-propelled within busy traffic. This is no leisurely ride. He

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103 Sweet, “Bodies for Germany, Bodies for Socialism,” p. 253.
104 Sweet, “Bodies for Germany, Bodies for Socialism,” 251.
keeps pace in traffic moving with cars along the wide Karl Marx Allee framed in the background by the uniform and imposing buildings on the Alexanderplatz. For a while we (i.e. the camera perspective) are out in front looking backwards at him. Then cut to a tracking shot where we are right along side him. Finally he passes us and we are behind, though we maintain distance until the end of the scene. Forward motion. Progress. Matthias’ suicide attempt is all but forgotten. More significantly, the final scene of the film echoes this formal sequence of camera position. At the very end of the film Philipp leaves us behind, riding his bicycle off into the distance along infinite straight lines that might suggest infinite possibilities. The camera angle rises higher and higher as the end credits roll as if to try and follow his progress. Above all, these bookend scenes evoke Philipp’s power to shape his own destiny.

The details of Philipp’s transformation, of course, lie between the two powerful bicycle scenes. He faces a number of obstacles along his path out of the closet. A number of scenes confront him with a choice to remain in the closet or proceed with the process of coming out. Each one frames a certain message aimed at a particular audience. In every case the character delivering the message dominates the mise-en-scene. The camera position merges the perspectives of audience and the character being addressed. This formal construction reinforces the film’s didactic function. Clearly social reform is its goal.

In one such scene Philipp faces his first opportunity to have sex with a man. Philipp’s internalized cultural norms provide the challenge here. This is the first real love scene of the film; the love scenes between Philipp and Tanja show little or no actual
intimacy. Matthias sits on the bed waiting, but Philipp hesitates and finally tells him that he should not be there. Philipp asks, “Don’t you want a family? To have kids some day?” Cut to Matthias, who now fills the screen. Matthias says, “No, I don’t want any of that.” The camera shift combines the perspectives of Philipp and the audience, many of whom, no doubt, would have held concerns similar to those Philipp raises about sexual reproduction. More importantly, just as Philipp seems uncomfortable with his desire for Matthias, many members of the audience would have been uncomfortable watching a gay love scene. After all, it was the first ever shown in the GDR. There are two lessons for the East German audience in this scene: reproductive potential is not a necessary condition for sexual intimacy and gay erotica is on par with straight erotica and presents a valid configuration of (male) bodies.

Philipp faces a second challenge when his distraught mother begs him to reconsider coming out. She blames his homosexuality for ruining her life. He asks why he must justify himself. He asks her to accept his right to live as nature intended. As Philipp asks these questions his mother moves off screen. He fills the screen. The camera position merges his mother’s perspective with that of the audience. His demands for acceptance are addressed to mothers and families across the GDR. The lessons here are clear: being gay is “natural” and gay (male) individuals deserve acceptance within their biological families.

Philipp faces a third challenge at work. He is a high school teacher. He has to interact with “impressionable” youth. The profession of teacher is the most vulnerable to virulent stereotype of Verführung. As I not in the previous chapter, the gay-man-as-
pederast image was a persistent and ideologically significant stereotype in the GDR. In this second to last scene we surmise that evidence of Philipp’s sexuality has surfaced at work. Four of his colleagues, including the school principal, come in to observe him. He sits silently and stares out the window. The camera zooms out the window, as if to suggest his desire to escape. The silence in the room is palpable. “Kollege Klarmann!” yells the unnerved school principal. Philipp waits several silent seconds before he turns to face them. The camera position merges the perspectives of the audience with that of his four colleagues. He gets up looks right at the camera and says, “Yes.” He knows why they are there and answers their accusation in the affirmative. This is the last word we hear from Philipp, which makes it all the more powerful. Here the obvious lesson is that gay men deserve socioeconomic equality and workplace security. But the deeper lesson teaches that fears of Verführung are unfounded and, more importantly, provide heinous opportunities for damaging workplace discrimination; quite an ideologically salient message in the German workers and peasants’ state.

These lessons are all reinforced by the antifascism that legitimates Philipp’s coming out process. Carow draws a clear connection between the homophobic present of the GDR in the 1980s and the fascist German past. The connection is antifascist. Dislocating present homophobia into the fascist past using official GDR antifascist dogma allows Carow to attack homophobia in the GDR without challenging the homophobic record of the GDR.\textsuperscript{105} The message is clear: GDR society can only progress further away from its fascist past by discarding its homophobic present. It is significant

\textsuperscript{105} To say nothing of quasi-legal or unofficial discrimination against gay men in the GDR, the penal code of the GDR criminalized male homosexuality until 1968.
that Carow’s definition of sexual “progress” differs markedly from the one put forward by Politburo member Hermann Axen, for whom homosexuality was a “false relationship with the state.” 106 Both of these views locate danger to progress within a specific historical construction of the fascism of the Third Reich. For Axen, fascism was homosexual. For Carow, fascism was homophobic. Both correspond to different strains of thought that run through early German socialism and communism. Carow’s antifascist homophilia corresponds to the history of cooperation, networking, and mutual support between Hirschfeld’s *Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee* and German socialism. Axen’s antifascist homophobia resonates with virulent Communist attacks on homosexuals linking them with the Nazi movement’s supposed homoeroticism and the quasi-open homosexuality of many top SA leaders, Ernst Röhm in particular. Two competing and incompatible understandings of the relationship between antifascism and homosexuality existed in the GDR of the 1980s. Carow’s film foregrounds his own understanding of antifascism to counter the one held by Axen.

I focus on three instances when the film evokes the Nazi past. In each case Carow ties homophobia with German fascism. His redefinition extends antifascism to include antihomophobia. Two related scenes build an association of gay men with Jewish identity and the Holocaust. The soundtrack of the first of these scenes hints at this association; early in the film, before Philipp begins to confront his sexuality, he and his students dance to a melody that is marked as Jewish. After his first experience in a gay bar, Philipp again encounters Jewish culture. In this second scene, he and Tanja attend a

concert. Lutz (Robert Hummel), Philipp’s gay student, sings a “Lied aus dem Ghetto,” or song from the Ghetto. The intimate camera alternation between Philipp and Lutz reinforces their connection as gay men while the soundtrack evokes the Ghetto experience. Jewish experience in the Ghetto stands metaphorically for gay experience in the GDR. The moral and political capital of antiracist-antifascism is extended to legitimate antihomophobia.

A second instance evokes the Nazi past via a neo-Nazi present. Philipp and his students are returning home from a concert. In their train car three men begin to beat a black man. With shaved heads, torn clothing, and black leather jackets, the mise-en-scène marks the men as neo-Nazi skinheads. Philipp takes the initiative and tries to stop the beating. The other passengers join Philipp and push the skinheads out at the next stop. As the train slows, the camera rests triumphantly on the station sign: Marx-Engels Platz. The group of passengers walks away from the train station. Philipp nurses a bloody nose from the fight. A woman who had visibly been attracted to him during the concert tries to comfort him. But Lutz shoves her out of the way and puts his arm around Philipp, again a connection between these two gay men. This scene juxtaposes three elements: brutally racist neo-Nazi skinheads, their defeat at Marx-Engels Platz station, and the connection between gay men. Similar to the previous example, these elements suggest a redefined antifascism as antihomophobic based on the moral and political capital of Marxism and antiracism.

The third and most powerful elicitation of the Nazi past arrives in Coming Out’s climactic scene. But this scene is too dense to limit to one reading. Instead, after
describing the scene, I unpack it to illustrate the conclusions I wish to draw from this film reading. This scene occurs during the film’s final ten minutes. Following the loss of both Matthias and Tanja, the confrontation with his mother, and his disenchantment with random sex, Philipp returns to the gay bar. Lonely, depressed, and terrified, he flits around the bar in an embarrassing frenzy. The older gay gentleman, Walter, who had been kind to Philipp before, tries to calm him down. Philipp takes offence and knocks him down calling him a “dirty old man.” The host threatens to throw Philipp out but Walter intervenes and forces him to confront his demons head on.

A sobbing Philipp admits to Walter that he is terrified because he is a high school teacher who is gay: “Don’t you know what that means? A gay high school teacher,” sob Philipp. Walter nonchalantly counters, “It could be worse.” He looks directly into the camera and begins to tell his story, gulping down shots of brandy so he can. Walter had met Karl, the love of his life, while serving in the Wehrmacht during the Second World War. But their comrades found out, dragged them from their tent, and turned them into the Gestapo. Walter spent the rest of the war wearing the pink triangle in Sachsenhausen and never saw Karl again. After the war he joined the Communist Party because “the comrades saved [him],” and he was an activist “from the first hour.” Now speaking as a member of the party he states, “We worked like crazy. We stopped mankind’s exploitation by mankind, now it does not matter if the person you work with is a Jew or whatever. Except gays. They were forgotten somehow.” He leaves a pensive Philipp sitting at the table.
This scene binds antifascism most clearly with antihomophobia. Carow references the Nazi persecution of gay men during the Third Reich directly. The message: discrimination against gay men in the GDR present of the 1980s is a carryover from the Nazi past. The scene also contains a critique of the *Verführung* stereotype. Philip finally vocalizes an overwhelming fear of being both gay and a high school teacher in the GDR and, tellingly, projects this fear of the “dirty old man” onto the kind and clearly undeserving Walter. The earlier portrayal of Philipp as a competent and caring teacher reinforces the injustice of his terror.

Again we see here a familiar didactic formal construction. Walter fills the screen as he delivers his impassioned speech. From behind the camera the audience’s perspective merges with Philipp’s. This time however, Walter is not to be speaking to a general East German audience. The message he delivers targets gay (and perhaps lesbian) individuals directly. At the same time that it challenges Philipp to embrace his homosexuality, Walter’s message encourages gay and lesbian East Germans to come out. His admonition to “stop crying” and quip that “it could be worse” signal the challenge: gay men have the power to shape their own destiny if they will take it.

There are many critiques of GDR society both explicit in content and implicit in form that find voice or pass across the screen in *Coming Out*. But it is in this scene that we find the one explicit critique of the state, or at least of the Communist Party. “Except for the gays. They were forgotten somehow.”¹⁰⁷ Forgotten by whom? Vague grammatical construction allows for a subtle and implicit criticism that the SED-state had forgotten its gay citizens. But Walter is, naturally, a good communist. He was a party

¹⁰⁷ The original German (in dialect) is “Los die Schwulen. Die haben den vergessen.”

57
activist from the first day after the War. Only from this position can such a critique be
safely made. The soundtrack shifts markedly in style as Walter’s speech builds to this
final criticism. Instead of the lilting folksy melodies or lighthearted dance beats that
pervade most of the film, we hear the crunching distortion of rock-n-roll. Musical
eagerness reinforces Walter’s critique of the Party. Walter, like the East German gay
movement, criticizes the state from a position of loyalty to the Party and official
ideology.

Having accompanied Philipp on his antifascist journey from teacher to Schwul, the
puzzle from which we took our departure remains: how does the opening sequence of
Matthias’ suicide attempt fit the rest of the film? Both Philipp and Matthias begin as
young men on the boundary between youth and (re)productive membership in socialist
society. In this sense, Coming Out begins where the typical nineteenth century German
Bildungsroman, the story of a young man’s journey from the idealism of youth to the
social (re)productivity of adulthood, would end. But instead of embracing their socially
proscribed roles, as the protagonist of the Bildungsroman would, both Matthias and
Philipp reject them. The ensuing crises for each of them are different and differently
resolved.

Matthias’ desperate suicide attempt represents the ultimate rejection of both his
own needs and the role society had proscribed for him. Stomach pumps, tubes,
comforting nurses, and tears accompany the images of Matthias in the hospital scene.
Quite painfully and with much effort and help, the pills with which he had intended to
end his life come out of his body; stomach-pumping images combine to form a striking
visual metaphor for “coming out.” At the end of the sequence, when Matthias explicitly comes out to the attending doctor he resolves the conflict between his own needs and society’s. In order to live he must choose his own needs. Matthias’ ordeal anticipates the pain, effort, and support that Philipp experiences as he comes out and posits coming out as necessary for life.

The juxtaposition of Matthias’ ordeal in the first sequence and Philipp’s in the rest of the film is reinforced by two street intersection scenes, one immediately following the suicide attempt (the opening credits scene previously described), and the other preceding Philipp’s final bicycle ride. The camera position and shot composition are almost completely identical in both. In both scenes, the elevated train speeds across from right to left and cars stream into the intersection. The formal linkage of the intersection scenes emphasize the metaphorical link between the opening and closing sequences: Philipp’s final bicycle ride stands for the resolution of his inner conflict, just as Matthias’ coming out to the doctor stands for his resolution. Like Matthias, Philipp rejects his socially constructed (re)productive role in favor of his own needs and desires, a strong yet implicit critique of the requirements of any society that favors rigid social roles over individual self determination.
3.2 Conclusion

Ostensibly, *Coming Out* is a didactic call for reform of GDR society. While never explicitly straying from a socialist framework, the film manages to critique homophobia on terms unique to the historical and ideological path of the GDR: It frames antifascism as antihomophobia. And it gives lie to the socialist stereotype that gay men are harmful to the education and development of the youth, the promise of utopia. It does not posit merely one suicidal "gay body for socialism" to be pitied and saved through socialist tolerance and acceptance. Rather, the film also locates a powerful sense of personal agency in the characters of Matthias and especially Philipp. These messages, explicit in content and implicit in form, were shaped by a specific process of interaction within the GDR’s imperfectly regimented public sphere among DEFA, Party leaders, artists, and topic. The SED state was not the originator of this call for reform. Its censorship certainly shaped the messages, but *Coming Out* is ultimately the product of a conversation between the DEFA censors, the Party, and the gay politics and experiences of the artists who made it. As a reformist attempt to shape public opinion in the GDR on the topic of homosexuality, it was directed at GDR society. As a film that implicitly questions the realities, though not the basis of socialist rule, it challenged at the state.
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

In response to the disaffection of lesbian and gay East Germans, the SED-state had a history of imperfect regulation and ambivalence at best, and all too often, blatant homophobia. The topic of homosexuality was long a stark taboo. This pattern continued until the mid-1980s when the medical and academic establishments began to respond to the demands and concerns of a nascent gay movement, which had emerged a few years earlier "under the roof of the church." Significantly, members of the gay movement were invited to participate in a series of interdisciplinary conferences beginning in 1985. From this beginning, an unprecedented public discussion of the once taboo topic ensued, eventually expanding into all forms of print and visual media. The movement imitated this discussion from below the state and outside of society. The fact that it happened illustrates one instance in which the East German dictatorship could not perfectly regiment its official public sphere.

Denis Sweet suggests that the East German state was the source of the discussion: "As an attempt to outmaneuver the church groups and raise political capital, the East German state by the last years of its existence in the late eighties embarked on a program
of tolerance and integration of homosexuals into socialist society.” The claim that this message originated with the state is, however, quite problematic. On the issue of homosexuality, the Politburo remained silent until the end. The Stasi certainly exhibited unfriendly and, at times, hostile intentions toward gays and lesbians, particularly those who were politically active. Indeed, as late as July 1989, when the first “state-recognized” secular group, the Sonntags-Club, planned a discussion of “marginalized groups in socialism” at the Berliner Construction Worker Youth Club, “two inconspicuous men”—clearly Stasi agents—appeared and informed the club director that the topic was not wanted. The director immediately called the event off.109

Even assuming, as Sweet does, that we can treat the state as a single undifferentiated actor (an analytical assumption this thesis argues against), the motivations he assigns to it, if they hold at all, indicate that the state was reactive rather than proactive. He identifies three state motivations: preempting the church groups, integrating homosexuals into socialist society, and raising political capital. The fact that the gay movement originated within the state’s primary institutional rival, the Lutheran Church, provides political motive for the state to respond to the movement. Yet if the church groups had not existed in the first place, there would have been little need for the state to address the topic at all. Moreover, the 1978 state policy on integrating homosexuals into the socialist project indicates that some form of integration was in the


109 Sillge, Un-Sichtbare Frauen, 82.
state's interest. But this policy aimed at integration by individual dispersion into society—without recognition. Marxist categories blinded the SED-state to the unique concerns of lesbian and gay East Germans. Class, after all, rather than sexuality, was the distinguishing social category in a Marxist framework. In contrast, the calls for acceptance and tolerance of homosexuals in the late 1980s advocated integration based not on alienation but rather on recognition of sexuality both as a social category and as a source of unique concerns. Furthermore, the claim that a programmatic call for the tolerance and acceptance of a controversial and socially marginal group could have increased the political capital of the SED-state is logically suspect. Given that the GDR was not immune from widespread homophobia, such a program would have added little to the state’s political capital and, rather, would likely have decreased it.

The explanation for the surprising shift from taboo to openness thus lies in the manner that politically active lesbian and gay East Germans engaged their state. These people, in groups or as individuals, engaged certain sectors of the GDR’s officially regimented form of public sphere. As a whole, the gay movement neither strayed from Marxist ideology nor questioned state-socialism. The regimented publics reacted and began to take up the cause of acceptance and tolerance. This response was a far cry from the state’s only official position—a policy of homosexual integration by individual dispersion into society.

Among the cultural products of the discussion is Heiner Carow’s feature film, *Coming Out*. The film was not the product of a programmatic social engineering on the part of the SED-state, rather it resulted from the active engagement of gay men and their
allies, most notably Carow, with the regimented cinematic public. Carow had to placate Kurt Hager in the Politburo and the bureaucracy at DEFA. But he also incorporated the experiences, spaces, and bodies of real East German gay men into his film. By means of his power and position, he was able to create a film that carried a surprisingly political message of Schwülsein aimed at changing the sexual norms and values of East German society. The spaces, characters, and messages that populate the filmic world of Coming Out are reflection of the dialogue between state socialism and a political Schwülsein that emerged in the GDR during its final years.

The discussion of homosexuality in general and Coming Out in particular show that despite its pretensions toward total control, the East German dictatorship could influence but not perfectly regiment the messages that emerged from the GDR’s public sphere. Despite censorship and the lack of support in the Politburo, the activism for and by an unpopular minority was able to inspire discussion in the regimented public sphere. More broadly, the example of political Schwülsein in the 1980s suggests that the process of public opinion formation in the GDR cannot be reduced to a formula of state input and social output.
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