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East Germany's Angela Davis

The last few years have revolutionized how people perceive, approach, and consider the structures of American society. Most recently, the national discussion has been focused on what should be done to help create an equitable society for all in a country which many see as marred by a history of systemic racism. Amid a pandemic unlike any other in over 100 years, the United States has been experiencing a socio-political upheaval as the world watches on. As these events unfold, it is perhaps helpful to look to the past in a more global context to better understand the situation. Namely, before the Black Lives Matter movement became a world-wide phenomenon, the Black Panther movement was advocating for justice on the global stage. Of the many figures of that movement, one stands out among the rest. It is through her activism and work that the world began to better understand the struggles of black Americans at the time—a cause she continues to champion. However, no matter how well-intentioned one's actions might be, there are always those willing to capitalize on the work of a bright, brave, and compelling activist. After all, the United States is not the first country to attempt to confront a deeply racialized history. This paper will reveal how Angela Davis became the fascination of East Germany during the early 1970s and how the young soviet state then utilized her image to help further its own political agenda.

The years following WWII saw the formation of two separate German states. The Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) quickly became an internationally recognized federal republic while receiving substantial financial and political backing from its western occupiers, such as the United States, following WWII. In stark contrast to the FRG, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) of the east formed in 1949 after years of political in-fighting following its Soviet

occupation (Naimark 11). As a result of this juxtaposition, both countries initially refused to legitimize the other, and the two would stand at the center of the international social, political, economic, and cultural rift known as the Cold War. From its inception, East Germany conceived its mission to be a society free from any such fascist, imperialist, or nationalistic entanglements (Naimark 2). The public discourse within the state reveals a society deeply concerned with educating its citizens in opposition to traditional Western notions of nation building and foreign entanglements. The GDR saw West Germany as a direct continuation of Germany's fascist past, while West Germany saw the GDR as no more than an extension of its Soviet patronage. This is evidenced by a long sustained public opposition to the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War, which drew strong criticism the world over. Conversely, the West German state lacked such concentrated opposition to its fascist past in the form of public discourse or state reorganization, as many leaders in public life who were influential in the Nazi regime remained in positions of power without recourse (Waldschmidt-Nelson 80). This would become the focal point of much social distress in the years to come. However, one criticism of the GDR from the West was largely accurate. Even in the eyes of its own population, the East German was largely an inorganic formation.

Despite its open discourse regarding race, class, and solidarity, no truly dynamic public figure had ever appeared from within the East German regime to give life to a social movement underscoring such rhetoric. In many ways, the movement towards collective ideals in East Germany was not an inborn movement, but rather the result of its top-down regime change organized around the ideals of a socialist state after its occupation by Soviet forces (Naimark 9). As a satellite state of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the regime in place struggled to garner more than a passive acceptance of its legitimacy from its people (Naimark 1).

Leading into the 1970s, neither the West nor many so-called third world countries were willing to recognize the independence of the East German government. The world was slow to be convinced of an independently operating East German state. To some it appeared that the GDR had faltered in shifting its purported ideals into a successful socio-political revolution. Therefore, by the late 1960s, as the founders of the state began to age along with it, the ruling elite of East Germany were in desperate need of a uniting symbol that might help it increase the state's legitimacy both domestically and abroad.

Regardless of the reticence of the international community to accept the GDR, its government was stable throughout its existence. However, the dominant political party for the duration of its 40-year existence did little to incorporate its public in the administration or delegation of its policies (Naimark 11). After the war, the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED) was confronted with the task of interpreting the past, framing the young country's future, and establishing an identity for the people who would become East German. For many years, scholars and citizens alike questioned what exactly it meant to be East German. While there certainly was an identity that developed from the governance, values, and education of the East German regime in its more than four decades of existence, the truth remained that the administrative cycle that was implemented with the founding of the SED effectively signaled the end of democracy in Eastern Germany in 1949 (Naimark 11). In short, public participation in governance was low. Nevertheless, the East German government was stable and capable of setting its agenda and making efforts to educate and influence its public.

One central feature that united most of the East German socio-political identity was an opposition to the notion of the nation state as a basis of identity and a strong awareness of the traumas inflicted by the recent wars (Naimark 3). In many ways, the GDR transposed the

traumas of National Socialism and projected them onto social issues throughout the world, perhaps in an attempt to reinforce the state's insistence of being free from its recent fascist past. However, as the founding leaders of the state grew older, it became apparent that something must be done to invigorate its public, in particular its youth, to help solidify their part in creating generations committed to its antifascist ideals (Bieber Klocke 4). By the end of the 1960s, the world was experiencing the ramifications of the ongoing Cold War, the active war in Vietnam, and in the United States, the continuation of social unrest regarding the status and treatment of Black Americans. The GDR, a state purportedly predicated on the values of global order free of the racist imperialism created by the West, was in need of a salient symbol that could reiterate the ideals of the state, while engaging a more global audience than they had reached thus far.

In many ways, Angela Y. Davis was exactly what the GDR needed. Davis was a bright, politically sympathetic, congenial, black American who spoke of the "Other America" in a way nobody else could, and following her imprisonment in the early 1970s, much of the world would come to know her as a considerable force in opposition to the status quo in the United States. The East German leaders quickly locked in on her messaging as well as her image. After all, if Davis was enough of a threat to be incarcerated, she was no longer just a political dissident but a living example of the systemic racism present in America. From this realization grew what would become years' worth of effort on the behalf of the GDR to herald Davis as an ideal for its public. Through Davis and the use of her image, East Germany hoped to engage its young citizens while garnering more legitimacy on the world stage.

Though it is difficult to discern to what extent the GDR's media immediately incited larger public interest, the use of Davis as a figure in the media throughout the coming years began to reveal a clearer picture of the state's motives to make her a symbol used to educate its

youth. Eventually, the state began appropriating images of Davis as a symbol of a carefully crafted political message and the record of such policies, changes in law, and general focus of the state can be traced to reveal a concerted effort to use Davis as a conduit of the GDR's political rectitude. The first campaigns on behalf of Davis were organized by student groups such as the Free German Youth (Freie Deutsche Jugend) while Davis sat in prison in 1970 (Lorenz 39). College-aged East Germans had long been vigorously opposing what they say as injustices of the West, such as the Vietnam War. However, the first movement specifically focused on Davis in East Germany was referred to as *Ein Million Rosen fuer Angela Davis* (One Million Roses for Angela Davis), which sent volumes of cards decorated with flowers to San Rafael prison in hopes of aiding in her release and to demonstrate their solidarity (Bieber 56). Davis is recorded referring to these cards in interviews, stating that she not only read them, but saw them as a means of inspiration (Lorenz 56). This seemingly mutual reciprocity of ideals and support between Davis and the East German students who participated is easy to appreciate when considering they held a common world-view. However, this affectionate exchange was the catalyst that allowed the state to capitalize on the movement and to make use of Davis' words, image, and activism. As evidence of this massive shift in focus, the East German media alone produced more than 1,750 newspaper articles about Davis between 1969-1973 (Wierling 207). By 1972, what would become known as, "Angelamania" was at a fever pitch.

Born in Alabama, educated in both East and West Germany, and briefly a professor at UCLA, Angela Davis became a prominent voice associated with the radical militant movement known as the Black Panthers. After a courtroom shootout in 1970 that used guns registered to Davis, she was charged and placed in prison for her alleged involvement. To many, the charges were trumped-up solely to incarcerate Davis, who publicly spoke with conviction about her

views on systemic racism within the United States. By the time Davis was put in jail, she had already been removed from her post at UCLA for her political views during Ronald Reagan's time as governor in 1969. Davis' imprisonment sparked an international outcry, particularly in the U.S.S.R., which transformed into a string of solidarity campaigns throughout the world. However, the movement in support of Davis arguably reached its peak within East Germany (Lorenz 1). Her stance against the United States' systemic oppression of people of color, an inequitable justice system, and structural violence often aimed at minorities deeply resonated with the purported ideological sentiments of the East German state. Davis stood to become a powerful validation of the GDR's conceptualization that countries such as the United States and West Germany continued to impose imperialistic policies predicated on racist governance and systems of inequality. To many in the GDR, Davis was the prime example of the transnational proletariat they sought to create, one which stood a good chance of politically invigorating the state's public around a comrade-in-common. However, Davis' ideological preferences were not perfectly in line with those held by the SED in East Germany.

Both Davis and the SED shared strong Marxist beliefs and framed the oppression of African Americans in the United States as a symptom of an international class struggle. The GDR's SED purported itself to be a Marxist-Lenin party of a new sort (Naimark 11). Davis had joined the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) soon after receiving her PhD in philosophy in East Germany at Humboldt University in Berlin. In the eyes of the regime, Davis stood to become a charismatic, articulate, and legitimizing force who crossed racial, social, national, and cultural boundaries. She helped prove that efforts against imperialism were not occurring within an ideological vacuum and often made her ideological predilections known in

powerful speeches such as the one she gave at the embassy auditorium in Los Angeles, California.

My life, and the lives of my family, my mother, my comrades, my friends, has really been drastically transformed over the last two years. For what happened was that as our movement – and particularly our movement right here in Los Angeles, our movement to free political prisoners, our movement to free all oppressed people – as that movement began to grow and become stronger and develop in breadth, it just so happened that I was the one who – one of the ones who was singled out by the government's finger of repression. It just so happened that I was destined to become yet another symbol of what the government intends to do – what the government in this state would do to every person who refuses to be its passive, submissive subjects. *[applause]*

But then, but then came the surge of a massive popular resistance, then came thousands and thousands and hundreds of thousands of people who were rising up to save me as we had tried to rise up and save the Soledad Brothers and other political prisoners. And what happened was that the government's plan, the government's project of repression fell apart; it backfired. The government could not, through me, terrorize people who would openly demonstrate their opposition to racism, to war, to poverty, to repression.

-Angela Y. Davis, 1972

This speech given shortly after her release from prison in California shows someone deeply dedicated, cognizant, and determined to her work as a public figure and activist leading the way for others both within or outside the United States. Regarding the efforts of the East German media, with their college-aged students already heavily involved, the task then simply became one of careful framing.

Shifting and holding the focus on Davis became the primary goal of the state. Davis provided a chance to create a more salient, edgy figure - an ideal embodiment of the GDR's socialist aspirations. With the rise of Erich Honecker as a political figure, there seemed to be a resurgence of hope that the state could convince the coming generation to accept the continuation of the socialist rule (Lorenz 40). While the admiration and solidarity many East Germans felt towards Davis was real, their perceptions of her soon became the product of an orchestrated effort by the state media. In the eyes of the East German state, Davis' image could be molded into a symbol against imperialism while also attempting to whitewash the pernicious residue of national socialism. Erich Honecker himself demonstrated this soon after becoming the leader of the SED in 1971 by personally congratulating Davis upon her release and insinuating that her release was inherently related to the international movement carried out on her behalf (Waldschmidt-Nelson 85). However, Davis' peak in popularity within the socialist state media was arguably decided upon before her release from prison. Writers of the GDR such as Max Roach had taken it upon themselves to help develop an image of the imprisoned Davis through works of children's literature. However, Roach's play would not only signal a spike in Davis' popularity in the East, but also marks the beginning of Davis' development as an image to be used at the discretion of the censored state media.

Many works in the East German state were censored, not excluding ones regarding Davis. However, writers quickly realized that Davis was a topic likely to make it to publication. Perhaps the most widely circulated publication about Davis' imprisonment was a radio play aired on public stations throughout the GDR. It began with the preface: *für Jugendliche Hörer und für Pädagogen* (for young listeners and educators). Soon thereafter, Max Roach's *Der Weg nach San Rafael: Für Angela Davis* (The Way to San Rafael: For Angela Davis) was transcribed, distributed, and read in classrooms throughout the GDR (Bieber 59). This hybrid work of fact and fiction took what was first a university movement and then directed it towards an even younger audience. Such tactics to educate and influence the youth of East Germany were seen as an appropriate means to educate children about the moral superiority of the state (Bieber and Klocke 5). Davis was simply the newest figure to be reconfigured. The focus on influence, rather than informing, can be seen in how Roach's play largely decentralized Davis in the narrative and presents her as a victim to the systemic oppression within the United States. While this does anecdotally demonstrate issues within the American system, the character of Davis in the play was not the same competent, strong woman the world knew. Instead, Roach appropriated an awareness of Davis that, while ideologically consistent, misrepresented her as a person and reduced her to a unidimensional category as the oppressed. In an attempt to expose the innate racism in the U.S. system, representations of Davis would lose their connection to the very person supposedly at the center of the movement. In Roach's effort to demonstrate the structural violence of the imperialist United States aimed at people like Davis, his state-approved message distorted Davis as a figure and decentralized her own activism from a representation of her personhood. However, such hybridity of fact and fiction in East German literature is clearly employed through Davis' popularity to inform and educate its youth. Eventually, Davis would

become a symbol for the GDR, which used a heavily appropriated awareness of her image to forward its own agenda.

While educating students of the GDR's moral and political ideals had long been the objective of governmental offices such as the Künstlerische Arbeitsgruppe (KAG) since the early 1950s, no figure had yet proved as invigorating as Davis. This new excitement was especially potent during her initial fame within East Germany and is reflected in the government policies of the time. As mentioned, censorship either done by the author themselves, or by the state, was common (Bieber and Klocke 5). However, there was a marked shift in the GDR's approach to youth literature around the time of Davis' popularity (Bieber 57). In contrast to the original legal definition of what constituted youth literature established in the early 1950s, which was material targeted at those between the ages of 14 and 18, the state chose to expand the age gap in 1974. Youth Literature now had a much more politically active audience as the state chose to include everyone from 14 to 25 as young readers (Bieber and Klocke 6). This change in state policy conceivably shows a concerted effort to broaden their scope of influence on the youth of the GDR during their engagement with Davis as a social, political, and now literary figure. This is a direct reflection of the state's understanding of her power as a figure. It also demonstrates just how important they felt Davis must have been for the social-psyche of the state. The same children listening to Max Roache's radio play about Davis would now be part of the youth literature audience for more than a decade to come. By expanding the official definition of youth literature, the state could now more directly target and censor material for a larger and often politically active audience. With such uni-dimensional representations of Davis within the media at the time, it comes as no surprise that Davis' association with militant activism was largely downplayed within East Germany's use of her as a public figure.

Within the East German media, Davis was presented as the ideal revolutionary thinker who was free from militant tendencies. However, during the same period West Germany was struggling to quell a number of student movements as, "...many young Germans were appalled by what they perceived as their government's lenient policies towards some former high-ranking Nazis" (Waldschmidt-Nelson 80). Following the assassination of Rudi Dutschke and the killing of student activist Benno Ohnesorg, a group known as the Red Army Faction (RAF) began to enact plots of domestic terrorism within West Germany. Eventually, the group would take to hiding within East Germany and began espousing their perceived ideological connections to the Black Panther movement. Much like East Germany, the RAF saw the source of all discord in German society as emanating from the imperialist United States and the policies it enacted. For a time, the RAF even adopted the iconic panther into its logo (Waldschmidt-Nelson 89). However, the Panthers soon sought to distance themselves from the terror-oriented RAF. In contrast, leaders of the Black Panthers such as Davis were never shown calling for acts of violence as a means to an end within the East German media, though these tendencies were part of the U.S. portrayal of Davis. However, no one portrayal of Davis was perhaps quite as influential as when she herself spoke directly to East Germans.

While numerous other publications appeared during the time of Davis' imprisonment, perhaps the most salient display of East German solidarity came shortly after her release. Alongside other prominent thinkers of the CPUSA, Davis was received with much enthusiasm by the political elites of East Germany. During her visit in 1972 Davis was awarded an honorary degree from Leipzig University and gave a speech entitled, "Not my Only Victory" wherein she decried the social injustices perpetrated by the United States. Through her speeches, Davis reinforced a number of strongly held beliefs for those in East Germany, among them was the

idea of the *Other America*. This term popular within the rhetoric surrounding black activism at the time and was used to juxtapose the disadvantaged social cleavages of the U.S. in contrast to the ruling capitalist class. During a later visit to the GDR in 1973, Davis was quoted saying, “From all our meetings with young people and students, we are convinced here the younger generation has grown up free from racial prejudices and fascist ideas” (Lorenz 56). While this very well could have been the perception of Davis and her envoy, it cannot be ignored that the rhetoric echoes the very core directives of the East German state. Moreover, the scholarship surrounding representations of Davis within the media of the GDR clearly indicates a concerted effort to use her image to further the political agenda of the government. The trend would become so pervasive that Davis’ image no longer represented her as a person, but as an embodiment of the state’s ideological message.

The use of Davis as an authority on the dubious nature of the United States in the East German media is evident in its attempts to influence young children when using her image. Not only did the East German media widen the definition of youth literature to use Davis as a means of education, but they would continue to use her image in media aimed at young children (Bieber 57). Perhaps the clearest example of the propagandic nature of the representation of Davis is in her last major appearance in youth literature. A children’s magazine called *Bummi* published a story which centered around Davis in New York City answering questions posed by concerned East German children (Bieber 71). Davis extolls answers to questions regarding the Vietnam war and the actions of the United States against the Vietnamese people. From this portrayal of Davis, the propagandic nature of the state’s literature becomes unquestionable. The state again appropriates a fictionalized image of Davis to further a more palatable and relevant political message to children. While this work is one entirely of fiction, it serves as a valuable example of

the perceived influence that even a mere image of Davis represented within the East German mindset. Moreover, the setting and power dynamics within the book position Davis as the sole authority on interpreting the actions of the United States. It is clear through such illustration that the state had so effectively tied appropriated images of Davis to a political agenda, that her image alone had become a powerful symbol of the state's ideals. In this illustration, Davis is the only American represented, who speaks against American policies to a group of German-speaking school children. In light of the fact that this publication came after Davis' peak popularity within East Germany, it becomes clear how highly the state had come to value Davis as a political figure, speaker, and finally as an image used to support their perception of the United States in media, regardless which age group they targeted.

Davis' invitation in 1973 to East Germany came after her appearance in *Bummi*. Though this appearance occurred past her prime in East German media, the event gathered more than 25,000 foreign guests and was dubbed the *Red Woodstock* (Lorenz 57). Here, Davis called upon the youth of the world to continue the fight against colonialism in the modern era. Again, she is positioned as a symbol of internationalism during the summit with a strong appeal for young people in attendance. In her last moments of heightened international acclaim, the East German state continued to use her as their evidence that the United States was at odds with the moral compass of the state. Be it through their representation of Davis in children's literature, or her speeches given in person, Davis' message was consistently on-brand regardless of which media it appeared in. As a figure in the East German media, Davis took a number of forms. Representations of her within children's literature constituted much of her later appearances. Her overwhelming popularity in the sociological imaginations of the people of the GDR, then

reinforced by her numerous public appearances within the state, was of unquestionable political value for the government.

Not only was Davis a literary figure of the people's collective imagination, she would ultimately become tangible proof of the state's policies, especially during her visits to the GDR. Her in-person and on-brand rallies had an enormous psychological impact on the already enraptured youth of East Germany. Children's books, radio plays, newspaper articles, and even magazines served as mediums that solidified a seemingly factual account of Davis and her beliefs. The East German state had largely been successful in their attempts to 'factualize' Davis through ideological fictions as an ideal adherent and representative of their core values. They did so while appropriating her image for their political benefit. However, nothing could have solidified this more quickly than Davis' acceptance of their invitations to speak directly to the public. In those moments that she was present, Davis transfigured from merely an idea within the media, bound to a specific medium, into a medium of her own as she was gazed upon by the eyes of a people who had already developed a carefully constructed and foregone conclusion of what she represented. The ability for the East German people to take these preconceived notions and to have them affirmed through in-person interactions was the ultimate figuring of Davis by the state. By first creating the character within the minds of the public, then presenting her to them with speeches that corroborated state-sanctioned ideals, the state effectively brought their ideological aspirations to life with Davis as the ideal conduit. While Davis' intentions are not in question, what is clear is that the East German media sought to make as much use of her activism and appropriations of her image as often and as quickly as it could.

In all, it is clear how the use of Davis within the state media benefited the regime in relation to its own public. The appropriated depictions and representations of Davis had an

apparent effect on the morale of the state's public and at last gave them a seemingly ideal embodiment of their socialist and antifascist aspirations. After over two decades of existence, the GDR had finally found a way to inspire its own public through the use of its state-run media, with a particular focus on its younger citizens. Davis as a figure was legitimizing both for the internal doctrine of the GDR as the ideal socialist, while also strongly reinforcing their worldview in relation to the West. By crafting Davis as the prime example of the international proletariat in the media of the GDR and through her own words, the state was able to use Davis to revolutionize the legitimacy of their own political agenda.

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