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1989: FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL. THE COLD WAR AND THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY

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Synopsis:

The Cold War dominated every aspect of life in the second half of the 20th century. It may be reasonable to expect that it ended in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall. However, this paper argues that the Cold War and its ideology, despite good intentions and proclamations, did not end, but indeed continues until this day. In order to prove this point three internationally acclaimed German movies, *Run Lola Run* (1998), *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003), and *The Lives of Others* (2006), are analyzed.

1989: Fall of the Berlin Wall. The Cold War and the Crisis of Democracy

The Cold War, unlike any other major event, dominated the second half of the 20th century. Almost every sphere, every sector in society was affected by the ideological and rhetorical confrontation, be it international politics and economics, secret services, cultural productions, education and academic conferences, social attitudes, even personal spaces and decisions, to mention only a few. The effects of this confrontation were clearly discernable in all aspects of global politics. While the beginning of the Cold War can be traced back to 1917, the escalation did not occur until after the victory of the allies over Nazi Germany in 1945 when separate and seemingly incompatible geopolitical and economic concepts for global power and social order surfaced between the Soviet Union and the U.S. as well as England. The situation was further aggravated by Winston Churchill's speeches in August 1945 about an "iron curtain" dividing Europe and again in March 1946 in Fulton, MO where he characterized the politics of the Soviet Union as a serious threat to Christian civilization. President Harry Truman joined this ideological course in his well-known speech in March 1947, the so-called "Truman Doctrine," where he called for the containment of communism as the major goal of his political agenda. Moreover, this doctrine not only determined the politics for the U.S. and its allies, but also employed a rhetoric that insinuated that countries in the capitalist West were part of the so-called "free world" whereas countries in the socialist East were defined by a contemptuous totalitarianism.

The positions of the Western allies regarding the future of Germany were deadlocked. The Conference of Foreign Ministers in Moscow (March/April 1947) ended without any results and the London Six-Power Conference on Germany (February/March 1948) aimed at dividing Germany, albeit unofficially. All suggestions from the Soviet Union and other Eastern-bloc

countries to enforce strictly the Potsdam Agreement from August 1945 to turn Germany into a politically neutral country via a stringent demilitarization and the introduction of an anti-fascist and democratic parliamentary system were either ignored or flat out rejected.¹ Consequently, two German states were founded in 1949, the FRG in September and the GDR in October. People in both countries, without having been involved in any of these decisions, were time and time again and for many decades dragged into and subjected to the political and ideological confrontation between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, e.g. the introduction of the Marshall Plan (June 1947), the currency reform and introduction of the West-German Mark (June 1948), the rearmament of West- and East-Germany in the 1950s, the construction of the Berlin Wall (August 1961), the stationing of US and Soviet short- and middle-range nuclear missiles and warheads on East- and West-German soil in the late 1970s and 1980s, etc.

The historian Eric Hobsbawm pointed out in his book, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (1994),² that the ideology of the Cold War was especially important for the U.S. In foreign policy it was employed with the goal to enforce and secure global capitalism; domestically it was used to stir up fear and insecurities among the population. The Soviet Union on the other hand was concerned mostly about the hegemony of the U.S., specifically in regions where the USSR was not present. Domestically the ideology of the Cold War was practically of no importance for the Soviets. Furthermore, Hobsbawm showed that the West with the help of Cold War ideology was able to keep the Eastern-bloc alive for over 40 years, despite the beginning economic debility in the Soviet Union in the 1970s. In the countries of Western allies the rhetoric of the Cold War proved of vital importance as a significant tool in

¹ Cf. Harald Neubert (ed.). *Stalin wollte ein anderes Europa. Moskaus Außenpolitik 1940 bis 1968 und die Folgen*. Documents by Vladimir Wolkov. Berlin: Edition Ost, 2003.

² Eric Hobsbawm. *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991*. New York: Pantheon, 1994, Chapter 8: The Cold War.

every-day life situations and in the cultural production of many artists and forms of art, e.g. literature, films, popular music, painting etc. Countries such as West-Germany, in addition to capitalist consumer culture, provided federal funding for state-run social, health, and cultural programs and institutions. This also served to prove that the capitalist system, with its rhetoric of freedom and personal enterprise, was far superior to all concepts of state planning. Indeed, the premise of all political decisions after 1945 was to “secure the hegemony of the U.S. economy.”³ After the Soviet Union officially ended the more than absurd nuclear arms race in 1986-87 and after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the end of the Cold War was officially declared by President George H. W. Bush and General Secretary of the Communist Party and President of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev in December 1989 and again by Presidents Bush and Boris N. Yeltsin in 1992.

Needless to say, total victory was claimed immediately by the Western allies, especially by the U.S. and this mood intensified after the dissolution of USSR in 1991 and the eastern-bloc in the following years. Critics warning that this was nothing other than a pyrrhus victory as the real existing problems, primarily the impending global environmental crisis as well as many other social and political issues, still needed to be addressed were again dismissed or ridiculed as dreamers or malcontents. After all, it seemed that the so-called free world and its laissez faire economics had defeated so-called totalitarianism and its state-run economics. Al Gore in his book *Earth in the Balance. Ecology and the Human Spirit* (1992) summed up this notion as follows:⁴

What made this dramatic victory possible was a conscious and shared decision by men and women in the nations of the “free world” to make the defeat of the

³ Charles S. Maier. *In Search of Stability. Explorations in Historical Political Economy*. Cambridge UP, 1987, 125.

⁴ Al Gore. *Earth in the Balance. Ecology and the Human Spirit*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992, 271.

communist system the central organizing principle of not only their governments' policies but of society itself. That is not to say that this goal dominated every waking thought or guided every policy decision, but opposition to communism was the principle underlying almost all of the geo-political strategies designed by the West after World War II. [...] U.S. advocacy of free trade and the granting of foreign aid to underdeveloped nations were in part altruistic but mainly motivated by the struggle against communism. Of course, some of the policies were painful, costly, and controversial. Wars in Korea and Vietnam, the nuclear arms race, arms sales to dictators who disagreed with every American principle save opposition to Soviet communism — these and virtually every other foreign policy and national security decision were made because they served the same central principle...

In light of such noble intentions and declarations one might reasonably expect that after the official and dramatic end of the Cold War its ideology and rhetoric would be buried alongside the cadaver of the decades old West-East conflict. However, this did not happen. On the contrary, the ideology and rhetoric was quickly resurrected during the 1990s and proved to be an even more useful and powerful tool within U.S. politics and its allies to combat new enemies. The first was President George H.W. Bush who in 1990 appropriated the phrase “new world order” as a rhetoric to justify the gulf war.⁵ In the next few pages I intend to investigate and answer the following questions: Which socio-political factors contributed to the rhetoric of the Cold War remaining practically unchanged in politics, the media, and culture? Who benefits from this rhetoric? Which prominent cultural artifacts still carry the message of the Cold War today? Did the Cold War leave any political marks that are still existing today?

To answer the first two questions it is best to examine the historical, social, and political context. Different and partially unforeseen events occurring almost simultaneously

⁵ Cf. Noam Chomsky. “A View from Below.” *The End of the Cold War. Its Meaning and Implications*. Ed. Michael J. Hogan. Cambridge UP, 1992, 137-150.

around 1990 contributed significantly to the understanding that the so-called free-world and global capitalism were threatened by new and dangerous enemies and adversaries. 1. The collapse of the so-called eastern bloc countries; 2. the promise of widespread prosperity and consumerism in those countries; 3. growing global ecological problems, such as the dangers of nuclear power, population growth, the loss of biodiversity, the clear-cutting of forests, growing desertification, the pollution of water ways and the soil by chemicals, and the possibility of a climate disaster; 4. the resurgence of new nationalisms in Europe, the USA, and elsewhere; 5. acts of global terrorism; and 6. global capitalism itself. Mostly overlooked for similar reasons by many conservatives and liberals alike, the economies in many countries around 1990 were not nearly as promising as the much celebrated victory over so-called totalitarianism, academic talk about the supposed end of history, and notions of postmodern “anything-goes” seemed to suggest. To be sure, after years of competition between the two political world views the U.S. remained as the world’s only political and military superpower, but at the same time lost its economic hegemony for good, a fact that even the boom in the “new markets” between 1995 and 2000 was unable to hide. Severe economic crises followed in Mexico in 1994, in Southeast Asia, Uruguay and Russia in 1997-98, in Argentina in 2000-02, in the U.S. in 2008-09 and well as in all capitalist countries that had been subjected to rigorous deregulation and privatization. These aspects and several others resulted in the swift and determined resurrection and consequent reinforcement of the ideology of totalitarianism in mass media, as well as by many conservative and liberal politicians and parties. The “us versus them” ideology expressed by President George W. Bush following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 barely disguised the similarities between the old enemy (communism) and the new enemy (Islamic terrorism). In both situations the ideology and the rhetoric of the Cold War served the same purpose, namely to differentiate

between the “free world” and the world of religious suppression and terrorism. More importantly, the recourse to an ideology that supposedly worked well in the past once again aimed at supporting and praising a so-called free and global economy with unlimited markets and possibilities. The beneficiaries of these economic policies are all too obvious. Simply put about 10% or less of the population, representing global businesses, multinational conglomerates, and CEOs win, the other 90% of the population lose.⁶ The glorification of a “total market system” and its increasingly dictatorial aspects has led, among other things, to enormous profit margins, especially in the oil industry. To put it differently, 200 of the world’s largest corporations in recent years have had larger sales growth than 182 of 191 countries had in total productivity.⁷ Consequently, a fifth of the world’s population in highly industrialized countries enjoy the lavish lifestyles of “unlimited luxuries,” while the other four-fifths of the population, recently referred to by the historian, Eric Hobsbawm, in a newspaper article as the “Mother-Courage-countries” of Africa, Asia, South America, and the former Soviet Union are forced to live with wars, exploitation, and poverty.⁸

To answer the question which prominent cultural artifacts still carry the message of the Cold War today I will discuss three acclaimed German movies: *Run Lola Run* (1998), *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003), and *The Lives of Others* (2006). These three movies are well situated in the cannon of Cold War themed movies, from *Ninotchka* (1939, starring Greta Garbo), to many James Bond movies, such as *From Russia with Love* (1963, starring Sean Connery), to *The Spy*

⁶ For a recent analysis of this problem c.f. Patricia Cohen, “Paychecks Lag as Profits Soar, and Price Erode Wage Gains,” *New York Times*, July 13, 2018 (online).

⁷ Simon Retallack, “The Environmental Cost of Economic Globalization,” in *The Case Against the Global Economy and for a Turn Towards Localization*, eds. Edward Goldsmith and Jerry Mander (London: Earthscan Publications, 2001), 189-202.

⁸ Eric Hobsbawm, “Eine gespaltene Welt geht ins 21. Jahrhundert,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, April 12, 1999, n. p.

Who Came in from the Cold (1965, starring Richard Burton), to the five *Rocky* sequels (1976-90, starring Sylvester Stallone), and *The Hunt for Red October* (1990, starring Sean Connery), to mention only a few. It is important to note that the three German movies became major box office successes in Germany and internationally, specifically in the U.S., for several reasons. 1. They were produced after the official end of the Cold War but continued to project major themes of the Cold War, 2. they were produced in a now united Germany, formerly at the center of ideological and rhetorical Cold War confrontation, depicting, at least superficially, specific German topics and themes, and 3. they were produced for a global market and aimed at an audience who was widely familiar with many aspects of Cold War consumer culture.

It is important to note that the context of the recent German unification plays a significant role when trying to understand the underlying ideologies of these movies. While for most people of the non-German-speaking world the unification of the two Germanys ended the interest in things German it caused major problems for many East Germans. This was the result primarily of two aspects, the handling of private property and rising unemployment. As one critic noted:⁹

The biggest mistake of the unification treaty and the resulting policies was in the area of property rights, which threatened millions of East Germans. The unique and usually unfair implementation of the policy that primarily looked at the heirs of the original owners of East German property to stake their claim under the motto “restitution before compensation” alienated most citizens from the East and made them take a second look at the blessings of unification.

In addition, unemployment on average rose to near 17% by 1991 and remained there. This hit many East Germans particularly hard as their country was considered one of the ten most

⁹ Rado Pribic. *The Trouble with German Unification*. Berlin: Nora, 2008, 10.

productive countries in the world prior to 1989.¹⁰ However, a third factor is equally important when understanding the German context. Unification took place entirely on West-German terms, however, West-Germany didn't need anything East Germany had to offer: a unique culture, social achievements for women and in education, as well as Marxist-trained intellectuals and authors included in and critical of the political process. Therefore, the Christian Conservatives under the leadership of Chancellor Helmut Kohl immediately began a deliberate campaign to delegitimize and criminalize every aspect of East Germany. Indeed, Kohl insisted that "nothing was supposed remain from East Germany, certainly nothing Socialist."¹¹ The best tool to ridicule East Germans about their 40-year history, in addition to a lack of private property, turned out to be the East German Secret Service, the Stasi. It's 110 miles of files were made available to the general public, not just the victims, in 1990. Partially due to its sensationalizing in the West German media the files turned out to be detrimental to the self-image of East Germans many of whom checked their files only to find out that they contained nothing other than trivialities. However, for many West Germans, as well as many others, their simple existence added even more feelings of victory and gratification.¹² That the FBI had its own extensive files on the German emigrants living in the U.S. in the 1930s and 40s, and even on those who did not, made no difference whatsoever.¹³ In a larger historical context it is safe to say that the barbaric approach to the destruction of East Germany's past is tantamount to serious damage to democracy.¹⁴

¹⁰ Pribic, 10-12.

¹¹ Werner Mittenzwei. *Die Intellektuellen. Literatur und Politik in Ostdeutschland 1945-2000*. Leipzig: Faber & Faber, 2001, 458

¹² Cf. Mittenzwei, 443-453.

¹³ Alexander Stephan. *'Communazis.' FBI Surveillance of German Emigré Writers*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2000.

¹⁴ Cf. Eric Hobsbawm. *On History*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997.

Run Lola Run, grossing \$23 million by 2015, generally received favorite reviews. It was praised for its high energy, the use techno music, slapstick, and comic strip, as well as the dazzling MTV style editing, all of which contributed to the international success of the movie. It was selected as the German entry for the Best Foreign Language Film category at the Academy Awards in 1999, but ultimately was not nominated. The plot is simple: flame-haired Lola (Franka Potente) runs through Berlin three times with different outcomes to somehow gather 100,000 D-Marks within 20 minutes to save her boyfriend's life. While not immediately obvious it is the running through Berlin that carries the important message in this movie. During the run lots of references to history are revealed: people, buildings, landmarks, the Wall etc. The significance here is that Lola runs through Berlin with its East and West-German history and memory but in this now united city there are no more limits, boundaries, or other artificial separations. The 40-year history of a divided Germany and a city divided by a concrete Wall are in the past if not completely erased. Freedom and self-determination now define the city of Berlin and its people. Seen in this light the movie reflects directly what Klaus Wowereit, the colorful Social Democratic Governing Mayor from 2001 to 2014, said about the city: "Berlin is change, Berlin is the place to be." Or: "Berlin is poor, but sexy." And: "There's no question it is a flamboyant scene..."¹⁵ Indeed, with the end of the Cold War Berlin is finally breaking away from its gray and divided past only to reemerge as a city that's open for business and pleasure around the clock. Anything and everything seems possible in Berlin and according to *Run Lola Run* the outcome of any activity, enterprise, or investment could be triple of what one might expect. Now that East Germany with its stifling limits and attitudes is gone the possibilities are endless seems to be the message of the movie.

¹⁵ <http://www.berlinlists.com/Chapter7.htm>

Good Bye, Lenin!, grossing more than \$79 mill. worldwide, is one of several movies depicting supposedly typical East-German life. The reviews were generally positive, calling the movie “beautiful,” “poignant,” “intriguing,” or even a “sophisticate satire.”¹⁶ It received many awards in Europe and was nominated best Foreign Language Film at the Golden Globe Awards in 2004. The plot again is straight forward. The movie is set during the time when the Berlin Wall came down and a family is desperately trying to keep East-German attitudes and culture alive for their mother Christiane who fell into a coma and could die from a shock brought on by any unforeseen changes. As Christiane, other than the rest of the family, is a strong supporter of the Socialist Unity Party (SED), the family does everything in their power to please her, primarily with objects and moods that can best be described as nostalgic East German, from food items, to interior design, and the state-run news show on TV. All of this takes place within the confines of a small apartment in a typical East Berlin high-rise. However, the outside world is changing rapidly as indicated by the display of typical symbols of a global economy: Mercedes Benz, Coca Cola, and Burger King, to mention only a few. In the end Christiane outlives the GDR by three days, indeed she dies three days after German unification. The movie remains ambivalent whether she consciously notices the political and economic changes or whether she continues to live in the now gone world of East Germany. This ending supposedly allows the audience to decide for themselves how they want to identify: as East German socialist dreamers or as individuals in a “free” world. However, as throughout the movie all aspects of East German life and culture were subjected to satirical ridicule the answer is as clear as the programmatic title of the movie: It is high time for all people, not just East Germans, to say good-bye to all utopian visions of a communitarian society. The ideological message of the movie is clear: Theories and

¹⁶ https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/good_bye_lenin/

concepts developed in the 19th century by thinkers and philosophers such as Karl Marx, August Bebel, Vladimir Lenin, or Rosa Luxemburg to liberate the world and its people from oppression and exploitation and instead establish a world of social justice, equal opportunity, and peace are no longer needed in the post-socialist world of global capitalism.

The movie, *The Lives of Others* (2006), carries a similar message, but more intense. It grossed over \$77 mill. internationally by the end of 2007 and received many awards, among them the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 2007. Critics hailed the movie as one of the ten best films of 2006, mostly for showing the supposed accuracy of life in East Germany and the surveillance techniques of its Secret Service, the Stasi. Critics called it a “powerful but quiet film, constructed of hidden thoughts and secret desires”¹⁷ or a “political thriller that's consistently as inventive as it is creepy.”¹⁸ The *New York Times* described it as “a suspenseful, ethically exacting drama, beautifully realized” as it reached back “into the totalitarian past and over the Berlin Wall into the grim, brutal absurdity of the late, unlamented German Democratic Republic, and lay bare the anxious, cruel psychology of socialism as it once existed.”¹⁹ While the movie is undoubtedly suspenseful and well-acted such reviews barely scratch the surface when it comes to understanding the full context of East German society. As the movie was made in the style of socialist realism it thereby also claimed to portray not only the social realities of East Germany but also the truth about the Stasi and its methods. Moreover, it suggests that surveillance by the Stasi was all-encompassing and that specifically artists were confronted with the brutal power of the State government and therefore had three choices: betray

¹⁷ <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-lives-of-others-2007-1>

¹⁸ https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_lives_of_others/

¹⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/09/movies/09live.html>

their own ideals in order to please those in power, become spies themselves, or commit suicide.²⁰ However, critics of the process of German unification, while agreeing that such surveillances were deplorable and meaningless, have shown that nothing could be further from the truth. According to official numbers an absolute maximum of 0.5% of the population were victims of the Stasi at any given time.²¹ Clearly, the draconian perspective of East Germany presented in the movie is just a cliché but also serves other purposes as a closer look at the underlying ideology confirms. It is indeed the reaching back to the “totalitarian past,” as the *New York Times* review stated, where the movie reveals its message. Any attempt at establishing a political system built on community, solidarity, and opportunity for all peoples everywhere will not only fail but will necessarily lead to brutal oppression as portrayed in George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984* (1949). In order not to repeat such pitfalls from the past the only way forward for the world in the 21st century is to embrace global capitalism to which there is seemingly no alternative. Additionally, the admonishment while hardly ever mentioned is that only global capitalism can ensure the functioning of democracy.

To summarize, it is obvious that the Cold War continues, especially in popular movies. The three German movies discussed here resonate within the context of similar Cold War themed movies produced in Hollywood since the fall of the Berlin Wall, such as *Thirteen Days* (2000), *K-19: The Widowmaker* (2002), *Charlie Wilson’s War* (2007), or *Bridge of Spies* (2015). There are, of course, many ways to explain the ongoing fascination with filmic realizations of the Cold War. I would like to point out two that seem to be of particular significance. Historians and cultural critics have noted that the massive political changes in the 20th century (e.g. the October

²⁰ Cf. Daniela Dahn. *Wehe dem Sieger! Ohne Osten kein Westen*. Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2009, 185.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 175.

Revolution in 1917, the built-up of socialism and the so-called Eastern-bloc countries, two World Wars, Fascism, several major global economic crises, the Cold War, the demise of socialism, etc.) as well as the means of technological reproduction have not only influenced arts and artists, including the making of movies, but have also changed the perception of historical realities for the audience. Seen in this light, movies are primarily a form of entertainment that is easily accessible, easily understandable, and requires no further knowledge or reflection on the part of the viewers.²² As such movies can easily become vehicles to transport ideological messages. The success of the message depends directly on the success of the movies. It is neither a coincidence nor a surprise that these German movies internationally are among the most lucrative ever made. On the one hand this reflects the united Germany's growing political role in global affairs and on the other this is due to the superficial display of specific German cultural themes and topics aimed at a global audience by focusing on the Cold War. That the themes are simplistic, one-dimensional, or even historically and factually wrong is of little or no importance as in a global consumer culture they can be understood without any in-depth knowledge of Germany or the larger historical context.

It is also worth noting which aspects are hardly ever mentioned or discussed when it comes to the historical significance of events surrounding and resulting from the fall of the Berlin Wall, either in public debates or in popular movies. Arguably the most important facet is that the fall of the Wall was also a defeat of communism, particularly in the Eastern-bloc countries which, like East Germany, were built on the rights and the culture of the working classes.²³ While this may be of little political interest for people in the West another important

²² Cf. Hobsbawm. *The Age of Extremes*; Neil Gabler. *Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality*. New York: Knopf, 1998.

²³ Cf. Charles S. Maier. *Dissolution. The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany*. Princeton UP, 1997.

aspect lacking in these movies certainly is or at least should be, namely the worldwide crisis of democracy. This crisis is the result of the historical and dialectical process of the competing economic and social systems in the 20th century. Both neoliberalism and state-run socialism have failed large portions of the population, mostly in the working and lower middle classes.

Therefore, if democracy is still important in any given civil society then we must, as Jerry Harris of the Online University of the Left as well as many other historians, economists, and political scientists have suggested, employ a viable concept for a “workable transitional strategy to a society beyond capitalism, one based in today’s world, but taking us to tomorrow.” Such notions must necessarily “contemplate the interrelationships of the market, civil society, and the state, grappling with the inner connections, the conflicting demands, and how popular democracy can be the gear that turns them all.”²⁴ Needless to say, movies that simply replicate Cold War clichés and stereotypes are of no use in this respect. Differently put, positive filmic visions of what a truly democratic future for all peoples may look like are more needed than ever.

²⁴ Jerry Harris. *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Democracy*. Atlanta, GA: Clarity, 2016, 275.