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III. CUBA

The Construction of Solidarity in Public Spaces Between Germany and Cuba Before and After German Reunification

by

ANAIRIS DÍAZ MACEO
AND JOHANNA HABEL

ABSTRACT

The concept of solidarity between the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and Cuba have been the focus of several works of academic research. This contribution, however, aims to understand how these relations could persist in a reunified Germany by analyzing the communication of solidarity between the GDR and Cuba before and after reunification. This article illustrates how the GDR and Cuba communicated solidarity towards their respective people and among each other, and argues that the GDR's type of solidarity communication was not transferred to the government of the Federal Republic of Germany after reunification, but rather to its non-governmental solidarity organizations. The German working group Cuba Sí of the Party of Democratic Socialism serves as an example to compare the communication styles of these two transnational partners. Focusing on this example, this article studies the evolution of power relations and cooperation structures before and after reunification. In order to further comprehend and classify solidary communication of the period, this analysis aims to understand the continuity of ideological structures present in the Cold War beyond the collapse of the state socialism.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Anairis Díaz Maceo studied Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, and continues her studies in the M.A. Interdisciplinary Latin American Studies at the Free University of Berlin. Her connection to intercultural communication stems from the bicultural background of her parents - her Cuban father and German mother, born and raised during the times of the GDR, are her historical links to the topic of this article.

Johanna Habel studied Political and Social Studies at the Julius-Maximilians University in Germany and the University of San Andrés in Bolivia, and developed a strong interest in communication. She is currently deepening her knowledge of international cooperation at the Institute for Latin American Studies at the Free University of Berlin.

INTRODUCTION

International solidarity in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) as a symbolic show of the global bond between communist and socialist countries was a source of pride for government officials in the state, whereas it simultaneously suppressed independent solidarity groups domestically. As a type of “voluntary coercion,”¹ the concept of solidarity and solidarity communication took on many forms that require a closer look and a global perspective in order to properly understand their complex motivations, and their consequences within the GDR and throughout the socialist world. Due to the ideological intimidation exerted by the state, the full extent of the economic, political and social consequences of international solidarity became more apparent after the reunification.

The concept of solidarity is often used in political and social as well as academic discourses as a cross-cutting theme² and is mostly

considered a moral phenomenon³ that is difficult to measure. According to Katrin Radtke, solidarity is defined as either a demeanor or a feeling.⁴ The advantage of viewing it as a demeanor over a feeling is that demeanor can be better operationalized into concrete action. Radtke divides solidarity-based demeanor into three groups:

1. Material goods: such as currency or natural resources.
2. Communication, whether oral or written: in the form of petitions, speeches or articles.
3. Labor: physical or mental.

The concept of solidarity has been analyzed in various case studies with differing perspectives: The authors Jeannette Brosig-Koch et al., for example, consider German reunification⁵ as “an excellent opportunity to study the influence

1 “UMBRÜCHE-Diskussion: A Work in Progress - Ein Gespräch Zwischen Ost Und West,” *UMBRÜCHE*, 1993, 14.

2 Ulf Tranow, “Solidarität: Vorschlag Für Eine Solidarische Begriffsbestimmung,” *Analyse & Kritik*, 2013, 395-398; Katrin Radtke, “Transnationale Solidarität: Mehr Hilfe Für Entferntes Leid,” in *Solidarität Und Internationale Gemeinschaftsbildung: Beiträge Zur Soziologie Der Internationalen Beziehungen*, ed. Sebastian Harnisch, Hans Maull, Siegfried Schieder (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2009), 115-136.

3 Herfried Münkler, “Enzyklopädie der Ideen der Zukunft: Solidarität”, in *Transnationale Solidarität: Chancen und Grenzen*, ed. Jens Beckert et al. (Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 2004), 15-30.

4 Radtke’s solidarity concept is more complex than presented here. The presented part is the most relevant concept for this article. The entire concept of solidarity according to Radtke can be found here: Katrin Radtke, *Transnationale Solidarität*, 118-123.

5 The term “German reunification” is part of many different debates. The article does not want to assume a position or an evaluation of the term itself but merely uses it to define a historical moment.

of the economic and political environment on social behavior. [...] So this historical moment allows the investigation of how] social norms adapt to economic and political change.”⁶ Further authors to be considered are Petra Goedde and Richard H. Immerman, whose theory focuses on the aforementioned processes of change. According to their analysis, local, regional and global reactions to the danger of a nuclear war, the influence of decolonization, the rise of human rights, environmental politics as well as comparable transnational affairs deeply influence international interaction and cause social, political and economic transformations with a ripple effect of global affairs on domestic politics.⁷

This article will examine two separate time periods, from 1974 to 1990 and from 1990 to 1995, to demonstrate a completely different set of approaches to the concept of (international) solidarity in various parts of society and state institutions. Considering that solidarity is a complex construct, this article will be based on Radtke’s demeanor-based perspective, with a particular emphasis on communication. In the first part of the article, the

communication of solidarity between the GDR and Cuba will be presented. Again, a distinction is made between the type of communication between the two states and towards their respective people. Connected to this aspect of our analysis is the work of Jadwiga E. Pieper Mooney and Fabio Lanza, who pointed out that the discourse of the Cold War and thus the communications both between states and between the state and its population was centered around the state’s fear of revolutions and activism to maintain the structure of the political regime. In contrast to this, multiple social movements and solidary groups were formed as a result of transformations in global diplomacy and state politics, creating global alliances beyond the Cold War and its tensions.⁸

In addition, a short overview of the time of transition from the fall of the Berlin Wall to reunification is given. Here, primarily due to the negotiations between the two German states, there was a break in solidarity relations between Cuba and the GDR. Although communication remains a level of analysis in this area, there will also be a closer focus on solidarity in the domains of material and labor. It will be shown that changes at all levels were often the (main) reason for the foundation

6 Jeannette Brosig-Koch, “Still Different after All These Years: Solidarity Behavior in East and West Germany,” *Journal of Public Economics* 95 (2011): 1373-1376.

7 Richard H. Immerman and Petra Goedde, *The Oxford Handbook of the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2013), 3-4.

8 Jadwiga E. Pieper Mooney and Fabio Lanza, *De-Centering Cold War History. Local and Global Change* (London: Routledge, 2013), 1-8.

of civil society engagement or other solidarity groups. These groups will then be analyzed in further detail in the third part using the aforementioned working group Cuba Sí as an example. Here, the analysis will be carried out on the level of communication as well, although this part will additionally display the interconnectedness of the three levels. This part will closely examine the communication of solidarity between Cuba Sí and Cuba in the period of 1991 to 1995. We will conclude with a summary and highlight the relevance of this analysis in the context of Cold War research.

This article thus serves to illustrate the continuity in solidarity communication that can be observed in solidarity and friendship groups after reunification.

THE DISPARITY OF STATE IDEOLOGIES AND SOCIAL REALITY

The concept of international solidarity in the GDR not only thrived due to material benefits stemming from cooperation with solidary partner countries, but also political statements, diplomatic support and historical as well as cultural engagement. However, these solidarity measures often did not match the interests of all parts of the population and solely followed the GDR government's goal of "strengthening partners in an anti-Western, anti-imperialist

position" instead of "promoting an independent development path."⁹ In this context, the Solidarity Committee was in possession of a power monopoly. As a direct link to the Socialist Union Party's (SUP, Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschland = SED) Central Committee, the Solidarity Committee was established as a social organization that had been tasked with the economic development of so-called "third world countries" and coordinated different development assistance activities in the GDR in the government's best interest. Citizens depended on cooperation with such institutions and had little capacity to realize independent aid projects outside the state- a strong deficit of domestic policies.¹⁰

This disparity of state ideologies and social reality became apparent during the establishment of solidary connections with other like-minded countries. Connected to a political, top-down solidarity, the SUP decided which nations should be supported.¹¹ This state of affairs, however, did not withstand the collapse of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA, Rat für

9 Carl Ordnung, "Ein Teil des positiven Erbes: Die DDR-Solidarität hat die Partner erreicht und wirklich geholfen," *INKOTA-Brief* 146 (2008): 8.

10 Ordnung, "Ein Teil des positiven Erbes," 8.

11 Willi Volks, "Eigennützige Solidarität: Die Solidarität in der DDR war stark reglementiert und häufig an den eigenen ökonomischen Interessen orientiert," *INKOTA-Brief* 146 (2008), 9.

gegenseitige Wirtschaftshilfe), an international economic organization comprised of socialist states under the leadership of the Soviet Union. The CMEA operated from 1949 to before being dissolved in 1991 due to the radical decrease in trade concomitant with the decline and disintegration of the Soviet.¹² The fall of the CMEA revealed a fundamental problem of the GDR's understanding of their solidarity concept: solidarity only functioned on the basis of top-down executive regulations, as the state generally mistrusted the population and left a crippling lack of space for independent (political) thought and action. All direct, interpersonal relationships and interactions with solidary partners were prevented.¹³

CONSTRUCTING A SOLIDARY WORKFORCE

To fully understand the extent of the differences between the communication styles of the GDR and Cuba to their citizens and to each other on a governmental level, the values and priorities communicated to each population deserve a closer look. Their relevance becomes especially apparent in speeches given to their communities and official government documents handed out to the population. For instance, an

excerpt of the GDR's official report of Erich Honecker's friendship visit (*Freundschaftsbesuch*¹⁴) to Cuba in 1974 shows quite clearly how much significance was placed on the communication of a "brotherly" closeness between the two nations' government and peoples:

With this friendly visit, relations between the two countries are entering a new stage in their development. They aim to serve the progress of their peoples and to contribute to the consolidation of the socialist community [...] The fraternal bond and close friendship between the Socialist Unity Party of Germany and the Communist Party of Cuba, between the peoples of the German Democratic Republic and the Republic of Cuba are indispensable prerequisites for the great common achievements in building socialism and in the struggle for peace, democracy and social progress.¹⁵

¹² *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "Comecon," 2020, [britannica.com/topic/Comecon](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Comecon).

¹³ Volks, *Eigennützige Solidarität*, 9.

¹⁴ A *Freundschaftsbesuch* between two states can be defined as a less formal political visit of state officials as an expression of friendship and cooperation. *Duden*, s.v. "Freundschaftsbesuch," <https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Freundschaftsbesuch>.

¹⁵ Klaus Dieter Kröber and Wolfgang Meyer, *Compañeros Im Sozialistischen Amerika: Freundschaftsbesuch Der Partei- u. Regierungsdelegation Der DDR Unter Leitung Des Ersten Sekretärs Des ZK Der SED, Erich Honecker, in Der Republik Kuba* (Leipzig: Brockhaus,

The population of each nation, according to this speech, was to focus on contributing to social restructuring and to be an active part of the palpable progress in terms of cultural development as well as the fundamental changes in the lifestyles of Cuban citizens. This policy was to serve as an example and role model of “social progress and national liberation” for other or soon-to-be parts of the socialist state community.

This common goal of social progress and national liberation can be witnessed as a constant communication element, in speeches given during the friendly visit. For example, in the aforementioned official GDR report released after the visit, the authors Klaus Dieter Kröber and Wolfgang Meyer emphasized the pursuit of cooperation “rooted in mutual trust, solidarity and fraternity,” as well as the “goal of dynamically developing the productive forces of both countries, using science and technology more and more effectively, promoting socialist economic integration and increasing the standard of living of both peoples as planned.”¹⁶

Each side officially articulated to their population the goal of national and social liberation, and constantly communicated a steadfast mindset of solidarity with global liberation movements

1974), 5; translated from German to English, as all of the citations of this article.

16 Kröber and Meyer, *Compañeros Im Sozialistischen Amerika*, 14.

against imperialism, colonialism, neocolonialism, and racism.¹⁷ In working towards these goals, the GDR and Cuba emphasized the importance of their citizens’ skills, education, and their labor.

This aspect of labor as an essential element of solidarity communication was also analyzed by Che Guevara. As Hugo C. F. Mansilla explains in *Systembedürfnis und Anpassung*, Che Guevara juxtaposed the “blind motivation of the individual through interest and profit” under capitalism with the “conscious, societally oriented and selfless motivation” in socialism.¹⁸ The foundation of this socialist motivation, according to Guevara, is a moral stance, the “revolutionary conscience,” which does not work on the basis of a material reward but on the basis of a sense of duty towards society as a whole. On this basis, the amount of the reward does not depend on the quality and intensity of the work performed. Thus, the “revolutionary conscience” receives the function of a productive force and contains an inherent moral attitude.¹⁹

Elements of Guevara’s theory can be seen in the solidarity concept of Cuban socialism at the time of the 1974 friendship visit;

17 Kröber and Meyer, *Compañeros Im Sozialistischen Amerika*, 19.

18 Hugo C. F. Mansilla, *Systembedürfnis und Anpassung. Zur Kritik Sozialistischer Verhaltenssteuerung* (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1973), 215.

19 Mansilla, *Systembedürfnis und Anpassung*, 216.

however, it remains to be argued how much of his theory was actually accepted by Cuban society at large. The communication style the Cuban government and the GDR adopted to construct international solidarity during their representatives' speeches was based on this value of the "tireless, social and solidary workforce."²⁰ However, the GDR and Cuba did not approach this value in identical ways. Differences in their approaches become more apparent when analyzing Fidel Castro's and Erich Honecker's speeches during the friendship visit.

Castro, on the one hand, approached the subject in a more emotional, passionate manner, emphasizing the fact that "it is logical that [their] peoples march together, that they deepen their relationships[, ...] that the struggles, efforts and battles of the GDR are also [theirs]. Hence [their] solidarity, [their] sympathy, [their] cooperation."²¹ The core of his communication style with Cuban citizens becomes visible in the following part of his speech:

Dear comrades of the delegation of the German Democratic Republic! These revolutionary people welcomed you with all their *warmth*, with all their *enthusiasm* and with all the *solidarity* they are capable of. This friendship will be a *firm and*

20 Mansilla, *Systembedürfnis und Anpassung*, 216.

21 Kröber and Meyer, *Compañeros Im Sozialistischen Amerika*, 102.

eternal friendship because it is based on the love of the people! This friendship has its *roots in the hearts of all Cubans*. Long live the friendship between Cuba and the German Democratic Republic!²²

When analyzed, it can be seen that Castro's constant use of a rhetoric that appealed to the emotions and personal lives of the Cuban population served as a communication strategy to direct their attention to the priorities of him and government: an interpersonal, international long-term commitment between two societies that placed productivity and development first.

However, these sentiments of shared economic aspirations and interests were not wrapped up in an emotional and passionate package during Erich Honecker's speech, but rather approached straightforwardly:

Our economic relationships are increasingly developing towards a *mutual benefit*. The establishment of cement plants and other companies and training centers, joint research projects, student exchanges, cooperation between mass organizations, scientists and cultural workers *serve our socialist cause and the rapprochement of our peoples*, which are forever connected. [...] Long live the *indestructible friendship* between Cuba and the

22 Kröber and Meyer, *Compañeros Im Sozialistischen Amerika*, 105.

German Democratic Republic!²³

Comparing these two speeches alone clearly shows that the two speakers focused their cooperation on different aspects and approaches. For the most part, Mansilla states that this led to a view of solidarity in Cuban society as part of a “truly socialist personality” that distinguished itself in terms of “selflessness, material lack of interest, doing work as a patriotic matter of honor [and] exemption from the obligation to perform.”²⁴

Hard work, everyday heroism, complete fulfillment of the tasks decreed from above and above all a political-ideological transfiguration of fulfillment of duty and obedience as the highest and noblest revolutionary virtues, and the assumption that working constitutes the ontological ‘essence’ of people.²⁵

In addition, Mansilla points out the paradox that the identification with above-average work performance, revolutionary spirit and human value, which appears in this type of socialist solidarity, represents a unique form of a precapitalist merit system: hard work and dedication to the job play the central role in this ethics.²⁶

23 Kröber and Meyer, *Compañeros Im Sozialistischen Amerika*, 107.

24 Mansilla, *Systembedürfnis*, 220.

25 Mansilla, *Systembedürfnis*, 220.

26 Mansilla, *Systembedürfnis*, 230.

The communication of this common spirit and shared ethics from the government to its people becomes apparent in speeches such as the Central Committee’s secretary Julián Rizo Álvarez’s address in Matanzas on February 25, 1974, during a rally with the party and government delegation of the GDR. During this speech, Álvarez focused on the collaboration, “enthusiasm and hard work of [Cuban technicians and workers] and working people in the German Democratic Republic.” According to Álvarez, the success of and productivity in the chemical factory “Raúl Cepero Bonilla” in Matanzas was a result of fraternity and solidarity between the two nations.²⁷

THE TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF SOLIDARITY

The same orientation towards fraternity and solidarity, however, cannot be found as easily in the communication between the governments of the GDR and Cuba. In these official communications, there existed a continuous disparity in how these two states viewed each other. On the one hand, the GDR aimed to strengthen its position by using their solidarity with

27 Marita Bieß, *Dokumente Und Materialien Der Zusammenarbeit Zwischen Der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands Und Der Kommunistischen Partei Kubas 1971 Bis 1977* (Berlin: Dietz, 1979), 122-123.

“developing countries” as a tool in its battle for international recognition against the competing, West German state.²⁸ Furthermore, state solidarity was constantly connected to the Commercial Coordination (Kommerzielle Koordinierung) under Alexander Schalck-Golodkowski that shaped relations and changed the approach to developing countries based on the economic difficulties of the GDR—particularly in the 1980s. Economic relations with Cuba were based on the “economization of [Cuban] contract workers for their own benefit.” Towards the end of the 1980s, Cuban contract workers increasingly served the purpose of debt repayment and were “an integral part of social work capacity, although the GDR viewed relationships between contract workers and German citizens as highly undesirable, which led to numerous deportations of contract workers. Thus, expressions of solidarity mandated by the state did not include personal connections between citizens, and was bound by multiple conditions not directly conveyed to the population.²⁹ Cuba’s government, on the other hand, had already expressed their dissatisfaction with the insufficient solidarity of their GDR comrades after the meetings with Erich Honecker on February 21, 1974, and attributed the economic defects to a lack of internationalism and the narrow-minded thinking of the SUP and

its leaders. In the final hearing on February 26, Castro expressed this sentiment towards the GDR again.³⁰

This stark contrast in terms of the communication of solidarity between the state and the population versus the practical application and communication of solidarity between the two states can be witnessed by taking a closer look at the cooperation between state institutions of the GDR and Cuba. For example, cooperation between the Ministry of State Security of the GDR (Ministerium für Staatssicherheit, in short: MfS) and the Ministry of the Interior of Cuba (MININT), was defined by the solidarity-based “development aid” for Cuba.³¹ This “aid” included the transfer of repressive techniques and concepts, such as a very clearly defined image of a subversive internal³² that served

30 Dietrich Lemke, *Cuba, Castro y Comercio. 30 Jahre Im Dienst Des Aussenhandels DDR - Kuba* (Zeuthen: D. Lemke, 2004), 235.

31 Gerhard Ehlert, Jochen Staadt, and Tobias Voigt, *Die Zusammenarbeit zwischen dem Ministerium für Staatssicherheit der DDR (MfS) und dem Ministerium des Innern Kubas (MININT)* (Berlin: Freie Universität, 2002), 2.

32 The GDR’s enemy image started as seeing resistance as state treason and the connected suspicion of espionage as a valid reason for state intervention. This definition, however, was extended more and more so that minor criticism of the state system could result in arrests and other punishments. This enemy image was then transferred to Cuba. See Ehlert, Staadt, Voigt, *Die Zusammenarbeit*, 2.

28 Volks, *Eigennützige Solidarität*, 9.

29 Volks, *Eigennützige Solidarität*, 9.

to criminalize and disenfranchise broader parts of the population. The solidarity between these two ministries was based on a mutual idea of who threatened their authority and who did not, as well as common ways to govern what or who they perceived as a threat.³³

Cuba solicited assistance for its radical social transformations: it asked for assistance in the creation of a uniform prison system and two ministries similar to the GDR, well-trained cadres in the fight against “counter-revolutionary forces,” as well as an exchange of experience and advice from the working group of the Minister of the Interior of the GDR.³⁴ This ongoing list of demands directed at the GDR’s government was an extreme contrast to the more relaxed, emotional and friendly stance the Cuban government communicated to its citizens.

This close cooperation aimed at a mutual benefit was maintained until the end of the GDR and not only consisted of forms of concretely coordinated “political-operational measures” developed at the central level of the ministry leaders as well as between technically congruent service units,³⁵ but also included the “development of cooperation in the establishment and organization of the work of security officers in the

economy of the Republic of Cuba, in particular through the continuous, stable exchange of information and practical experience.”³⁶

Despite this close bond between the states, the solidarity concept communicated between the governments was never formulated on an empathetic level, as might be suggested by the official communication and the relations of international solidarity they upheld. On the contrary, during the second half of the 1980s, Cuba suffered from a loss of confidence in SUP politics and governance.³⁷

Due to this gap in their solidarity communication—combined with the diminishing resources of the GDR that led to a rising demand of profit—, this system of international solidarity³⁸ could not be supported any longer after the fall of the Berlin Wall. With German reunification, these relations ended abruptly and left the solidarity and friendship groups of the FRG with a solidarity concept that needed to be redefined and communicated anew.

33 Ehlert, Stadt, Voight, *Die Zusammenarbeit*, 9-10.

34 Ehlert, Stadt, Voight, *Die Zusammenarbeit*, 10.

35 Ehlert, Stadt, Voight, *Die Zusammenarbeit*, 16.

36 Ehlert, Stadt, Voight, *Die Zusammenarbeit*, 35.

37 Ehlert, Stadt, Voight, *Die Zusammenarbeit*, 64-65.

38 Susanne Ritschel, *Kubanische Studierende in Der DDR. Ambivalentes Erinnern Zwischen Zeitzeuge Und Archiv* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 2015), 47.

NEGOTIATING SOLIDARITY DURING TRANSITIONS

CUBA AND THE FRG

As explained in the previous sections, bilateral relations between Cuba and the GDR were extremely strong and well-connected through the discourse of international solidarity. Relations between the FRG and Cuba, however, were not as strongly developed. The author Ralf Breuer even described the FRG as a “Nordic hardliner”³⁹ among the Western European nations that traditionally supported the United States. The FRG, consistent with the US policy of embargo, rejected cooperation with Cuba following the Cuban Revolution in 1959. Breuer assumes that the FRG’s attitude was not only an exclusive expression of their allegiance to the US, but also reflected above all the concern that a development directed against the United States could lead to the loss of the FRG’s only credible security guarantor. As a result, the revolutionary events in Cuba were indirectly perceived as a threat in their own right. Up until the end of the Cold War, the FRG regarded the Cuban Revolution in simplified terms: either pro US and against the

Soviet Union, or pro Soviet Union and against the US. The individual character of the Cuban Revolution and the Cuban system, which surpassed this categorization, thus went unnoticed.⁴⁰

Another point of conflict was the establishment of bilateral relations between Cuba and the GDR. For the FRG, this was a violation of the Hallstein Doctrine,⁴¹ which led it to suspend bilateral relations with Cuba just two days later. With the improvement of relations between the two German countries in the 1970s, relations between the FRG and Cuba also relaxed, and bilateral relations were resumed. The situation changed in the 1980s, however, when Cuba negotiated retraining measures within the framework of the Paris Club. The FRG, together with the US, tried to make the negotiations more difficult by the joint acquisition of a majority stake in an English bank involved in the debt restructuring negotiations.⁴² This example shows that the bilateral relationship

39 Ralf Breuer, “Die deutsche Kuba-Politik nach der Wiedervereinigung,” in: *Kuba: Politik, Wirtschaft, Kultur heute*, (2001): 773-800, https://publications.iai.spkberlin.de/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/Document_derivate_00001715/BIA_075_773_800.pdf.

40 Breuer, “Die deutsche Kuba-Politik,” 775.

41 The FRG claimed to be the only representative of Germany. Using the political instrument of the Hallstein Doctrine, it threatened all states which officially established bilateral relations with the GDR to break off relations. Cuba was the first Latin American country to officially establish relations with the GDR in 1963, thus challenging the exclusive representation of the FRG. Breuer, “Die deutsche Kuba-Politik,” 777.

42 Breuer, “Die deutsche Kuba-Politik,” 779.

between Cuba and the FRG remained cold in spite of some attempts to rebuild a relationship.

CUBA AND THE GDR IN TIMES OF TRANSITIONS

In the transition period, the relations between the FRG and Cuba did not change. However, relations between Cuba and the GDR got worse. With the progressive inner-German rapprochement, Cuba brought back about 8,000 of its GDR workers from 1990 to the beginning of 1991.⁴³ Furthermore, many Cuban students who studied in the GDR returned to Cuba in 1990/91. The main reason was the introduction of the DM (German Mark) in the GDR and the associated increase in the cost of living for Cubans in Germany.⁴⁴ But it was not only Cuba and Cubans who changed migration processes, as the GDR unilaterally terminated their visa-free agreement

with Cuba on 9 July 1990.⁴⁵

During this period, about 100 intergovernmental agreements still existed between the GDR and Cuba, which regulated trade and economic relations between the two countries. Some of these agreements were maintained until the year 2000, and part of the intensive cooperation was the favorable granting of loans⁴⁶ from the GDR to Cuba. There was also an agreement that Cuba could pay off the loans in the form of trade supplies. As early as 1990, previously agreed upon deliveries from Cuba to companies in the GDR were then suspended, as the GDR no longer had any interest in purchasing from them. Furthermore, the demand for primary goods from Cuba such as sugar, fruit, or tobacco diminished, as these products were now increasingly being supplied to the GDR from the FRG. Still under the responsibility of the GDR's Ministry of Economics, a monetary reassessment of Cuba's repayment obligation, deliveries, and payments from both countries in DM was initiated.⁴⁷

43 This was officially agreed at government level between East Germany and Cuba. In itself, it was not a breach of contract, as these workers were originally supposed to leave the GDR earlier, but then stayed longer at the request of the GDR. Carola Hesse-Andres, "Innenpolitische Anspannungen in der Bevölkerung Kubas" *Cuba Sí - Zeitschrift der Freundschaftsgesellschaft Westberlin-Kuba e.V.* (May, 1992) 2-4: 3.

44 Carola Hesse-Andres, "Kurznachrichten zusammengestellt," *Cuba Sí - Zeitschrift der Freundschaftsgesellschaft Westberlin-Kuba e.V.* (September, 1990) 18-20: 18.

45 Ralf Punkenburg, "Mit Kuba wird es keine staatliche Entwicklungszusammenarbeit geben," *Cuba Sí - Zeitschrift der Freundschaftsgesellschaft Westberlin-Kuba e.V.* (January, 1991) 6-12: 7.

46 The benefits included 2% interest, some grace years, and 15-20 years repayment period.

47 Punkenburg, "Mit Kuba wird es keine staatliche Entwicklungszusammenarbeit geben," 6f.

THE CUBA WAVE

On 26 and 27 July 1990, representatives of the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation met in Constance. At this conference, the future of the bilateral trade agreements was to be decided. The FRG was declared as the future legal representative and was also willing to continue the binational relations of the GDR in the field of economic and development cooperation. The big exception, however, was cooperation with Cuba. The GDR declared itself unwilling to support Cuba in any form if they would not initiate political changes.⁴⁸ The GDR was only prepared to make an exception for milk powder delivery and to stop the cooperation after a transitional period of six months.⁴⁹

48 Punkenburg, "Mit Kuba," 9f.; Breuer, "Die deutsche Kuba-Politik", 773f., 780; cf. Michael Zeuske, *Insel der Extreme: Kuba im 20. Jahrhundert* (Zürich: Rotpunktverlag, 2000).

49 The GDR had concluded a skimmed milk powder agreement with Cuba in 1981. The agreements were valid until 1995, and during the negotiations, the representatives from the GDR particularly supported this agreement, justifying this for humanitarian reasons. They agreed to continue the supply of milk powder for six months, as stipulated in the agreement, and afterwards stop their cooperation on this project. This not only affected Cuba, but also farms in the GDR which produced milk powder almost exclusively for Cuba and lost their main customers. Ralf Punkenburg, "Mit Kuba," 8.

From a Cuban perspective, the international transformation during this period had an enormous impact on the country. Even though the Cuban Revolution claimed a certain independence from the East-West conflict, in a very short period of time, Cuba was internationally isolated at both an ideological and a foreign trade level. Cuba lost the Soviet Union and the GDR as trading partners in the short term and, in the case of the GDR, in the long term as well.⁵⁰ Despite the political and economic circumstances of Cuba, the German population became increasingly interested in the island, their people, culture, politics and current news. This phenomenon was called the "Kuba Welle" (the Cuba Wave).

THE INFLUENCE OF REUNIFICATION IN THE EXISTING RELATIONS WITH CUBA

A part of society that accompanied the important transformation processes of German reunification and grew within it was organized in the solidarity groups of both states. The destruction of the real-socialist model of the GDR in particular created space for the quantitative and qualitative development of these movements.⁵¹

50 To refer to this period historically Cubans use the term "special period". Carola Hesse-Andres, "Kurznachrichten zusammengestellt," 18; Breuer, "Die deutsche Kuba-Politik," 780.

51 Solidarity groups tried to take over or

Many people were looking for active forms of life, which they found in solidarity groups, among other things. As a result, the period of transition spurred on the growth of these solidarity groups. Their political work in particular was expanded and increasingly concentrated on preventing the collapse of GDR aid.⁵²

The special situation in the case of Cuba was after the establishment of bilateral relations between the GDR and Cuba, when greater development policy and solidarity measures were organized almost exclusively at the state level.⁵³ During the period of transformation between 1989-1991, several solidarity projects with Cuba were founded in various regions of Germany. On the West German side of Berlin, there was the Freundschaftsgesellschaft (Friendship Society) West Berlin-Cuba e.V., which focused on the task of informing the (West) German population about political, economic, and cultural issues in Latin America

and Cuba.⁵⁴ In March 1990, the Friendship Committee GDR-Cuba was founded in the East of Berlin. This group of about 30 people emerged from the “Club de los Amigos de Cuba” (Friends of Cuba Club) which had already existed for several years in Königswusterhausen. The friendship committee consisted of people who had been working in official solidarity organizations in the GDR.⁵⁵ A short time later a Cuba initiative was founded in Gesundheitsladen-Berlin (a health shop), together with Pro Cuba, a committee for the support of Cuba. The initiative strived towards the goal of supporting the Cuban health system, especially by providing material aid.⁵⁶ On 23 July 1991, the Cuba Sí working group of the PDS (Partei des demokratischen Sozialismus⁵⁷) was founded in Berlin. Their first major project was “Milch für Kubas Kinder” (Milk for Cuba’s Children), which came as a

at least cushion the disappearance of national, state-organized solidarity from the GDR. This means that many new solidarity groups arose, or that the work of already existing solidarity groups intensified.

- 52 Malte Letz, “Im Osten nichts Neues?: Ostdeutsche Solidaritätsgruppen vor und nach der Wende,” *Forschungsjournal Neue Soziale Bewegungen: Solidaritätsbewegungen zwischen Hoffnung und Resignation* 3 (1994): 53f.
- 53 Achim Reichardt, *Nie Vergessen: Solidarität üben* (Berlin: Kai Homilius Verlag, 2006), 85.

54 FBK, “Wofür wir stehen,” FBK, <https://www.fg-berlin-kuba.de/index.php/die-freundschaftsgesellschaft-berlin-kuba/ueber-die-freundschaftsgesellschaft-berlin-kuba>.

55 Freundschaftsgesellschaft Westberlin-Kuba e.V. (ed.), “Ankündigung der Aktivitäten der Redaktion,” *Cuba Sí – Zeitschrift der Freundschaftsgesellschaft Westberlin-Kuba e.V.*, 1992, May, 29.

56 Freundschaftsgesellschaft Westberlin-Kuba e.V. (ed.), “Neue Kuba Initiative in Berlin,” *Cuba Sí - Zeitschrift der Freundschaftsgesellschaft Westberlin-Kuba e.V.*, 1991, January, 24.

57 Party of Democratic Socialism, today: *DIE LINKE - The Left*.

result of the previously mentioned cancellation of the milk powder delivery from Germany to Cuba. A further aim of Cuba Sí was to carry solidarity with the Cuban population into the PDS and to inform Germans about the US blockade policies and their effects in Cuba. The solidarity communities in Berlin were additionally well-networked with other people or institutions which supported Cuba.⁵⁸

CUBA SÍ: SOLELY HUMANITARIAN?

The foundation of Cuba Sí was made up of a variety of individuals, including members from the Friends of Cuba and the PDS. As a result of their work, the party executive committee officially announced the association's foundation in July 1991.⁵⁹ Therefore, from the very beginning, their work carried a political dimension, and was not solely based on humanitarian reasons.

A Cuba Sí member explained that in the beginning they were a "Wilder Haufen" (wild bunch), but there was a constant development of work. There were many discussions

in the K.O. Council (Coordination Council), one of the two elements of Cuba Sí's organizational structure, where all essential decisions were made. The second element was the foundation and work of regional groups.⁶⁰ Up until 1995, a total of 17 regional groups of Cuba Sí were founded. In regional terms, these initially were concentrated strongly in the new federal states of the GDR.⁶¹ Applying Radtke's definition, Cuba Sí communicated solidarity in four specific ways – through events, information, petitions and requests, and personal relationships – which will be elaborated on in more detail.

EVENTS

One of the main activities of Cuba Sí was the organization of different types of events. For example, one of the first activities of Cuba Sí after its foundation was to participate in an official celebration of the Cuban National Day on 26 July. In 1992, the "Fiesta de Solidaridad" (Solidarity Party), on the same date, was organized for the first time by Cuba Sí itself.⁶² "That had been our specialty from the very beginning. [Initially several] hundreds of people took part in the celebration, and later up to more than a thousand," said Lukas,⁶³ who celebrated the

58 Not all but most of the solidarity groups still exist today. An overview of the solidarity groups with Cuba across Germany in 1993 can be found in: Reinhard Pohl (ed.), "Cuba," (Kiel: Magazin Verlag, 1993), 46.

59 Cuba Sí, "Cuba Sí: eine Chronik 1991 - 2011," (Berlin: private digital library Habel, 2011), 8.

60 Cuba Sí Berlin, "Video: 20 Jahre Cuba Sí - Teil 1," Youtube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XVhC0fps_5A.

61 Cf. Cuba Sí, *Cuba Sí: eine Chronik 1991 - 2011*, 8-23.

62 Cuba Sí, *Cuba Sí: eine Chronik*, 8.

63 The name was changed by the

first Fiesta de Solidaridad of Cuba Sí and has been active in Cuba Sí for a long time. “We started to have a small celebration in the embassy in Pankow, there were a few stands [where] Cuba Libre was sold, [there was also] an information desk about our projects [and we sold] souvenirs and T-shirts. [...]here was always music”. Other solidarity groups like KarEn also had desks at the celebration.⁶⁴

Aside from the Fiesta de Solidaridad, which was certainly informative but mainly meant for celebrating and spending time together, Cuba Sí also organized public informative events. The main focus was on the organization and participation in congresses or meetings between solidarity groups. On the one hand, the various regional groups of Cuba Sí met to coordinate their work and exchange information. Then there were three national congresses,⁶⁵ one of them organized by Cuba Sí itself in Berlin. At this solidarity congress, a total of 281 participants took part, including guests from Cuba and representatives of the Cuban government in Germany. The participants addressed a final declaration to the President of the

US and a solidarity message to the Cuban people.⁶⁶

In addition to national meetings, international congresses⁶⁷ were also organized and attended, three of them in Europe. In May 1992, Cuba Sí participated in the Cuba Congress “‘Solidarity with Cuba’ - Ending the Blockade by the USA, EC [European Community] and FRG”⁶⁸ in Bonn. Cuba Sí did not merely assist at the congress, but they sponsored its creation as well. Ulrich Bojé, a member of Cuba Sí, was also a speaker at the conference. In his speech, he explained the policy of the FRG towards Cuba. Besides Bojé, numerous other people, mainly from Europe and Latin America, took part in the congress as speakers. This example shows that the communication was not one-sided, including a diverse variety of speakers and representatives. As with the national congresses, numerous representatives of Cuba also actively participated in the congress.

In addition, the President of the Republic of Cuba, Fidel Castro, sent a message of greeting to the Solidarity Congress in Bonn. His main focus was on presenting the current

authors. Lukas has been an active member of Cuba Sí since the first year of its foundation.

64 Personal interview conducted in German and translated to English.

65 The National Congress consists of friends of Cuba and mainly participants from German-Cuban solidarity and friendship groups.

66 Cuba Sí, *Cuba Sí: eine Chronik 1991 - 2011*, 16f.

67 International Congress is a category that includes congresses attended by solidarity and friendship groups and other interested parties and friends of Cuba. The participants originated from different countries (except Cuba and Germany).

68 Cuba Sí, *Cuba Sí*, 10.

blockade by the US from Cuba's perspective. He elaborated:

[They think] in Washington that we will not be able to resist, that the hour of the settlement with Cuba has come. To this purpose the USA intensifies its ideological war [...]. Several European governments and institutions have joined this policy by setting political conditions for the development of cooperation and bilateral relations [...]. [But] no one should feel pity to us. [...] You give much more. You offer us your full political and material solidarity at this decisive moment.⁶⁹

Castro did not fully clarify what he understood by political and material solidarity, however, thus leaving room for interpretation. Three years later, the President of the Republic of Cuba himself participated in a conference in Copenhagen. This was the counter-summit to the UN World Social Summit, and a delegation of Cuba Sí also took part there.

Four further international congresses were held in Cuba from 1993-1995, with Cuba Sí participating in each of them. At these congresses, cooperation was coordinated, and agreements were reached about the implementation of projects in

various areas.⁷⁰ Notable about these various meetings is that most of the events organized by Cuba Sí were addressed mainly to people who were already involved with Cuba. However, other events appealed to a larger audience as a result of their visibility. For example, Cuba Sí organized vigils, such as the one in front of the US Embassy in Berlin in October 1993, in which they demanded an end to the US policy of blockade.⁷¹ On top of that, Cuba Sí organized a large demonstration in protest against the US economic blockade of Cuba in Berlin in 1995 together with other Cuba solidarity groups. In addition to the types of events just mentioned, Cuba Sí also organized a *solí-skat* evening at the senior citizens' club Knaackstrasse in Berlin, where they offered to play the game skat to promote solidarity with Cuba.

INFORMATION

Other parts of the population were not reached through events, but through the production and distribution of materials. Cuba Sí took over editorial offices and produced various informative materials, which became available then to a wider audience. It participated in the distribution of information about Cuba with the editing and publication of two books. Together with the newspaper *Junge Welt* (Young World) they also participated

⁶⁹ Fidel Castro Ruz, "Gruß von Fidel an den Solidaritätskongreß [sic!] in Bonn," *Cuba Libre* 2 (1992): 21f. Own translation.

⁷⁰ Cuba Sí, *Cuba Sí*, 14 - 19.

⁷¹ Cuba Sí, *Cuba Sí*, 15.

in the publication of “Granma” International.⁷² Furthermore, in 1994, Cuba Sí produced and published a film documentary entitled “Milch für Kubas Kinder” (Milk for Cuba’s Children).

The people involved in Cuba Sí produced brochures, information materials, and articles for magazines themselves. One of the goals here was to draw interest to Cuba. Cuba Si member Lukas even had this experience himself:

I began to come into more contact with Cuba [...] when I [saw] with my girlfriend at an event of the Humboldt Society [...], a brochure about a trip to Cuba, organized by Cuba Sí. And it was there that I came to Cuba Sí for the first time, as a result [I] also became more involved with Cuba.⁷³

The work of Cuba Sí or Cuba in general was not only communicated through brochures. Together with the chairman of the PDS Gregor Gysi, the working group also wrote articles which frequently were published in newspapers and magazines, mainly relating to leftist ideology. In a guest article from 1992, they called for donations for a milk

72 Granma is the official Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party. At that time, party-related news was distributed via the platform in a printed newspaper, which now also appears monthly in a German edition.
73 Interview with Cuba Sí member.

project which not only supplied milk powder to Cuba, but at the same time also aimed to promote national milk production. The authors Gregor Gysi and Ulrich Bojé expressed their gratitude for the solidarity shown up to that point and made

the request for increased and continuous solidarity with Cuba [... to the reader]. Be more solidary! Do not let this honest people out in the cold! Donate regularly for our own solidarity initiatives! Solidarity unites us and gives us hope! [... It is important to them that Cuba can gain or keep its] political and economic independence, which makes a socially just development possible. [The authors then call for donations and conclude with the words:] Let’s be realistic, let’s try the impossible!⁷⁴

Here the authors equated solidarity primarily with financial donations. Only in the second step was the political solidarity and international friendship also mentioned.

PETITIONS AND REQUESTS

Besides events and the production of written and visual materials, petitions and formal requests represented a third way in

74 Ulrich Bojé and Gregor Gysi, “Solidarität mit Cuba!: Schluss mit der Blockade durch USA, EG und BRD,” *Cuba Libre* 3 (1992): 39.

which solidarity was communicated. Cuba Sí submitted a series of petitions and requests during its first years. These were primarily addressed to the PDS, which Cuba Sí also utilized to get petitions through to state parliaments.⁷⁵ For example, on October 28, 1992, a petition submitted by the “Linke Liste” (Left List, which is a union between different left-wing parties) for a single humanitarian aid project called “Milk for Cuba’s Children” was supported by the Brandenburg state government.⁷⁶ Earlier, PDS chairman Gregor Gysi had called on Chancellor Helmut Kohl to continue the agreed deliveries of milk powder between East Germany and Cuba. He was referring to the 14,000 signatures of persons organized by Cuba Sí who supported this demand. In April 1993, the PDS and Linke Liste then called on the German government to normalize German-Cuban economic relations. Both petitions, however, were not responded to by the German government.

⁷⁵ These requests to the PDS were made at the respective party conferences. In the first year of Cuba Sí, 1991, the PDS already applied for solidarity with the Cuban people and demanded the immediate ending of the blockade. The motion was accepted by the Party Executive Committee. In addition, Cuba Sí submitted three further motions at party conferences. See Cuba Sí, *Cuba Sí*, 8-21.

⁷⁶ Cuba Sí, *Cuba Sí*, 11.

PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Finally, Cuba Sí communicated solidarity in areas where they brought together people from Germany and Cuba, including forms of organized travel. Lukas also took part in such a trip after seeing the brochure at an event:

My intention was then to go to Cuba to experience what Cuba is like. Because after the collapse [of] the whole Eastern Bloc [...] I thought, of course, that they would soon have the same situation as we had [...], only worse, they didn’t have a big brother to catch them. [...] And when I was there, the will to take part [in Cuba Sí] was even bigger because what I saw there, after the collapse of the *Periodo Especial* [special period] in Cuba in 1992, was a catastrophe.

The example of Lukas shows how deep the impressions and experiences of people who came into contact with Cuba through Cuba Sí could be. Of course, this was certainly not as intense for all travelers as it was for him. Nevertheless, Cuba Sí has continuously offered journeys to Cuba. In addition to these private trips, Cuba Sí also connected Germans and Cubans in other ways, like the congresses and information events analyzed above. There were also working visits of delegations of Cuba Sí to Cuba.

Another objective was to unite people in political positions.

Gregor Gysi, for example, met Fidel Castro in February 1992 for a discussion lasting several hours in Cuba. During this trip he also had contact with other Cuban party members.⁷⁷ Other than Gysi, additional political figures were connected with Cuban politicians, including the honorary chairman of the PDS Hans Mondrow, who had conversations with high-ranking representatives of the PCC (Partido Comunista de Cuba), and the National Assembly in 1993. In 1994, a delegation from Brandenburg also visited Cuba as guests at the Cuban National Assembly.

Yet it was not only Germans that visited Cuba, as Cubans also came to Germany. They were invited to congresses, information events, or work visits, to meet with representatives of the PDS and Linke Liste to discuss the current situation in Cuba.⁷⁸

Cuba Sí generally communicated with the Cuban authorities. Lukas remembered the contact “in the beginning mainly went through the embassy [as Cuba Sí was] formed as a Solidary Group, they worked very closely with the Cuban embassy. [Later,] it all went through the [...Cuban] Ministry of Commerce.”⁷⁹ This meant that the work of Cuba Sí was also political from the beginning. Just as it had been between GDR and Cuba, the communication was handled via state

77 Cuba Sí, *Cuba Sí*, 10.

78 Cuba Sí, *Cuba Sí*, 9-23.

79 Interview.

organs.

Aside from embassies and direct contact, most contacts of solidarity groups with Cuba were organized through ICAP (Cuban Institute of Friendship with the Peoples). The former President of ICAP, Sergio Corrieri, said in 1993:

We are living through a time when solidarity with Cuba is at the highest level in its history. [...] Solidarity is more fundamental, even if the friends want to materialize their solidarity in concrete solidarity goods, the really important thing is that many have contributed to it and have been present at events. [...]. [Events and campaigns are] an important sign of solidarity.⁸⁰

For Lukas, solidarity meant giving something to others. He also thought “if you’re a child from the GDR, then you [got to know] this system under socialism. Solidarity with other people and other countries who are not particularly well off, who were in the struggle for liberation and the like [...], you’ve always had a relationship with other countries [and] other people.”⁸¹ Cuba Sí thus took over a function that the FRG could never have assumed in the

80 Isabel Morales, “Die Solidaritätsbewegung mit Cuba besteht aus vielen ehrlichen Menschen: Interview mit Sergio Corrieri, Präsident des ICAP,” *Cuba Libre* 1 (1993): 32f.

81 Interview.

same way. As a result, Cuba Sí came to represent the other Germany in Cuba.⁸²

AN OUTLOOK

There is a continuity to be observed in the communication of solidarity that began with the first steps towards an intercultural exchange in the GDR, which then persevered after the German reunification and the end of bilateral relations between the GDR and Cuba.

As our analysis indicates, solidarity in the GDR and Cuba was bound to the actors it was communicated and instilled by. From the government to its citizens, both states used the rhetorical means to appeal to hard work and productivity as international bonds that was considered the essence of their solidarity. The same emotional bond could not be found in the communication between their state institutions, as this type of solidarity was solely based on the expectation of a mutual benefit and economic-political profit. In addition, it was endangered by a rising lack of trust towards the end of the 1980s.

With the German

reunification, these relations ended abruptly and left the solidarity and friendship groups of the FRG with a solidarity concept that needed to be redefined and communicated anew. The transition period after the fall of the Berlin Wall and before Germany was officially reunited consisted of rising tensions and terminations of contracts, as well as the establishment of intercultural exchange networks between the former GDR—then FRG—and Cuba.

Soon after tensions subsided, solidarity groups in the FRG resumed their cooperation with Cuba and became increasingly political in their work. Besides the organization of events and coordination of development projects, these groups—such as Cuba Sí—focused on the distribution of information and intercultural (political) exchange as a means to continuously communicate solidarity.

Although the type of cooperation changed from a state to a community level, at its very core solidarity was communicated in a way that appealed to the social norms of citizens and thus to their demeanor, as Radtke stated in her aforementioned definition of solidarity, more than solely for humanitarian reasons such as the general feeling of helping others. The example of solidarity groups such as Cuba Sí quite clearly displays that solidarity was usually based on a mutual benefit such as cooperation and intercultural exchange. For Cuba Sí, this resulted in a main focus on material assistance with

82 Cuba Sí Berlin, "Video: 20 Jahre Cuba Sí - Teil 3," Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dR8T2Os0awA>. Although this was said by members of Cuba Sí in the context of cultural representation at a book fair, it sums up most areas.

the byproduct of ideological support in their external communication and, in this manner, served as a replacement for the former dynamic between Cuban and GDR relations. The difference before and after the reunification, however, lies in the voluntary core of Cuba Si's work and its goal to strengthen Cuba's political and economic independence as opposed to the aforementioned "voluntary coercion."⁸³ Another continuity to be observed lies in the organization of cooperation, which proceeded to mainly take place on a state level in Cuba. In this context, the PDS enabled a much more profound political exchange than other solidarity groups at the time.

What this analysis aims for is the general understanding of solidarity communication during and following the Cold War and a closer look at the ideological structures it depended on. Nonetheless, questions of how these ideological structures offer a top-down mentality and whether the resulting hierarchies can still be found in solidarity groups via so-called "Third World" or development projects remain unanswered and suggest the need for further research.

83 "UMBRÜCHE-Diskussion: A Work in Progress," 14.