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WILL THE CZECH ROCK SCENE ADOPT AN EAST GERMAN BEAT?

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Summary: The Czechoslovak government's change of attitude toward hard rock, from outright repression to co-optation based on the East German pattern, is not likely to succeed because it comes too late. The rock subculture has become too widespread and entrenched.

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From 29 to 30 June 1986, Czechoslovakia sponsored Rockfest '86, the country's first major rock festival. The two-day event, held in Prague's Palace of Culture, featured 80 Czechoslovakian rock bands, including groups that had previously been banned from performing in public. Officials not only showed leniency toward unofficial rock ensembles but also allowed large numbers of "anarchists, hippies, and punks" to attend the series of concerts.¹ Western observers suggested that the communist regime's sudden openness toward rock music was perhaps the beginning of a cultural thaw.²

Rockfest 86 was, as the government itself admitted, not a reversal of its cultural policy but rather the first step in a campaign by the cultural authorities to use the official East German approach to rock music as a cultural model.³ The Czech government hopes to reform the rock scene, while maintaining strict control over the artistic and ideological content.

The Rock Music Scene. In the mid-1980s it has become clear that the Czechoslovak music scene is in desperate need of reform. Since the early 1970s the Czechoslovaks have pursued one of the most tightly controlled cultural policies in the entire Soviet bloc. Whatever did not conform to official taste was banned. In 1969, for example, the singer Karel Kryl was forced into exile; in the mid-1970s, underground rock groups like DG-305 and the Plastic People were harassed, arrested, and

imprisoned; and recently punk bands such as ETC and Yellow Dog have also suffered under official disdain.

Despite the apparent success of its repressive policies, the government finds itself in a quandary. Officially sanctioned singers and groups provide young people with at best middling musical fare, resinging old Elvis Presley songs or performing innocuous original material. Their "talent" is hardly recognized beyond the limits of the official cultural scene. At the same time, however, underground bands flourish, enjoying not only great popularity among young people but also attracting international attention. The Charter 77 human rights organization, the emergence of which was at least in part influenced by the imprisonment of members of the Plastic People, keeps the world media informed about musical developments within the Czechoslovak underground.

Josef Trnka, Director of the Institute for Cultural and Educational Activity has admitted that the official cultural scene has received "inadequate, incompetent, superficial, and unsystematic attention."⁴ He further acknowledged that the government would have to respond to the real interests of young people if Czechoslovakia were to develop a viable official rock culture. In seeking to reform the official policy toward rock music, Czechoslovak cultural functionaries have said that they will look to the GDR as a cultural model. There is a good reason for doing this. While socialist countries such as Poland and Hungary struggle with antagonistic rock bands, East Germany enjoys a musically dynamic and yet politically and culturally obedient rock culture.

The East German Musical Scene. East Germany, having a common language and cultural heritage with the adjacent FRG and able to receive not only West German but also American military forces broadcasts, was compelled to confront rather than ignore the Western "ape culture,"⁵ as Walter Ulbricht had called it. Initially, East Germany, like the other communist countries, had railed against everyone from the Swingle Singers (their music "leads to aesthetic disorientation and poisons the mind")⁶ to the Rolling Stones (they appeal to "base instincts and cause hysteria").⁷

In the early 1970s, while the Czechoslovaks cracked down on popular music, the East German government reversed its policy and began to court rock bands. Musicians, such as The Puhdys, who were willing to trim their hair and mind their decibel levels were given record contracts and allowed to appear on television. The GDR also began to politicize the rock movement by organizing contests and festivals devoted to political issues. The best known are two annual events, The Festival of Political Songs and Rock for Peace. Yet the authorities have also demonstrated resolve in repressing any movements that deviate from its image of socialist rock-and-roll.

The Leipzig Rock-and-Roll Riot of 1965. The Leipzig rock-and-roll riot of 1965 was one of East Germany's few public protests since the crushing of the 1953 uprising. In October 1965 the popular musical ensemble The Butlers was disbanded because its music, strongly influenced by the Rolling Stones, was deemed harmful to the state's "moral and ethical principles." Leipzig's young people disagreed and organized a public demonstration to protest the government's action. On the last Sunday in October several hundred young people assembled at Leuschner Square to demonstrate solidarity with the rock band. Erich Loest, a prominent East German writer now living in the West, described the government's response: "in the lead a jeep with police officers, followed by two trucks with riot police, then a large armored truck with . . . a turret mounted with a water cannon, then two more truckloads of riot police and another jeep."⁸ The police ruthlessly broke up the demonstration with dogs, clubs, and water cannons. Several days later a local newspaper reported a minor scuffle with rowdies in the city center.

Biermann, CBS Records, and the 1976 Expatriation. In 1965 the East German government also banned the protest singer Wolf Biermann, denouncing his lyrics as "toilet stall poetry." Despite the ban, Biermann continued to write and perform his music in his East Berlin apartment. Through a network of contacts, Biermann gained popularity not only in East but also in West Germany. Biermann, in fact, developed such a following in the West that CBS Records signed him on as a recording artist. For over a decade Biermann, based in East Berlin, wrote, performed, and distributed songs criticizing the East German government.

In November 1976 Biermann, having traveled to West Germany to give a concert, was barred from returning to East Berlin. The artistic community was outraged; 13 prominent East German writers, actors, and musicians openly protested the government's action, demanding that Biermann be allowed to return. The communist regime remained intransigent. In the next two years dozens of East Germany's most prominent writers, actors, and musicians emigrated to the West. The government weathered the exodus of artistic talent, filling the gaps with young, politically trustworthy artists.

Renft, "Otto," and Imprisonment. A year before Biermann's exile, in September 1975, East Germany's most popular rock group, the Renft Combo, was dissolved by the government. Founded in 1972 by members of the disbanded ensemble The Butlers, Renft became the most dynamic group on the East German rock scene. Relying on talent rather than on official patronage, Renft members refused to cut their hair, turn down their amplifiers, or respond to bids for co-optation. The band also touched on taboo subjects. "The Ballad of Otto" told of an attempted escape to West Germany. The song "Glaubensfragen" [Questions of Belief] criticized both the East German military and prison

system. Two band members, including the lyricist Gerulf Pannach, were imprisoned for defaming East Germany's "working class" and its "security forces." Other band members either recanted or emigrated to the West.

The Present Situation. In recent years the authorities have found seemingly less brutal methods for controlling the rock scene. In order to prevent the formation of an underground rock culture, the government allows the infiltration of Western trends, albeit balancing its measure of tolerance with ultimate control. When the breakdance craze hit East Germany, the state immediately organized breakdancing contests throughout the country. Similarly, since punk emerged in the late 1970s, the government has shown a certain amount of tolerance toward bands such as Silly, Pankow, and Keks.

East Germany is not, however, without its cultural problems. Frank Hille, the drummer for the group Pankow, one of the best rock ensembles in all of Europe, defected to the West while the group was touring West Germany last spring; and despite the diversity of expression granted to some East German rock bands, there is still an active underground culture. Since the early 1980s, Prenzlauer Berg, a section of East Berlin, has become a center for the East German punk movement. Unofficial bands from as far away as Leipzig and Dresden hold illegal concerts in courtyards and apartments, playing to dozens of fans who gather to hear their piercing condemnations of socialist society.⁹

Conclusion. East Germany has harnessed the domestic rock movement by a combination of control and selective tolerance; and, indeed, the technique seems to have had success when one compares the East German results with those of Hungary and Poland. It is unlikely, however, that an "East-Germanization" of Czechoslovak rock will experience much success.

A decade-and-a-half of oppression in Czechoslovakia has led to the creation of an extensive underground rock culture that has no equivalent in East Germany. Official campaigns against underground music have made rock-and-roll a rallying point for political and social opposition. The underground rock scene in Czechoslovakia is too extensive to be eradicated and too firmly entrenched in opposition to be co-opted. In his discussion of official intolerance toward rock music, Josef Trnka admitted that the Czech government had responded to the situation "belatedly." In all probability, an official bid to control the rock scene is not just "belated" but fated to failure from the start.

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1 *The Economist*, 27 June 1986.

- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 For a detailed discussion, see Czechoslovak Situation Report/12, *Radio Free Europe Research*, 5 September 1986, item 6.
- 4 *Mlada Fronta*, 22 July 1986.
- 5 *Der Spiegel* 19/1967. The term "Affenkultur" was coined by Walter Ulbricht.
- 6 *Melodie und Rhythmus*, no. 22, 1967.
- 7 *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, 13 October 1965.
- 8 Erich Loest, *Es geht seinen Gang* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1980), p. 19.
- 9 The underground rock scene in East Germany is detailed in two books: Wolfgang Buescher, *Null Block auf DDR* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag, 1984) and Olaf Leitner, *Rockszenen DDR: Aspekte einer Massenkultur im Sozialismus* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag, 1983).

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