

An interview with former East German director Rainer Simon

“We wanted to make realistic films about the GDR”

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At the Berlinale 2009 the WSWs had the opportunity to speak with Rainer Simon about his work as a film director in the German Democratic Republic (formerly East Germany).

Simon was born in 1941. As a youth he had a number of important experiences which cast doubt on the “socialist” character of the GDR. Once he became acquainted with a 14-year-old boy who had been imprisoned by the Red Army in a concentration camp immediately after the war. The young boy had been accused of being a Nazi sympathizer. At the same time, one of the teachers at Simon’s school in East Germany was a former convinced Nazi who had joined the Stalinist Socialist Unity Party (SED) after the war. Following protests from the pupils the teacher was removed, but only to be sent to another school.

Interested in natural science, Simon quit the church at 16, entered the SED a year later and agitated on behalf of the party amongst farmers who were reluctant to allow their land to be nationalized.

Simon’s allegiance to the SED suffered a serious blow when news of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev’s criticisms of Stalin in 1956 slowly penetrated the GDR. With a bunch of colleagues, Simon founded the *Collective 63* at film school. The mandate of the group was to show the GDR as it was, with all its warts. Such a perspective was too much for the party bureaucracy, however, which organized a type of Stalinist tribunal following political criticism made on a wall newspaper. This was a critical experience for Simon. The year was 1964, following the ouster of Khrushchev, whose policy of accelerated industrial expansion had led to a wave of strikes in the Soviet Union.

Fearing similar protests in the GDR, the 11th Plenum of the SED in 1965 corrected the “exaggeration” of the “performance principle.” At the same time the party began to move against artists. Among the films banned at this time was *Traces of Stones* (1966) directed by Frank Beyer. In the film, workers in a labour brigade threaten to strike against supervisors and the SED to protest the lack of building material. A number of other films from this period featuring conflicts between young workers and the SED were also proscribed. Simon’s first film project dealt with a similar issue—young people attempting to evade the pervasive

control of the bureaucracy.

Simon told the WSWs: “For my first film in 1965 I had a script by Horst Bastian, *Outlaw Morality*. After the 11th Plenum I was suddenly forbidden to make this film. It showed a sort of anarchist youth gang immediately after the war who resist the remnants of the fascists, and also resist the patronizing embrace of the party. ... It was a film about the roots of the GDR and the initial years of East Germany, which have barely been dealt with in a realistic way on screen.”

Simon became an assistant to the director Ralf Kirsten who made a film about the expressionist sculptor Ernst Barlach (*The Lost Angel* [*Der verlorene Engel*], 1966), which was also initially banned. Simon came into contact as well with the filmmaker Konrad Wolf, who, in 1967 had finished his autobiographical film about the end of war in Berlin, *I was Nineteen* (*Ich war neunzehn*, released in 1968).

Wolf (1925-1982), was the son of the writer and German Communist Party member Friedrich Wolf. His brother Markus was later to become chief of the East German foreign intelligence service. The Wolf family had taken refuge from fascism in the Soviet Union and lived in Moscow during the period of Stalinist purges.

On one occasion Simon asked Konrad Wolf about the purges in the USSR and the reaction of German émigrés to the Hitler-Stalin pact. Simon found Wolf’s response unsatisfactory. Wolf spoke about the émigrés’ fear in the context of the incomprehensible arrests in the late 1930s and, at the same time, the devotion to communist ideals, which led many German refugees to tolerate the persecution of leading Communists.

Simon saw a contradiction between the purges and the ideals of communism. In terms of his enthusiasm for science, Simon could not reconcile himself to the fact that the party was not prepared to allow an open discussion of scientific matters, but instead sought to silence any criticism. At the end of the 1960s Simon read a number of books by the Russian author Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, which were being circulated secretly in the East Berlin theater scene. “Now I knew,” Simon declared in his autobiography.

His experiences have had an influence on his films when it comes to the relationship between the individual and the powers that be. Simon received his first artistic impulse from the new Soviet films of the 1960s. He was also influenced by Czech

cinema at the time of the 1968 Prague Spring, and impressed by the works of the Polish director Andrzej Wajda and the Russian Andrei Tarkovsky. He became acquainted with a wide range of international cinema at university, the Italian neo-realists and their successors, plus Truffaut, Godard, Antonioni, and the fantasy world of Fellini. He was also influenced by the world of theater, which played a large role for critical artists in the GDR.

Simon's first film, the fairy tale *How to marry a King* (*Wie heiratet man einen König*, 1969), was criticized because of its allegedly "decadent" qualities. There then followed *Ordinary People* (*Gewöhnliche Leute*, 1969—a segment in an omnibus film, *Aus Unserer Zeit* [*Episodes From Our Time*]), based on a sympathetic, everyday story by Werner Bräunig. The major novel written by the same author was banned in the GDR and only appeared in 2007, more than 30 years after the tragic death of the author, who never recovered from the shock of his work being banned.

In the 1970s Rainer Simon made a number of films, including *Men Without Beards* (*Männer ohne Bart*, 1971), a film about young people, and the comedy *Till Eulenspiegel* (1974), based on a script by Christa and Gerhard Wolf. The latter story was popular in the GDR because of its many swipes at authority figures, which the public naturally associated with the SED. This omnipresent anti-establishment factor in Simon's films meant that even a scene in his historical film *Set a Fire, Here Comes the Fire Brigade* (*Zünd an, es kommt die Feuerwehr*, 1978) was censored in its television version. The scene shows workers building a new prison striking to increase their wages.

At the conclusion of that film there is a grim scene in which the local population is forced to do senseless push-ups in the snow on the command of sadistic gendarmes. The film warns against the dangers of parents passing on a blind belief in authority to their children. The association with Stalinist drills is apparent. The only positive alternative to such a system rests with individuals who refuse to conform—as is the case with Simon's next film *Jadup and Boel*.

The latter was Simon's final attempt to bring the reality of the GDR onto the screen. Based on the novel *Jadup* (1975) by Paul Kanut Schäfer, it was the last film to be banned in East Germany. The film shows a GDR doomed to destruction should it refuse to take stock of its failings—the process for which artists waited in vain since the Khrushchev revelations.

"We wanted to make films about the GDR. We wanted to make critical or realistic films," Simon told the WWS. "That was only possible, however, when we made films which excluded any conflict—documentary-type films about young people, where everything was played down. Such films fell roughly into the parameters allowed by the East German film industry. One could deal with everyday life, but we were not permitted to show any sort of real conflict."

The crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968 by Russian tanks was a major disappointment for Simon and many others: "The moral ideal, the hope, which one once had, received a heavy blow after the events of 1968, but one still hoped naturally that something would change, that life would become easier for people..."

Simon continued: "We certainly knew about the degeneration of

the society. But of course that was absolutely taboo. Absolutely nothing could be said about it and in no way could you treat the subject in films. Among friends, yes ... The first thing by Solzhenitsyn I got to read was given me by actors I was filming with, and we read it in one night and then passed it on to friends so that as many people as possible would get the chance to read it. We didn't know much about Trotsky back then.

"But for the Stasi [GDR secret police] and the SED leadership, Trotsky was the worst of the worst. I had a friend from West Berlin who used to visit us fairly often, but I didn't know that he belonged to a Trotskyist group. Apparently there were quite a few in West Berlin at the time. But we couldn't understand why, every time he came, his car was taken apart by the authorities. Anyway, we thought it had something to do with contacts between artists in the East and West. Later I read in the Stasi records that they knew he came from a Trotskyist group. ... The whole thing was meticulously observed."

Simon, who remained critical of capitalism after the Soviet era, planned a sequel to *Jadup and Boel* at the end of the 1990s. It was to be called *Jadup's Children*. Unfortunately, the project failed to materialize, due to a lack of financing.

Since his earlier documentary film *Friends from Werbellinsee* (*Freunde am Werbellinsee*, 1967), concerning the GDR's international Pioneer Holiday Camp, Rainer Simon has envisaged making films that bring the peoples of the world together. The first real recognition of his cinematic achievements took place on an international stage: a Golden Bear at the Berlin film festival in 1985 for *The Woman and the Stranger* (*Die Frau und der Fremde*, 1985), a love story from the First World War.

Shortly before the collapse of the GDR, Simon was able to travel to South America for his film about the scientist, Alexander von Humboldt, *The Climbing of Chimborazo* (*Die Besteigung des Chimborazo*, 1989). Since then, he seems to have become attached to this part of the world and has devoted much energy and commitment to making films promoting the interests of the native population.



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