Sealed Lips: Dramatizing the Stalinist origins of the former East Germany

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Written and directed by Bernd Böhlich

Sealed Lips (*Und der Zukunft zugewandt*—literally, *And Facing the Future*), written and directed by Bernd Böhlich, is currently showing in German cinemas to coincide with the thirtieth anniversary of the collapse of the Stalinist regime that ruled the former East Germany (GDR—German Democratic Republic).

Böhlich's work is one of a number of recent films that address the contradictions of the GDR, and challenge the claim that the demise of the East German regime expressed the failure of socialism. These films include *Gundermann* (Andreas Dresen), *In Times of Fading Light* (Matti Geschonneck) and *The Silent Revolution* (Lars Kraume). *Sealed Lips* recalls the darkest chapter of the GDR—its Stalinist prehistory—and is well worth viewing.

Those imprisoned in the Stalinist penal camp in Vorkuta north of the Arctic Circle in the 1930s and 1940s were charged with being anti-Soviet enemies of socialism, and denounced as saboteurs, spies or "Trotskyists." The victims fictionally treated in the film are German Communist Party (KPD) members Antonia Berger (Alexandra Maria Lara), Irma Seibert (Karoline Eichhorn) and Susanne Schumann (Barbara Schnitzler).

Antonia was a member of the German Communist agitprop group *Kolonne Links* (Left Column) which toured the USSR in the 1930s, and fell under the wheel of Stalin's purges. As the Soviet bureaucracy promoted nationalism, the group was met with suspicion since it was made up of "foreigners," and Germans at that. Ultimately, following the outbreak of World War II, its members were declared to be "fascist spies." Antonia is the only member of the agitprop group to have survived.

In 1952, the three women are suddenly released to the GDR. Upon arriving in East Germany, they are allocated comfortable apartments and given well-paid work. Antonia becomes the director of a cultural center. Before taking up their positions, they must sign a document obliging them, under threat of prosecution, to keep silent about their "stay in the Soviet Union." They are stunned. Instead of addressing the issue, the local SED (Socialist Unity Party—the GDR's ruling party) secretary for agitation and propaganda, Leo Silberstein (Stefan Kurt), tells them what happened to them had nothing to do with Communism. There will come "a time when we will talk about everything," he declares, "but not now."

1952 is also the year in which Stalinist leader Walter Ulbricht proclaims the planned construction of "socialism" in the GDR. But what sort of socialism begins with a great falsehood, Antonia asks herself? However, she remains silent. Despite her doubts, she does not want to hinder the new beginning. The ban on free speech, nevertheless, isolates her and others. Antonia cannot even tell her mother where she has been for the past decades, or why she did not even write a postcard. When an unsuspecting comrade leaves a rarity for her at the cultural centre, an old recording by the Left Column, she leaves the hall, deeply distressed and is later admonished by Silberstein.

None of the women has a stable relationship. Even the cautious love affair between Antonia and Dr. Konrad Zeidler (Robert Stadlober)—who saves her daughter's life—fails. Konrad has moved from West Germany to the GDR, attracted by the prospect of a better society, where not only money counts. Devastated by the death of Stalin in 1953, he bursts into the company of the three women, who are celebrating Stalin's demise with sparkling wine. Konrad learns that Antonia's husband did not die in an accident, but was shot as "a Communist by Communists" in Vorkuta. He reads Antonia's camp diary and, disillusioned, subsequently returns to West Germany.

Antonia's character, excellently played by the Romanian-born Lara (*Downfall, The Reader, The Collini Case*), expresses some of the questions and doubts that motivated and plagued many Communist Party members and sympathisers who were also "detained although innocent" by the Stalinists.

SED official Silberstein justifies the Stalinist lies and crimes by arguing that former Nazis remain in power in West Germany, and the GDR population cannot be trusted. The latter change their beliefs like laundry, he says, yesterday "Brownshirt," today "blue" (the color identified with the GDR). "To be innocent in a Soviet camp, do you know what that means? They'll change their shirts again and our chance will be wasted." The director, Böhlich, has aptly captured the tone and attitudes of the SED bureaucrats, who officially extolled the virtues of socialism while treating the working class with utter contempt.

Antonia does not let up. She raises the question of the old Bolsheviks condemned to death in the Soviet show trials of the 1930s. How could Lenin's closest comrades-in-arms suddenly turn into criminals? She first asks about Leon Trotsky, then Lev Kamenev and Grigory Zinoviev.

She suspects that something is very wrong, without knowing what, and demands clarification from the party. Her inquiries land her in a state security (Stasi) prison. "You cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs," her interrogator says. The former

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Communist Party member reacts furiously to Antonia's claim of being innocently imprisoned in a Soviet camp. He shows her his wooden leg, the result of medical experiments carried out on him at the Nazis' Buchenwald concentration camp. That, he contends, was a real camp. This complex confrontation is one of the most impressive sequences in the film.

The subsequent scene, in which Antonia burns her diary because it only brings her misery, is painful to watch. "When could I ever have told the truth?" Antonia bitterly asks when Konrad phones her in November 1989. The Berlin Wall has just fallen.

As long as the GDR existed, she felt that her suffering, her silence, perhaps had some purpose and value. Was it not necessary, she asks herself, to hold back as long as "socialism" was under pressure from the capitalist world? Many in the GDR hoped for reform and improvements after the death of Stalin, and were subsequently disillusioned, as late as 1968. "Lenin wake up!" was a banner Antonia recalled from the popular uprising in Prague that year. "But Lenin did not wake up"—instead Soviet tanks crushed all hopes for the future.

Nevertheless, Antonia does not regard capitalism as an alternative. When neighbours urge her to come with them to visit West Berlin after the fall of the Wall, she refuses. Nor does she want to meet Konrad in the West. Eventually she returns with her daughter to her mother and tells her the truth about her long absence. They embrace one another, visibly relieved, and proclaim a fresh start. It sounds ambiguous: a new life cannot be based on lies nor can a genuine future socialist society.

This is also suggested by the German-language title, which refers to the GDR anthem: "Resurrected from the ruins and facing the future." *Sealed Lips* is a bitter film, which makes clear the GDR was based on the historical lie that Stalinism had something to do with socialism. Thirty years after the restoration of capitalism in the GDR, director Böhlich—who was born in Löbau (80 kilometres east of Dresden) in 1957—has raised the origins of the Stalinist terror in an incisive manner and from a left-wing viewpoint.

In an interview with Deutschlandfunk, German public radio, Böhlich declared that prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall he was informed by East German actress Swetlana Schönfeld that she had been born in 1951 in the Vorkuta labor camp. Böhlich was stunned and proceeded to carry out research on the question. It was only after the fall of the Wall in November 1989, however, that he was able to gain access to appropriate literature. He read everything he could get his hands on and talked to contemporary witnesses. He became increasingly aware that the demise of the GDR was bound up with its own history and deformations.

Silence over Stalinist crimes was the "birth defect" of the GDR, Böhlich argues. Schönfeld herself, who plays the mother in the film, explains that East Germany failed because it was built on falsehoods. The actress' mother, a staunch Communist, was arrested in 1932 in the notorious Hotel Lux in Moscow, and spent 20 years in a camp. Her father was murdered in the same camp, as is shown in *Sealed Lips*. In 1957 they were "resettled" in the GDR after old friends in the former Communist Party campaigned for their release.

The German Communists who came to the Soviet Union were a dangerous and threatening thorn in Stalin's side. He feared their criticism of his disastrous policy in Germany, which had opened the door for Hitler to take power in 1933. Following the signing of the Hitler-Stalin Pact in 1939, the arrests and shootings in Moscow increased. It was no accident that even loyal supporters of Stalin were accused of being "Trotskyists." Trotsky's writings against impending fascism and his proposal for a united front of the Social Democratic and Communist parties were well known to many KPD members, and his piercing assessment of the situation in Germany was tragically confirmed by Hitler's victory and the bloodbath that followed.

The emergence of the truth about the Stalinist Gulag was also feared by KPD officials who returned from the Soviet Union at the end of the war and organised the founding of the GDR, such as the group around SED Secretary Ulbricht, some of whom had delivered comrades to the executioner.

What prevailed in the GDR, according to Böhlich, was "real Stalinism," not "real socialism." The fact that he refers in *Sealed Lips* to the old Bolsheviks, with Trotsky in first place, and places them in a common front with Lenin, is a first in movies dealing with the GDR and an important step towards clarifying the public about its history.

The authors also recommend:

Eighty Years of the Fourth International: The Lessons of History and the Struggle for Socialism Today
[9 October 2018]

Within the Whirlwind: Stalin's Great Terror and a big question mark
[13 June 2011]

Nathan Steinberger dies at 94: A life dedicated to the fight against fascism and Stalinism
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Was There an Alternative to Stalinism in the USSR?, By Vadim Rogovin

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