

# What “freedom”? On the short film *Whispers of Freedom*

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The premiere of the short film *Whispers of Freedom* by British writer-director and actor Brandon Ashplant took place at Berlin’s DDR Museum [a museum devoted to East Germany, the German Democratic Republic—Deutsche Demokratische Republik] on October 2. It tells the tragic story of Chris Gueffroy, the last person to die at the Berlin Wall, shot by East German troops on February 5, 1989 while attempting to escape to West Berlin. His death came only months before the fall of the Wall on November 9. There are plans to permanently incorporate the film into the museum’s exhibitions.

It is no coincidence that this film is being shown so prominently on the eve of the 35th anniversary of the end of the GDR and German reunification. *Whispers of Freedom* is based on conversations with Gueffroy’s mother and was made in collaboration with historian Katja Hoyer, born in the GDR and author of the book *Beyond the Wall: East Germany, 1949–1990*. Regardless of the director’s efforts to ensure authenticity and avoid the usual clichés—with the film even mentioning positive aspects of life in former East Germany—Ashplant’s work ultimately falls into the trap of repeating timeworn lies about socialism.

The film’s opening sets the general tone. We hear the dramatic commentary of an East German radio announcer in October 1989 on the 40th anniversary of the GDR. He praises the country as an “outpost for peace and socialism” and predicts a grand future, while Gueffroy’s mother, slumped in her darkened room, weeps desperately for her dead son. The scene perpetuates the false claim that the Stalinist regime of the GDR represented socialism. This claim remains unchallenged in what follows.

In a flashback, the same radio station is heard announcing Mikhail Gorbachev’s coming to power in the Soviet Union on July 18, 1985. The film then cuts to the young Chris and his friend Christian, celebrating their school graduation with two bottles of beer from the West, organised by Christian. He reveals he will start his military service in a month and jeers at the name of the army—“National People’s Army,” declaring “People’s Army, what nonsense”. He asks when Chris plans to perform his military service, and the latter explains he will refuse. Christian is sceptical, saying that his friend will be disadvantaged professionally, “unable to go to university, not become an actor, not get your pilot’s licence.” Chris smiles, hinting at the figure of Gorbachev: “Things are changing.”

This is followed by an exchange with his mother and brother.

When Chris says he doesn’t want to join the army, but plans to leave and travel “to America,” his mother is horrified. She tells him he has no chance in the West, whereas in the GDR there is social security, no homeless people, work, education and housing for everyone. Chris replies contemptuously that there is more to life than “work without money, after which you come back to a shabby flat.” His mother stares at him aghast—“Our home!” His brother in military uniform looks through the door and accuses Chris of thinking he is better than everyone else.

Once again, the film cuts to a radio programme his mother is listening to while washing the dishes. A spokesperson for the ruling Stalinist Socialist Unity Party (SED) government attempts to portray Gorbachev’s promises of more openness and freedom in the Soviet Union under the slogan of *glasnost* as irrelevant to the GDR. Here, the spokesman says, there is already enough freedom and, unlike in the West, no poverty, unemployment or homelessness.

Chris turns off the radio, shouting “total nonsense.” In the meantime, after being denied a place at a drama school, he is working as a waiter in a Berlin restaurant. During a visit by a high-ranking Stasi (East German secret police) official, he overhears the official’s conversation with the restaurant manager, in which the latter suggests that the regime’s shoot-to-kill policy at the Berlin Wall could be temporarily lifted during the Swedish head of government’s visit February 5. For Chris, this amounts to a green light to flee. His friend hesitates, urging caution, saying that it is “not so bad” in the GDR, and again pointing out the danger of losing career opportunities. Chris insists, however, that “freedom” is more important. There are no prospects for the future in the GDR except to live “in small flats”; he wants to travel to other countries, to America.

His friend is ultimately persuaded and the pair attempt to cross the dead man’s zone of the Berlin Wall. Chris is shot down while Christian survives. The last images of the film show the injured man being led through a tunnel by two border guards.

*Whispers of Freedom*’s story and dialogue are both realistic and appealing, thanks in part to the convincing performances. This, however, is precisely what makes it suitable for propaganda by the German government and media, which, in the face of a growing radicalisation among young people against war and the threat of fascism, are intent on discrediting the concept of socialism.

The film is not openly anti-communist, but subliminally conveys a familiar message: freedom is incompatible with socialism! Or, in

other words: if you take to the streets today to protest against war and dictatorship, best not concern yourself with socialist ideas.

In fact the equation of socialism with Stalinism was the great lie of the 20th century. The GDR was guided by Stalin's reactionary, nationalist policy of "socialism in one country," which expressed the interests of a privileged bureaucracy, blocking the progress of the 1917 Revolution and its expansion into other countries and eventually leading to the Terror conducted against the Bolshevik old guard in the 1930s.

After the Second World War, Stalin initially sought to establish a bourgeois regime in the Soviet-occupied territory of East Germany on the basis of agreements with Churchill, Roosevelt and de Gaulle. Led by the group of German Stalinists sent from Moscow headed by Walter Ulbricht, all spontaneous attempts by workers to expropriate the factories and drive out and punish the fascist managers were suppressed. It was only after a currency reform and the introduction of the Deutschmark in West Berlin that the GDR was founded and industry and somewhat later agriculture were nationalised.

This changed ownership structure in the east of the country was a concession to the working class, with workers gaining a stronger social position through secure jobs, free education, culture, healthcare and childcare. At the same time, however, they were politically oppressed and cut off from any links to the international working class. Such a policy has nothing in common with socialism, which involves workers internationally taking political power, eliminating the capitalist profit system, reorganising society according to the needs of the entire population and ultimately abolishing class differences.

The claim that the SED dictatorship was "actually existing socialism" served to fuel anti-communist prejudices among the working class in the West during the Cold War. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, politicians and the media declared in triumph that socialism was finally dead.

Today, however, the question of an alternative to capitalism is coming back with a vengeance, and with it the prospect of socialism.

The film must be seen in the context of recent discussions and publications about the GDR, and in particular the attempt to use the deaths at the Berlin Wall for propaganda purposes.

One month after the film's premiere on October 2, Berlin will host its first "Berlin Freedom Week" (November 8-15), which is thereafter to be held annually. The events include a "Berlin Freedom Conference" on November 10 with international representatives from politics, business, culture and the media, hypocritically dedicated, in a hollow fashion, to the themes of "freedom, democracy and human rights." This comes after weeks and months of vicious state attacks by the Christian Democratic-led Berlin Senate on young people demonstrating against the genocide in Gaza.

Significantly, the initiators of Freedom Week include various right-wing outfits and individuals, such as the Axel Springer Freedom Foundation and the World Liberty Congress, as well as the Berlin representative of the Federal Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship. This notoriously right-wing, anti-communist organisation has sponsored not only the DDR

Museum, but also the production of the short film *Whispers of Freedom*. The historical advisory board includes Jörg Baberowski, a professor of Eastern European studies who has been classified as a right-wing extremist, and Claudia Weber, who has sought to reinterpret Hitler's war of extermination against the Soviet Union as a war of aggression by the USSR.

Young people should see the film with a critical eye and ask themselves the following question: what freedom does capitalism offer? If someone expresses their opinion on the genocide in Gaza or demonstrates against it, they must expect censorship and police violence. If Chris were a young man today, he would have similar difficulties with the German army (Bundeswehr) as he did with the NVA in the GDR, following the reintroduction of conscription. If the Bundeswehr were to be involved in direct combat operations against Russia—for which it is currently being armed—he would have to fear forced recruitment and death on the front line, as is already the case in Ukraine today.

The freedom to travel to other countries is also increasingly proving to be an illusion. If you don't have the right passport, you risk imprisonment in camps at the borders or death at the insurmountable walls of Fortress Europe. In the Mediterranean alone, 32,000 refugees have drowned since 2014, compared to just over one hundred people who died during the 28-year existence of the Berlin Wall.

Interestingly, Brandon Ashplant's film includes a scene about Cuban contract workers in the GDR. They are undergoing training in the GDR, and although they are sometimes treated with contempt by SED officials, one worker enthuses to Chris that the employment contract allows him to overcome the isolation of the island of Cuba and get to know other countries. "Getting to know other countries," Chris murmurs with an ironic undertone.

If he were young today, he would have to regard the promise of freedom at that time as cynical, in view of the thousands of refugees who are being forcibly repelled at the European Union's borders, and in view of the wall and the shoot-to-kill policy at Mexico's border with the US. In Chris's declared land of promise, currently a fascist president is hellbent on destroying democratic rights.



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