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'Millions of Friends': Friendship and the Public Sphere in Post-War East Germany[1]

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ABSTRACT: The article examines the role that the German-Soviet Friendship Society (Society of Friendship with the Soviet Union) played in the creation of the cultural public sphere in East Germany in the first post-WWII years. The concept and practice of institutionalised friendship are discussed as an alternative to the Western concept of citizenship, whereby unofficial ties between people were supposed to replace any kind of formal affiliation. However, as an institutionalised form of public identification, friendship ended up incorporating major contradictions characteristic of the new order. At the same time, translating utopian aspirations into a series of rather basic bureaucratic measures, the Society of Friendship did create a unique type of public sphere which must be examined on multiple levels. In this article official reports are read together with unofficial correspondence not as mutually exclusive versions of events, but as two sides of the same phenomenon, allowing us to form a more complete picture of what the socialist society was and what it envisioned itself as being.

Keywords: East Germany; Soviet Union; friendship; culture

The twentieth century was a century of friendship, not only of wars. Immediately after WWII Europe was going through a transition not only in terms of its political institutions, but also in the vocabulary that was used to define and manage these institutions. In this context "friendship" was one of the terms invested with new power, in particular with relation to the Soviet Union as the great victor and a new super-power. At a time when "Russia was the fashion" ("Soviet Cultural Collaboration," 1954: 198), "societies of friendship" with the Soviet Union were active all over Europe and the world. The concept and practice of friendship also became the foundation of a new type of public sphere and social relations in what came to be known as "the Soviet Block." However just as the phenomenon of the Soviet Block was new – an almost hermetically closed and strictly controlled empire based on a propagation on openness and freedom – so the idea of friendship on which it was based, too, was qualitatively different from what would be normally understood under friendship as a special kind of emotional attachment to another person or group. As the title of Jan Behrends's (2006) book on the subject suggests, this new kind of friendship had to be actually invented.

One of the most interesting things about this friendship was that it was inherently paradoxical in many respects. Capitalising on the popularity of the Soviet Union after the war, it was used to subjugate whole countries. The common designation of the European satellites of the Soviet Union as "the socialist camp" implied a hermetically closed and strictly controlled structure, while the equally frequently used self-designation "*sodruzhestvo*" (commonwealth, fraternity) emphasised openness and freedom as widely propagated values of the newly created community of states (Roshchin, 2007). The editor of a major study on practices of friendship once defined the scope of the subject through the following question: "[h]ow does the institution of friendship form and regulate human society?" (Haseldine, 1999 cited in Gebhardt, 2008: 321). I am also interested in how friendship forms and regulates the social order, though, far from

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attempting to cover all of human society, my interest here is limited to the Society of Friendship with the Soviet Union in post-war East Germany.

The Society of Friendship was founded in July 1949 as a successor of the Society for the Study of the Culture of the Soviet Union. The organisation grew to become one of the most significant mass organisations in East Germany in terms of numbers. The GDR is a particularly challenging case study for any researcher of the Soviet Bloc for a number of reasons. It was, most obviously, "the front line in the Cold War" (Kanig, 2010: 71), the one country that shared with its capitalist twin not just a border, but also language and history, which implied that the introduction of socialism there was also meant to prove that the new system was by far superior to the old one. The most Western section of the Soviet camp, it was also, in terms of its cultural heritage, one of its most developed parts. As Tony Judt points out, "Raymond Aron is not the only person to recall that in earlier years this had looked to be Germany's century" (Judt, 2005: 204). But it didn't work out this way, and "a re-education of the Germans" became the buzz word of the day after the liberation from National Socialism (Hartmann and Eggeling, 1990: 35). A clear example of what historians sometimes call "an educational state" (Behrends, 2003: 346), the only moot point in the occupied Germany was who would become the re-educator. As it appears, the task could be best achieved by friends.

An enthusiastic propagandist writing under, and sympathetic to, the regime which preceded the formation of the two Germanies painted the picture of a succession of centuries in broad strokes: "A Franciscan monk, a physician, an officer embody the thirteenth, the nineteenth, the eighteenth century, because their leaders left the strongest imprints on these periods" (Hoske, 1934: 55). He then went on to say that the embodiment of Nazi Germany is, of course, the figure of *der Führer*, the leader. Had the author of those lines been asked to adapt his text for publication in post-war East Germany, he would have most certainly added: "and the spirit of our age is incorporated in the figure of a friend." "Friends" was how the citizens of the new state were to address each other on formal occasions; "friends" was how they were defined, how they were to define themselves, how they were to feel and what they were to be. "Friends" was a designation which, as a GDR researcher remarked much later, "was on everybody's lips" (Richter, 1974: 440) especially as this was also to be the designation of Soviet representatives, whose presence was prominent in all spheres of life (see Herrnstadt, 1949 for the general background). As a means of bringing human beings together, friendship has traditionally been seen as a more natural, spontaneous kind of connection between parties than political or social allegiances. It is a more traditional kind of connection going back to the practices that were widespread in Medieval Europe and ancient Greece (de Certeau cited in Bauman, 1987: 122; Hutter, 1978: 25; Herminghouse, 1994: 85 with reference to Habermas). Regardless of how hypocritical the designation "friend" was in the conditions of East Germany controlled by the Soviet Union, there was something that the two societies genuinely did have in common: the traditionally central role allocated to literature and culture in the life of the society. In this sense, it stands to reason that the Society of Friendship with the Soviet Union would be in charge of organising many, if not most, of cultural events in the Soviet zone.

There is a curious overlapping of literal and metaphorical meanings here: the Soviet *zone of influence* was also a place where a very particular kind of *public sphere* came into being. In my discussion of the public sphere in so far as it was an integral part of the propagation, and institutionalisation, of friendship between the countries I will be guided by Jürgen Habermas's writings on the emergence and functions of the public sphere in 18th century Europe. For all the obvious differences between them, both these periods were defined by a transformation of already existing concepts at the basis of social relations and an emergence of new ones.

According to Habermas, what came to be known as the "public sphere" (German: *Öffentlichkeit*) was a result of social changes that made it possible for representatives of different social classes engaging in a variety of occupations to come together in the informal setting of *salons* and discuss art, literature and current affairs (Habermas, 1989: 137). The newly liberated Germany was coming together to listen to talks on culture and current affairs, participate in discussions and readings of writers and artists who were directly accessible at book fairs, and holding numerous cultural events. All of this sounds very much like a modernised version of early European salons, albeit with an obligatory ideological twist. However, what interests me here is not so much what was happening and how, but how *whatever was happening was talked about*. Stories about stories – this is essentially what the public sphere is about, but this is also what the whole enterprise of Soviet propaganda was about, both at home and abroad. What things looked like, or what they could be presented as, was more important than what they actually were. Reports on events, discussions of discussions, analysis of interpretations, necessarily accompanied and followed any officially sanctioned public event, especially if this event had a mass character, as was the case with the activities of the Friendship Society. Hence the choice of the materials examined below, which include mostly programmatic publications of the Society, internal reports and general media pieces pertaining to the promotion of friendship between the citizens of the two states.

Friends By Numbers

Ties of friendship that united power-holders with intellectuals were central to the master narrative of the new society, just as they were in the Soviet Union. In calling the attention of his audience to the importance of the "relationship between, on the one hand, those working in the domain of culture, artists and, on the other hand, - the society, between art and the life of the people" Alexander Abusch, one of the primary cultural functionaries of East Germany, "especially emphasised the example of the friendship between Lenin and Gorky" (Richter, 1974: 441-442). The special friendship, or rather the idea of it, permeated everything. The determination of those in charge of fostering the required feelings towards the first socialist country in the world bordered on obsession: they saw themselves as those who "must show them [the citizens of new Germany] how one propagates the German-Soviet friendship at work, in the house where one lives, on the street, always and everywhere…" ("Der Agitator…"). The idea was that "friendship with the Soviet Union was a natural necessity" ("Freundschaft mit der SU…" 1949), the desired result of any "friendship activity" being an "emotional attachment to the Soviet Union…" (Behrends, 2008: 39). As an unusually perceptive (and poetically inclined) contemporary commentary put it, "[b]ut the task of the Friendship Societies in the countries under Communist dictatorship can be summed up, precisely, as an effort to break the silence of the soul, to solicit a response and captivate the sensibilities" ("Soviet Cultural Collaboration," 1954: 209).

Naturally, it was necessary to show that the desired results were achieved. But how is it possible to prove, on a daily basis and beyond any doubt, that one is indeed a loyal friend of another country, a social order, a certain system of values? How can one measure in any reliable manner that there are, indeed, more and more friends experiencing the right kind of emotions? General statements referring to large quantities had to become numbers. If the objective of the Society of Friendship was to become "a veritable 'mass organisation'," [2] if what one was developing was "links of friendship on a mass scale" (Wanda Wasilewska's speech printed in *Pravda*, 18 June, 1953, cited in Barghoorn, 1960: 65), and if the optimistic prophecy of one of the Soviet cultural

officers about how "in the future, there [would] be millions of friends of the Soviet Union in Germany" (Behrends, 2006: 154) was to become reality, then the only proof that things were indeed going in the right direction had to be in numerical evidence.

Some reports and reports on events organised by the Society often contained more numbers than words, quite literally. In this sense, the subtitle of the piece proclaiming that friendship with the Soviet Union was a "natural necessity" was quite informative: "The Society for German-Soviet Friendship Is a Mass Organisation: 655,000 Members" ("Freundschaft mit der SU..." 1949). The opening sentence of the article is even more specific: "According to a report by the Society for German-Soviet Friendship, by the end of the Month of German-Soviet Friendship the number of the Society's members reached 655,203. This is a significant increase compared to 30 October 1949, when the Society had 293,370 members" (ibid.). The growth in numbers seems to be also the main criterion of how successful the Central House of the Culture of the Soviet Union was, if the following report is anything to go by:

> The Central House of the Culture of the Soviet Union. Visitor Numbers: 1948 = 205,000 persons; 1949 = 490,000 persons; 1950 = 600,000 persons; 1951 = … ; so, in 5 years – over 2 millions; by April 1952 = 157,000 persons. Lectures 1947/8 – primarily Soviet presenters. In the past two years some 2,000 lectures, plus hundreds of art exhibitions, over 7,000 screenings of Soviet and German films, numerous major exhibitions. Library: over 55,000 volumes (in 1948 – approx. 7,000) – classics of Marxism-Leninism, works of Soviet literature and many writings in German. Daily visitor numbers on average – 300. (**"Angaben über die Arbeit, 1952"**).

Numbers were both reported on and set as targets to be reached:

> The Society of Friendship set itself particularly demanding goals for the year 1950. The 'Fighting Resolution for Peace,' passed by the Executive Board, stated that between 5 May and 22 June some 50,000 public events with ten million participants would take place all over the territory of the GDR. In addition to that, 20,000 exhibitions on the peaceful policy of the Soviet Union and on the 'imperialist military plans' were planned. However, the mass-scale programme was not quite realised. Only 20,000 events actually took place, with four million participants (Hartmann and Eggeling, 1993: 37).

In passing, it should be noted that the language of numbers was a feature of the time and by no means limited to the Society of Friendship. Thus, a later researcher reports that the authorities in charge agreed at some point that "the membership numbers of the Volksbühne Theatre club should be doubled to reach a million, whereby the percentage of workers should be increased from 30% to 60%. Likewise, 60% of the audience at first performances should be factory workers, primarily activists" (Schuhmann, 2006: 55). Likewise, "the cultural programme of large factories with more than 1,000 employees should include at least three […] annual concerts" (ibid.).

The counting borders on the obsessive, leaving no doubt that soon the whole society would become a society of friendship, making the actual Society of Friendship obsolete. This translation

of a sublime idea (large numbers of people experiencing a certain emotion in harmony) into the language of reality measured by crude statistical data might seem somewhat paradoxical, but it is not. One of the most perceptive critics of totalitarian self-fashioning, Hannah Arendt, noted that the urge to provide a logical, supposedly irrefutable basis for everything is an inherently totalitarian feature in so far as it is a sign of the regime seeking to ground its otherwise dubious policies in the seemingly irrefutable logic of numbers and scientific consistency (Arendt, 1994: 317). As another researcher put it in an analysis of Nazi practices, we are dealing here with "a fascination with the rational, the calculative and the hyper-efficient" (Elden, 2006: 765 with reference to Frei, 1993) which is supposed to give the regime a legitimacy it otherwise lacks. The consistency of solid mathematics replaced civil law.

For all that, counting was also about supposedly voluntary public participation in supposedly informal activities. The numbers were called upon to show that what was coming into being was a genuinely democratic public sphere, a *res publica* in the literal sense of "a public thing." A *public* public thing – this forced tautology points to a crucial feature of all the interactions in the context of the events referred to above: all of them had a meaning only as expressions of shared engagement, openness, transparency – everything that is implied by the German concept of *Öffentlichkeit*. Just as the etymology of both "republic" and "democracy" takes us back to the time of ancient Greece, so does the very notion of political friendship as the foundation of a community, of the *polis*. For ancient Greeks, just as for the post-WWII masters of Eastern and Central Europe, it was obvious that "in political friendship, one could be friends with many other citizens without servility or loss of virtue" (Aristotle, 1171a15 cited in Kharkhordin, 2002: 83).

At the very same time as the triumphant plans for, and reports on, activities were being published, other reports were being composed, more laconical and for a more restricted audience. A meticulously detailed note sent to the Society by a speaker (whose signature and professional affiliation are unclear) chosen to address factory workers on the Soviet struggle for peace opens by telling that "the beginning of the event, which had been scheduled for 20:00," had to be postponed because at first there were but "3 friends present." 25 minutes later, the report continues, the event did begin "in this intimate circle" (**"An die Gesellschaft ..."**). The note concludes, as all such notes did, with the request for a compensation of the return train fare. Another report is even more indicative in its deadpan laconicism: "A public event [planned to take place] in a hall with many hundreds of seats, only 40 participants, because a theatre performance was taking place the same day. The premises were well decorated. Otherwise not worth it" (**"Telephonischer Bericht…"**). Another compliments the organisers on the "artistically worthy preparation of the event" and on the fact that it "took place in a well-decorated setting." "Unfortunately," the report concludes, "the theatre [that is, the venue] was only half full, which is especially regrettable considering the significant expenses" (Müller-Muck). Yet another speaker complains that both events at which he was to talk on the cultural and scientific achievements of the Soviet Union and their importance for the struggle for peace "stood under an unlucky star. The event in Dresden had to be postponed and was not rescheduled, while the event in Leipzig, to which over 500 people had been invited, was attended by only 10 people, because on the same day various other public events were taking place in the city" (**Döring**). Such complaints on how poorly attended the events of this kind were constitute almost exclusively the contents of at least one big file (DY/ 32, Archivsignatur 6167).

The usual way to see such obvious inconsistencies between what was being reported and what was actually happening is to say that the media were, to put it mildly, exaggerating. They were, of course, but there was more to it. These discrepancies are also indicative of the co-

existence of two poles that defined the public sphere of the new society: on the one hand, a celebration of mass participation (authentic, or staged, or only wished for) in discussions of matters of concern and intellectually exciting issues (or just mass presence at such discussions – hence the spacious halls designed to accommodate the audience), and on the other – the actual fact of direct communication within a restricted circle of people who found themselves, by choice or by chance, at a supposedly public event. The former is a utopian vision from the time when all of East Germany would become "a society of friends," while the latter is an image from a distant past, with but a few "tribe members," or – in a more modern parlance – friends, gathered around a story-teller by the fire.[3] This discrepancy between the vision of the future and the reality more reminiscent of a distant past is something I am going to come back to below. Here, I would like to dwell a bit more on the semantics of these different, even mutually exclusive, forms of "coming together."

The two forms represent, in fact, two different versions of the public sphere, two forms of engagement in matters of political and social importance. The first one is about the emotional engagement of the masses, in which case the actual numbers do not really matter all that much. On the order of thousands and hundreds of thousands, numbers turn into metaphors of multitude, and as such, they become an integral element in what Giorgio Agamben defines as "glory" in his analysis of practices of worship. On his reading, "glory" is a practice where "[t]he prevalence of the glorious-contemplative aspect over the administrative (or vice versa) is translated… immediately into a numerical excess" (Agamben, 2011: 152). Once we approach from this perspective the obviously extreme imbalance between the means invested into the numerous mass activities of "[t]hese Societies" which, "taken as a whole, form an extremely powerful machine – probably the most powerful of any organization in the world for the "diffusion of culture" ("Soviet Cultural Collaboration," 207-208) and the frequent absence of actual "masses" in reality, it becomes clear that the question of investment versus gain must be modified in this context. One can, of course, collect statistics and be impressed by the "massive investment of staff and [informational] publications," when in one year alone (1950), during the Month of Friendship, "conferences of the sections of literature and cinema [of the Society of Friendship] took place, as well as congresses of Michurin study groups and of teachers of Russian. 11 million copies of brochures, reference materials and posters, slide sets and exhibition sets were distributed. 48,334 celebratory events with over 7 million participants were organised…" (Hartmann and Eggeling, 1993: 101). At the same time, we know from other, internal, documents that the number of actual events and their actual attendees remains a moot question. It would be logical, on the basis of the internal reports, to answer the question of "whether the results obtained… are proportionate to the amount of systematic planning, money, and energy expanded on them" ("Soviet Cultural Collaboration," 207-208) with a definite "no." The very question, however, would miss the whole point of the enterprise. In the production of "glory," that pure expenditure testifying to a limitless, forever growing numbers of servants (in this case – friends) and an increasing intensity of feelings (in this case – friendship), the actual material parameters and inconsistencies, waste and expenses are simply not applicable (see, e.g., Santner, 2016: 73; also passim, with reference to Giorgio Agamben).

At the same time, ironically, it is exactly when there was a discrepancy between the number of visitors/ listeners/ participants planned and the number of those who actually attended an event that the communication between the "story teller" and his audience came closest to the personal communication which was supposedly the ideal of the new public sphere. With just a few people present, a direct contact with *people* rather than *masses* was inevitable, and the communication, at least in theory, was more in the spirit of friendship, whether authentic or enforced.

However, regardless of whether authentic or enforced, it appears as if the right experience of the right kind of friendship had to be learnt – and taught.

Teachers, Students and Friendship

The teaching/ learning dichotomy was at the core of one of the principal paradoxes of the relationship between Moscow and a satellite: the citizens of the recently liberated country were, of course, friends, but they were also students. Not by chance was the Society of Friendship first called "a Society for the Study of the Culture of the Soviet Union." Even after the name change, the slogan "Learning From the Soviet Union Means Learning To Win" quickly became a formula for the right way of life (Barck, 1997: 339), and "read and learn" was the motto of one of the Weeks of the Book at which numerous Soviet publications were presented (Apel, 1953). However, a teacher-student relationship, regardless of how democratic and open it may be, is still a hierarchical one, while friendship is a relationship that "tends toward equality" (Hutter, 1978: 10). The teacher-student relationship was a special kind of friendship that could also work as a hierarchical bond; a carefully monitored upside-down structure with supposedly equal exchanges within it. Here, looking more closely at the functioning of the literary section of the Society is instructive.

Importantly, there was not to be a trace of doubt about the learning experience being a two-way street, in full accordance with the principle governing the idea, and practice, of international friendship as propagated by the Soviet official ideology. Especially with Germany, Soviet representatives were careful to emphasise that they came "not only as teachers but also as pupils" ("Vorschläge für den Monat...," p.3).This friendship, at least in its official version, was "less about solidarity by default and more about mutual learning, which entails sharing concerns, listening, and the willingness on both sides to adapt," to use a formulation Felix Berenskoetter uses in his analysis of friendship in international relations in general (2007: 672). It was quite a challenge for the Soviet authorities in East Germany to maintain the balance between demonstrating their appreciation for the culture whose thinkers had provided the foundations of the theory of socialist revolution, and making sure that the Germans acknowledged the right of the new masters to guide them from now on. In this peculiar friendship, one party was associated with the legacy of the past, the wealth of tradition and the eagerness and ability to learn to do 'the right thing', while the other brought with it the promise of a better feature, the experience of a more advanced social order, and the practical knowledge of how to do 'the right thing.' The exchange ensured that all supposedly non-official, non-compulsory cultural activities, all public interactions between groups of people in contexts bearing on affairs of the day – that is, what can be broadly defined as the public sphere – were framed by references to events or ideas that were conformant with the demands of the new order. This guaranteed that there would be no conflicts, that everybody would be friends with everybody else. It was expected that the German friends would accept with modest gratitude the reminder of the Soviet participants of a Month of Friendship that they should be more proud of "their own national heritage" and be more conscious of the need to "process it critically and learn from it" ("Vorschläge für den Monat..," p.3).They were assured that Soviet critics were appreciative of "the works of Anna Seghers, Willi Bredel, Kuba, Fallada, Wolf and others" (Die Sowjetliteratur im Kampf.., 52). Even as students of the superior Soviet culture, "German writers and poets" were encouraged to believe that they would be able to share "this literary mastery once they have explored [their own] rich national heritage, [and] once they have learnt how to create [new works] on its basis" (Vorbild für die

Entwicklung.., 1951). Educators were advised to be alert to the danger of "not paying enough attention to the contributions of German scholars" when "propagating Soviet methods of education," which is "*exactly the reason*" [*deshalb* – italics in the original] why "they often could not really develop a dialogue with their colleagues." It was always better to "avoid… this decisive mistake of underestimating [their] own achievements" (**"**Vorschläge für den Monat**..,"** p.3).

But this friendly acknowledgement of, and admiration for, the other country's culture came with an important caveat. The "workers and creative artists" were called upon to remember that "the change in the social power structure [in East Germany] had not been reached through struggle and hard work, but that it was owed to [the] occupying power, the socialist Soviet Union" (Maschke, 1948: 25). It was a good idea to "illustrate the relations with the Soviet Union… by means of references to the German culture" but it was also advisable to never forget that this "'Germanisation'" could lead to a "misrepresentation or even encourage feelings of arrogance on the part of the Germans" (Kuczynski, 1948: 10-11) which would have been unforgivable. On 1 June 1952 *Neues Deutschland* published an article entitled "On the Necessity of Learning from One's Own History," where the Soviet model was posited as the unquestionable example to follow in all matters related to the interpretation in historical perspective of one's past, present and future (Nothnagle, 1999: 172). Apparently the very tradition which was a source of pride for generations of Germans had its drawbacks: it was often the reason why in Germany "the general ideological and professional level of literary criticism [was] significantly below the level of criticism in the Soviet Union." However knowledgeable the critics may have been in the literary history of their country, their "ignorance of new developments in life…. [would] often lead to a mistaken judgment of new works based on the criteria of obsolete aesthetics" (Abusch, 1952: 160). The German tradition may have been valuable, but its value was mostly limited to translating the future into terms that would make it understandable to the public of the present, still steeped in the past. This is why the German friends were required to never forget that, just as they were encouraged to hold talks on "Gogol's relevance for the struggle for peace and for the present day development of progressive literature" (Müller-Muck)[4] and just as Russian classics were first and foremost useful for the revolution (Kalinin's words from 1920 on the importance of learning the language of agitation "from the classics" were quoted in this connection – see Der Agitator, 1953), German geniuses of the past, too, were to be venerated for reasons which had more to do with their role as precursors of today's progressive tendencies than with their artistic achievements. Thus, "Goethe became a pioneer of Marxist thought; Bach, a partisan fighter in the struggle against formalism; and Beethoven, a visionary proponent of the 'solidarity of nations' ultimately realized by the October Revolution" (Castillo, 2008: 750).

This is why, however good their own writers may have been, it was considered a matter of utmost priority to bring out "a booklet with the provisional title 'Progressive German Literature in the Mirror of Soviet Criticism', which will contain the most important pronouncements of Soviet critics about the works of Anna Seghers, Willi Bredel, Kuba, Fallada, Wolf and others" (Die Sowjetliteratur im Kampf.., 52). The underlying assumption seems to be that otherwise the German public, critics and the writers themselves could not be sure whether they were really good, really worthy of reading. It went so far that, having seen an issue of the Soviet literary magazine *Novyi Mir* dedicated to "German literature," a prominent cultural activist felt "shame" caused by a realisation that the Soviet friends were so much ahead of the German colleagues. Experiencing this negative emotion, however, turned out to be constructive because he was able to draw the correct conclusion: "We want, after all, to learn, we want first of all to familiarise ourselves with the critique from *Novyi Mir*, so that we can learn from it something for our own critical work" (Die Sowjetliteratur im Kampf.., 31). Whole sections in the Society were in charge of "assessing available VOKS materials" and of compiling "information brochures from

these materials, as well as from Soviet newspapers, magazines and books" (Bericht über die Arbeit…) with the topics of culture and literature covered, among many others. The general impression is that the writers, critics and readers of the new Germany were blessed with talents in both past and present, with productive writers and dedicated readers – but they needed a friend to tell them that, yes, their tradition was to be treasured, their writers were good, their readers were knowledgeable and their critics knew their job. Without the friend they were in danger of being ignorant of their own advantages. Without the friend, they were in danger of not knowing what it was that they knew. However strong the German literary and cultural tradition may have been, however eager its literati and readers may have been to make progress, it had no more chances to catch up with the Soviet Union than Achilles could catch up with the tortoise, the rich tradition notwithstanding. However respectful Soviet cultural officers were of the German cultural heritage (Hartmann and Eggeling, 1993: multiple references), one of them was expressing not just his own view when he wrote, years later: "we knew […] that Germany was now living through a period which had long been over in the Soviet Union…" (Hartmann and Eggeling, 1990: 29).

This is where the friendly advice and support of the more powerful allies/ liberators/ occupiers/ friends, their "public example" [*das öffentliche Vorbild*] which they "selflessly" [*in selbstloser Weise*] offered their German friends and colleagues (Apel, 1953), came in particularly handy. This was especially so in the public realm where the foundation for the new type of uninhibited interactions between intellectuals and citizens from other walks of life was laid. The German public was to feel grateful to the Soviet friends who "provided support as sensitive advisors and partners for discussion" and to writers such as Konstantin Fedin for sharing their thoughts with the audience in the course of public literary events. This was appreciated as "a valuable friendly support in the development of [new German] literature" (Richter, 1974: 440; Vor dem IV.Deutschen Schriftstellerkongreß, 1954). The *future* development of East German arts and letters, of the whole new community was based on the *past* experiences of the Soviet Union – this was a fundamental principle both for the Society of Friendship and for other similar organisations in charge of cultural programmes at places of work. The Society saw its goal in "organising better an analysis of [Soviet] experiences, [so that] to give the German people an understanding of the tremendous value of the experiences of the Soviet people" (Freundschaft zur Sowjetunion, 1951), while other organisations, like, for example, the Association of Trade Unions, were engaged in the organisation of "cultural plans for factories etc … [which] would be based on the Soviet experience of cultural reconstruction" ("Ohne Planung – keine Kulturarbeit," 1951).

Jan Behrends quotes another researcher's remark concerning the possibility of seeing "the system of the Soviet *great friendship* as a system of ordering the Soviet multi-national state…" (Behrends, 2006: 28). The same holds for what was happening beyond the borders of the Soviet Union: the 'great friendship' was, first of all, a system of ordering, whether it be the net of social relations, acknowledged and unacknowledged rules of social interactions, people gathering in space – or even experiencing time.

This last point was important. It stands to reason that one of the preconditions for a functioning public sphere in any society is that all groups which *make it up* are from the same time – otherwise the parties end up *making up* a realm of free exchange and debate which is not actually there. This might sound too obvious to even merit consideration, but in fact, in the context discussed here, the difference in where each side was positioned on the temporal scale had far-reaching implications for the 'friendly' exchanges. The two parties, though living through

the same dates on the calendar, belonged to different stages of historical development, theirs being a case of what Anne Hartmann and Wolfram Eggeling call "temporal delays" (*Zeitverschiebungen*) in the specific context of East Germany versus the Soviet Union, or of what Ernst Bloch in a more general context defined as 'non-synchronicities' (*Ungleichzeitigkeiten*) (Hartmann and Eggeling, 1990: 29; Bloch, 1973: 104). Emmerich uses the expression when talking of the still popular take of Western researchers on the GDR literature as having been 'delayed' in its development with respect to the West, just as for Jürgen Habermas, East Germany was in the permanent state of a "catching-up revolution," in the hardly enviable position of the inevitability of certain things waiting to happen (in the future), and of having missed them the first time round (in the past) (Habermas, 1990: 180 cited in Ohlerich, 2005: 30).[5]This is where the role of the "friends" was especially important. For our discussion here, it does not really matter whether the neighbour deemed more advanced was to the East or to the West of the GDR. What matters is that the rhetoric in the foundation years of the community was all about not yet being *there*, whatever the 'there' referred to.

Given all of this, what better way could there be to correct this temporal imbalance, to create and maintain a shared memory of experiences one had not necessarily lived through together than by means of a new calendar that would introduce a new version of the past, present and – insofar as the very nature of a calendar is that it promises repetition while acknowledging the passing of time – future? Such was the impetus behind the "calendar of friendship." Compiled, edited and published by the Society of Friendship, the calendar was there for the whole society to observe, not just *the* Society, filling the days, weeks and months with a new significance. Now, hardly a day passed by without it commemorating a special event (Behrends, 2006: 226), from "a sailors' uprising in 1905 in Odessa" to "the 35th anniversary of the Rapallo Treaty," from the date on which "the Five Year Economic Plan was launched in 1950" to an anniversary of Lenin's death and Stalin's birthday being celebrated on a par with the death of Marie Curie and Beethoven's birthday ("Pocket Calendar," 1952), and the date of a general strike in Saint-Petersburg in 1917 was as important as the day on which Georgy Dimitrov was born (**"**Terminplan für die kulturelle Zusammenarbeit**"**).

The ideologues of National Socialism spoke pejoratively of a "simply natural calendar" (*bloß naturhafter Kalender*) (Hoske, 1934: 55) which they were certain would one day be replaced by a different one that would be reflecting not just the passing of time, but the stability of the new social order. The idea was by no means new, nor too radical. Since time immemorial changes in a social order have been accompanied by changes in the way events are dated and the experience of time is organised. Elias Canetti's observation concerning the importance of the ordering of time for all (new) governments and regimes is no less true for being general: "…one might say that the regulation of time is the primary attribute of all government" (1978: 397). Likewise, in the new Germany whose citizens were first and foremost defined as friends, the new calendar set a new rhythm to the everyday life, with habitual units of time becoming rather relative compared to new ones. Now there were, for example, weeks and months of friendship, which did not necessarily correspond to astronomical equivalents. Thus, for example, "in 1956, the Month of Friendship was conducted twice, but both times it was condensed to one week only. The first time it was called 'A Week of German-Soviet Friendship' and organised to commemorate 'The Day of Liberation' on 8 May […], and the second time it was dedicated to a celebration of the October Revolution" (Faitsik, 2006: 81).

Conclusion

We started by postulating that friendship, both as an ideologically inspired idea and as its institutionalised embodiment in the shape of organisations such as the Society of Friendship, was the foundation of the new kind of public sphere that was supposed to define social relations in the Soviet Block. With East Germany as my case study, I suggested that the very paradoxical nature of the Society of Friendship was exemplary of the essence of the new order whose masters proclaimed a qualitatively new type of society, and ended up with a complex web of contradictory discourses. It was the Society's official function to be unofficial. Its membership was to be built on a strictly voluntary basis, but the numbers were to grow exponentially. Incorporating a utopian vision of the future, the Society was to work hard on creating (an illusion of) a shared past celebrated in the present. Promoting the idea of an all-inclusive community, its activists would often find themselves facing not more than a couple of other people. It was to be a mass organisation which was based on (supposedly) intimate emotions. The notion of "friendship" covered this whole terrain, however full of tensions and inconsistencies it may have been, simply because "friendship" occupies that intermediary ground which, according to Hannah Arendt, "seems neither to belong to the public realm nor is it confined to the private realm" (Chiba, 1995: 519). This emotion/ state/ form of relating to others functioned, in practice if not in theory, as an alternative to the Western category of citizenship. Unlike the citizens of capitalist countries, whose everyday existence was governed by a set of rules and obligations imposed upon them by the state, in socialist countries those who were (supposedly) friends, both with their compatriots and with people in other socialist countries, were (supposedly) driven solely by the sincere, honest desires of their own hearts. As Margaret Canovan says (paraphrasing Hannah Arendt), "if people in the West wear a legal kind of 'persona,' then those in the Soviet Bloc also wear a persona, a mask, but that of a friend" (Canovan, 1994: 191). Creating the new kind of 'friends' was an integral part of creating a public sphere, cultural as well as general, that would take the bourgeois public sphere, with its traditional codes of behaviour, distribution of roles and exclusivity, "as a negative reference point" (Behrends, 2010: 229).

It seems apposite to conclude by noting that, rather surprisingly, in its refusal to adopt Western liberal criteria for the construction of an allegedly free and open society the Soviet regime, and some of its post-Soviet mutations, inadvertently proved their loyalty to the origins of the very principles they sought to escape. Just as the post-war Soviet fantasies of "millions of friends" were reminiscent of ancient Greek visions of the ideal organisation of the polis, so in post-Soviet Russia, as Oleg Kharkhordin notes, "[t]he central problem of contemporary Russian civil society… may consist in transforming the relations of uncivil violence according to the principle of friendly networks," which brings "Russia… paradoxically close to building civil society as it was understood by thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, rather than by contemporary parlance" (Kharkhordin, 2002; 80). Friendship can be a sinister thing, and looking into its (trans)formations across cultural and political systems can help us consider the seemingly familiar from a new angle.

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Endnotes

[1] **This article is part of the research project *Literary Pax Sovietica* conducted at the University of Sheffield in 2013-2017 and supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council of the UK.**

[2] The importance of the concept of a "mass organisation" was commented upon both by Western observers and by East German ideologues themselves. See, e.g., "Soviet Cultural Collaboration," 1954: 198-199, as well as Jan Behrends quoting a resolution from 1949 (Behrends, 2006: 157).

[3] "By the fire" is not a metaphor in this case: as Hartmann and Eggeling note, the simple fact that the premises in which the events took place were heated was, indeed, an important factor in bringing people together in a certain place at a certain time (Hartmann and Eggeling, 1993: 67).

[4] Cf. also a 1953 article published in the West noting that the claim "that this or that genius held 'progressive' Socialist ideas… " permeated the public discourse virtually in all of the satellite countries (The Post-Mortem Glow: 24).

[5] Cf. also Helmut Plessner speaking of Germany as a "verspätete Nation".