

GDR Films and the British Left: A Failed Breakthrough

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It was ironic that it was on West German soil that the British government first showed an interest in the films produced by the East German DEFA Studios. Acting as one of the occupying forces after the Second World War, the British High Commission held a number of raids in the early 1950's on Communist meeting places in Westphalia. This resulted in the confiscation of films from what was then still called the Soviet zone. All these films had to be examined in detail by intelligence people. At one point so many were taken that it made one of the officers concerned sigh: 'If it's worth seeing let's see it, but I can't afford to waste a ½ day looking at [a] film unless it's really necessary'.¹ One of the films was ALWAYS PREPARED (IMMER BEREIT), an hour-long colour documentary about the Whit-sun Youth Rally 1950 in East Berlin, of which the Allied authorities had been extremely wary. It was seized in September 1950 during a raid on the headquarters of the West German Communist Party (KPD) in Düsseldorf and must have caught the attention of the officials, for the print was soon forwarded to London, where it was screened to an audience of civil servants and MPs.² But it was only when early in 1951 the National Union of Students (NUS) notified the British Government of its desire to obtain an import license for the very same film, that the alarm bells started ringing at the Foreign Office. A NUS delegate attending a meeting of the International Union of Students in East Berlin had received a copy of the film directly from Erich Honecker, then leader of the East German youth movement Freie Deutsche Jugend. The Foreign Office immediately asked the Board of Trade to hold up the application by the NUS for an import license, so that it could look into the matter.

Foreign Secretary Herbert Morrison got so carried away with the idea that ALWAYS PREPARED was a new TRIUMPH OF THE WILL – in his own words: a danger 'to immature persons who have not the political wisdom to see

1 This was scribbled on the memorandum 'Miss Leith Murray to Deputy Chief', 12.12.1950, in: PRO, FO1056/351.

2 'Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs', 19.3.1951, in: PRO, PREM 8/1411, CP (51) 86.

through it'³ – that he considered using the Royal Prerogative to ban the film. But Home Secretary Chuter Ede made clear that he was totally opposed to its use in this case. Morrison came up with the alternative that ALWAYS PREPARED 'be severely edited, and material introduced to point to resemblance between the Communist and Nazi regimes'.⁴ Of course, no commercial distribution company was prepared to do so. First it was unclear whether they had any right to alter the film without the DEFA's consent. After all, although it was not prepared to recognise the GDR, the United Kingdom was not at war with her. But the overriding argument was that there was no money to be made with any version of ALWAYS PREPARED, as theatrical exhibitors in the UK were simply not interested in showing propaganda films. There was however a company catering for the non-theatrical market that was prepared to distribute ALWAYS PREPARED without any cuts or alterations: Plato Films. The only concession that Plato's manager Stanley Forman (born: 1921) was prepared to make, was the use of a black-and-white print, because it was cheaper.⁵

Over the next fifty or so years Forman would be the most important 'player' with regard to the screening in Great Britain of East German films, documentaries in particular. In the following article I would like to examine the strategies that he employed to get GDR films shown in the UK, and the obstacles that his adversaries were putting in the way. There is a widespread misconception that Plato and another company, Contemporary Films, run by Charles Cooper (1910–2001), were heavily subsidised by the Socialist world.⁶ Undoubtedly they did get countless cans of celluloid from the East Bloc embassies, but these were seldom the films that really mattered – films that appealed to British audiences, in particular to 'unconverted' audiences. Ivor Montagu (1904–1984), the doyen in film matters among the Communists, has told over and again how difficult it was to get films from the Soviet trade delegation. Every five years or so a new official

3 Ibid.

4 Minutes Cabinet Meeting, 12.4.1951, in: PRO, PREM 8/1411 CM (51).

5 Bert Hogenkamp, 'Not quite prepared for ALWAYS PREPARED: Herbert Morrison and the film of the 1950 East Berlin Youth Rally', in: *Contemporary British History* 12:1 (1998), pp. 131–138.

6 There is no proof either for the interpretation put forward by Nicholas Pronay that the existence of companies like ETV and Contemporary Films 'was one of those characteristically British arrangements where it suited counter-intelligence and counter-subversion agencies to tolerate a channel on infiltration of subversive material on which they could keep an eye'. Cf. Nicholas Pronay, 'British Film Sources for the Cold War: the disappearance of the cinema-going public', in: *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 13:1 (1993), p. 8.

would arrive at the Soviet trade delegation, full of ideas about how he could earn lots of hard currency for his country with the sale of Soviet films. It took him three to four years to realise that he was not getting anywhere and to start making films available for non-commercial distribution free of charge. At this point, he would be recalled to Moscow and the same cycle would start with his successor.⁷

III-Prepared for the British Situation

At the beginning the East German film company DEFA too showed signs of being ill-prepared for the British situation. During a visit to East Berlin Ivor Montagu, who was a member of the World Peace Council, saw *COUNCIL OF THE GODS* (*RAT DER GÖTTER*, 1950), an East German feature film about the IG Farben story. He was impressed by the film and wanted to see it released in the UK. In March 1951 Montagu therefore wrote directly to Kurt Maetzig, director of the film and 'National Preis' winner, c/o DEFA. For some reason Maetzig chose not to reply. Montagu then asked the historian Jürgen Kuczynski, who had spent his exile years in the UK, to help him out. Telling Montagu that he did not know the first thing about film, Kuczynski nevertheless managed to pull the right strings and get the DEFA send him a print of *COUNCIL OF THE GODS* via Prague and Brussels to London. However, as Montagu wrote on the import application form as the place of origin of the film 'Berlin, Democratic Republic', the authorities interpreted this to be West Berlin. Consequently they refused to grant an import licence, because the film had not been sent from West Berlin! It took a few months and the intervention of Labour MP Elwyn Jones to put that right. Then Montagu started negotiations with the British Board of Film Censors about the translation of the dialogues and possible cuts in this highly controversial film, which argued among others that the Americans intervened in the Nuremberg war trials to prevent German-American wartime collaboration from being exposed. Hearing this the DEFA people got upset because they felt that Montagu was giving in to the 'class enemy'. He was told that 'cuts which would change the meaning were in no circumstances allowed'. Only when Montagu answered that DEFA might have to face libel charges in that case, the East Germans backed down. Montagu personally took care of the dialogue translation (as he did for quite a few East European and Chinese films, finding this a congenial

7 Bert Hogenkamp, *Deadly Parallels. Film and the Left in Britain, 1929-1939* (London, 1986), p.171, n.7.

source of extra income) and the subtitling. In the end *COUNCIL OF THE GODS* was released in the UK more than one year after Montagu had sent his letter to Maetzig.⁸

Montagu allocated one 16mm and one 35mm print of *COUNCIL OF THE GODS* to Contemporary and one 16mm print of the film to Plato. The latter had been registered in May 1951.⁹ It had the blessing of the CPGB leadership and among its shareholders were such well-known Communists as Eva Reckitt (Collett's bookstores), trade unionist Bill Ellerby, Bill Wainwright (British-Soviet Society), composer Alan Bush and singer Martin Lawrence. British-Soviet Friendship Houses made an investment of £ 500.¹⁰ Under the slogan 'See the other half of the world' Plato distributed non-theatrically films from the Soviet Union, the People's Democracies and China, often using prints that had previously been handled by the British-Soviet and other friendship societies. Around the same time Charles Cooper (1910–2001) who had been forced to leave the USA, where he had emigrated to in 1939, started his company Contemporary, distributing Soviet classics and US labour films. Some Party officials were less than happy with this situation, but Forman and Cooper soon came to terms with each other, each finding a particular niche for his company.¹¹ Apart from 16mm distribution, Cooper gained a foothold in the theatrical market (the fact that Montagu allocated a 35mm print of *COUNCIL OF THE GODS* was proof of this), eventually running the Paris Pullmann cinema.

Although in the early 1950's the Communist movement made extensive use of film in what was coined in typical Cold War jargon the 'Battle of Ideas' (which amounted to a battle against American popular culture), East German films only played a minor part. It was the Soviet productions like *THE FALL OF BERLIN* (1949) or *THE DONETS MINERS* (1950) that caught the attention. Still Montagu managed to get another DEFA feature, *DAS VERURTEILTE DORF* (*THE CONDEMNED VILLAGE*, 1952), released in the UK. It was the story of a West-German village that was 'condemned' by American plans to build a military airport and the resistance of the local population. Although successful in the GDR, the film did not particularly appeal to British audiences. *WE ARE FOR PEACE* (*FREUNDSCHAFT SIEGT!*, 1952), the official colour film of the World Youth Festival in Berlin 1951, met more appreciation. This Russian-East German co-production made by the much

8 Files on *COUNCIL OF THE GODS*, in: Ivor Montagu papers, British Film Institute (BFI), London, files Nos.225 and 287.

9 *Daily Worker*, 17.3.1951.

10 Company registration file, Plato Films Ltd., in: ETV Archive, BFI, London.

11 Charles Cooper, interview with the author, London, 2.10.1995.

admired Dutch documentary director Joris Ivens was distributed by Plato. Later Plato distributed another East German film by Ivens, *SONG OF THE RIVERS* (*LIED DER STRÖME*, 1954), a documentary about the activities of trade unionists all over the globe, made for the World Federation of Trade Unions. Continually urged by the Party to win over trade union audiences, Stanley Forman tried to interest trade union branches into booking films by organising special 'Film and the Labour Movement' conferences. Some unions were openly suspicious of Plato's political affiliation and asked the TUC for advice. Although the film distribution company was not on the blacklist of proscribed organisations, the TUC's advice was invariably that it was 'not in order to associate with it'.¹² But the TUC's opposition was not the main reason why Plato failed to reach trade unions audiences. Difficult enough as it was to sell the idea of using films to trade unions, it was just impossible to convince them to take films made in Eastern Europe or the Soviet Union. Plato had more success with the branches of the various friendship societies and with workers' film societies like New Era, whose members were lapping the films 'up (...) as being the truth', as Plato projectionist Eric Walker would later put it.¹³

The Best Possible Forum

While bookings had already declined in 1955, Plato had an extremely hard time surviving the disastrous year of 1956, when Khrushchev's revelations in his famous Secret Speech about the crimes committed by Stalin and later the Soviet invasion in Hungary plunged the Communist movement in a deep crisis. It was the DEFA that offered Plato a lifeline, by making it the sole distributor in the UK of its 'super production' *THE GERMAN STORY* (*DU UND MANCHER KAMERAD*, 1955). This 99 minutes documentary was directed by Andrew and Annelie Thorndikes, loyal party members who had made a name for themselves with their documentaries. *THE GERMAN STORY* showed the historical developments in Germany between 1900 and 1954. Falling back on the theory of the two camps (the Capitalist camp intent on war while the Socialist one stood for peace), the film argued that all that was wrong with the old Germany was continued in the Federal Republic, a theme that the Thorndikes would further elaborate in their forthcoming

12 File 'Plato Films' in: TUC Archive, MRC, MSS 292/675.94.

13 Eric Walker, interview with the author, Ipswich, 11 June 1996.

documentaries. Even political opponents had to admit that Andrew and Annelie Thorndike had made a masterpiece.¹⁴

Without her husband, although he had expressed the wish to meet his distant relative Sybil Thorndike, Annelie Thorndike made the roundabout air trip via Prague and Brussels to be the star of the gala performance of *THE GERMAN STORY* at the National Film Theatre on 28 July 1957. On her return she was welcomed at East Berlin airport like a heroin. In a telegram to Forman she confessed: 'am telling day and night of Plato Films and London'.¹⁵ Annelie Thorndike's visit and the release of *THE GERMAN STORY* were a blessing to Plato Films. Although there were no official relations between the UK and the GDR, the event at the National Film Theatre drew the attention of the national press.¹⁶ The British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) gave a certificate to a version of the film that ended with the defeat of National Socialism in 1945, omitting the GDR's (controversial) views on the Federal Republic of West Germany. The film helped to break down the isolation which had been the Communists' fate since November 1956. Interest was shown by people who did not necessarily agree with the Communist interpretation that all the flaws of West German society could only be attributed to its economic and social system, but who refused to be fooled by the Economic Miracle and were worried about such developments as the prominence of ex-Nazis in high positions. It was conspicuous that a private screening of *THE GERMAN STORY* at the House of Commons, attended by no less than sixty MPs, was arranged by the Conservative Member for Skipton G.B. Drayson.¹⁷

It was therefore with anticipation that Plato awaited the arrival in the Spring of 1958 of the next documentary made by the Thorndikes. This was *URLAUB AUF SYLT (HOLIDAY ON SYLT, 1957)*, the first in a series entitled *ARCHIVE SAGEN AUS (THE ARCHIVES TESTIFY)*. The BBFC however refused to give it a certificate, arguing that *HOLIDAY ON SYLT* attacked a living person who was unable to defend himself. The film was an exemplary piece of investigative journalism, comprising an interview with the former SS offi-

14 For the background information on *The German Story*, see Thomas Heimann, "Lehren aus der deutschen Geschichte": Wahrheitstreue und Propaganda im DEFA-Dokumentarfilm *Du und mancher Kamerad*', in: Martin Sabrow (ed.), *Verwaltete Vergangenheit. Geschichtskultur und Herrschaftslegitimation in der DDR* (Leipzig, 1997), pp. 185–215.

15 'Telegram from Annelie Thorndike to Stanley Forman', 6 August 1957, in: ETV Archive, BFI, London.

16 Cf. *The Times*, 29.7.1957.

17 *Daily Worker*, 9.8.1957.

cer Heinz Reinefarth, who had played a leading role in the crushing of the Warsaw uprising of 1944 and was now living an inconspicuous life as Christian Democrat mayor of the North Sea holiday island Sylt. The Thorndikes had engaged a West German camera crew to conduct the interview and had edited the material with archive footage. The BBFC ban gave Associated Rediffusion an ideal excuse to cancel the planned transmission of a twenty-minute extract of the film. *Tribune* reported that the television company had decided to do so after consulting the Foreign Office.¹⁸ For the time being *HOLIDAY ON SYLT* could only be screened on 16mm on premises that did not have a Cinematograph license.

The next documentary in the series *THE ARCHIVES TESTIFY* concerned a subject that would be explosive in more than one sense: the career of General Speidel. Since his appointment as commander of the NATO Ground Forces in Europe, rumors about his Nazi past had pursued Speidel. In August 1957 *Democratic German Report*, a fortnightly broadsheet edited by John Peet (the elder brother of film maker Stephen Peet), a former Reuters journalist who had chosen the GDR as his domicile, published an article implicating Speidel with the assassination of King Alexander of Yugoslavia and French Foreign Minister Barthou in Marseilles in October 1934.¹⁹ The code name for this assassination was 'Operation Teutonic Sword'. The Thorndikes chose this as the title for their film, for which they did extensive research. Apart from his involvement in the Marseilles murders, they made four further charges against Speidel: that he worked as a spy for General Canaris in pre-war Paris, had been an accomplice in the killing of hundreds of French resistance fighters and Jews in 1942, had committed war crimes in the Soviet Union and betrayed General Rommel to the Gestapo after the failed Stauffenburg plot to kill Hitler. These were serious charges indeed, but the film makers were convinced that they could substantiate them. Perhaps Plato should have heeded the warning, when the *Daily Express* and the *Sunday Express*, that had been approached for an exclusive story on the film, informed the company that they were not able to print it owing to libel laws.²⁰

18 *Tribune*, 16.5.1958, p. 11.

19 *Democratic German Report*, 2.8.1957, pp. 113–115; for John Peet see his posthumously published autobiography, *The Long Engagement. Memoirs of a Cold War Legend* (London, 1989).

20 'Minutes of board meeting, Plato Films', 2.7.1958 and 12.11.1958, in: ETV Archive, BFI, London.

In December 1958 the BBFC refused to give OPERATION TEUTONIC SWORD a certificate on the same grounds as HOLIDAY ON SYLT.²¹ The suspicion that the West German Government was somehow behind these decisions gained some credence, when in reply to Parliamentary Questions by Labour MP Arthur Lewis Junior Foreign Minister V. Allan had to admit that 'the Federal Government drew attention to this film' but that he was not in a position to 'reveal detail of a confidential communication from another Government'.²² Next Plato approached the London County Council for a certificate that would enable it to distribute the film theatrically in the London area. In February 1959 the complete council voted on an amendment, tabled by a Labour Councillor and seconded by a Conservative, who happened to be a former prisoner of war. On a free vote by a majority of one the council gave the coveted certificate.²³ But the joy was short-lived, for on 19 February Plato Films received a letter from the solicitors Holland & Co., informing the distribution company on behalf of their client General Speidel that OPERATION TEUTONIC SWORD contained gross libel and demanding an undertaking that the film would not be distributed.²⁴

A period of feverish consultations followed. At the suggestion of its solicitors Garber, Vowles & Co. Plato decided to discontinue the distribution and exhibition of the film and cancel all future bookings. These measures were announced in the press.²⁵ The DEFA Studio in Berlin was informed, which in turn managed to get through to Moscow by telephone, where the Thorndikes were working on a new film. They declared that the court case should go ahead, arguing that 'we will never have another forum like this'.²⁶ On 12 March 1959 writs were issued against Plato Films Ltd. and its managing director Stanley Forman, claiming damages for libel and an injunction restraining the defendants from distributing or exhibiting OPERATION TEUTONIC SWORD. Now that he was personally implicated, Garber, Vowles & Co. gave Forman the advice to sell his share in the house that he

21 'Draft letter from Plato Films to Mr. John Trevelyan, British Board of Film Censors', 30 April 1959, in: ETV Archive, BFI, London.

22 *Hansard*, Vol. 598, Written Answers, col.74, and Vol.599, Written Answers, col.15.

23 *Daily Worker*, 18.2.1959; *The Times*, 18.2.1959.

24 'Copy of letter from Holland & Co. to Plato Films Ltd', 19 February 1959, in: ETV Archive, BFI, London. For the full story of the 'Speidel case', see Bert Hogenkamp, *Film, Television and the Left in Britain 1950-1970* (London, 2000), pp. 78-84.

25 *The Times*, 24.2.1959.

26 'Letter from Mr. Müller, DEFA Studio, to Mr. Schauer, VVB Film', 2.2.1959, in: BArch DR 118 S100 (with thanks to Günter Jordan for this reference).

owned to his wife Hilda, what he immediately did.²⁷ Secondly, a new company had to be registered, in case Plato would go bankrupt as a result of the verdict. On 5 July 1959 Educational & Television Ltd., better known as ETV, was incorporated.²⁸ In the meantime in the GDR the Secretariat of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) had made the sum of £ 5,000 available for the defense, which was unobtrusively transferred to the UK by the Gesellschaft für Kulturelle Verbindungen mit dem Ausland (Association for Cultural Connections with Foreign Countries).²⁹ After a careful study of the writ Garber, Vowles & Co. had come to the conclusion that the complaint only concerned one passage in the film: Speidel's involvement in the Marseilles assassination. On 26 March they informed Holland & Co. of their instruction to Plato Films to cut out that particular part of the film and bring it back into circulation.³⁰ On 27 April the edited version, to which a preface had been added, was shown to the British press under the title GENERAL SPEIDEL – THE ARCHIVES TESTIFY.³¹

Although the CPGB was afraid of the financial consequences and the political harm if libel damages were awarded, the SED was adamant that the case should go ahead. Given the SED's political weight, not to mention the fact that the East Germans were backing up the defense with hard currency, the CPGB had no other choice but to give in.³² The flamboyant East German solicitor Dr. Friedrich Karl Kaul came up with the idea that the Thorndikes in turn should sue Speidel for libel in a West German court. After all, the General had publicly cast doubt on the truth of OPERATION TEUTONIC SWORD. Kaul reckoned that West German libel law allowed more room for maneuver than the British. Being one of the few East German lawyers who had a license to practice his profession in the Federal Republic he could personally take charge of the case. His strategy however proved a failure. The East Germans too failed to come up with the originals of the documents that featured in the film – photocopies were not accepted as evidence by the British courts. By the end of 1959 CPGB secretary John Gollan felt compelled to write an angry letter to the SED Central

27 Stanley Forman, interview with the author, London, 20.11.1995.

28 'Memorandum and Articles of Association of Educational and Television Films Limited', in: ETV Archive, BFI, London.

29 'Reinschriftenprotokoll Sekretariat des ZK Nr.7', 18.3.1959, in: SAPMO-BArch, DY 30 JIV 2/3-634.

30 'Letter from Garber, Vowles & Co. to Holland & Co.', 26.3.1959, in: ETV Archive, BFI, London.

31 *Daily Worker*, 28.4.1959.

32 'Reinschriftprotokoll Politbüro des ZK Nr.21', 5.5.1959, in: SAPMO-BArch, DY 30 J IV 2/2-645; SED's view, memorandum, 28 May 1959, ETV archive, BFI, London.

Committee demanding that the latter take responsibility for the work on the case.³³ Shortly afterwards the East German leader Walter Ulbricht received a personal letter from Annelie Thorndike who had been briefed by the British comrades during a short visit to London. She expressed her anxiety that not enough was done on the GDR side to bring the case to a favourable conclusion.³⁴ Ulbricht intervened, with the result that the case was put in the hands of the SED Foreign Affairs Department instead of its Agitation and Propaganda Department.³⁵

In the UK the case was making legal history by going from court to court. But the fact that by the end of 1960 GDR officials decided to wait with the next payment in Sterling, was proof that even they were entertaining serious doubts over the outcome of the case.³⁶ On 2 March 1961 the House of Lords dismissed an interlocutory appeal and defeat looked inevitable.³⁷ Forced to go on the defensive after the construction of the 'anti-fascist protection wall' in August 1961, the GDR no longer was no longer interested in pursuing the case. General Speidel was willing to grant a retreat with honour: he renounced any financial claims for damages but insisted that all the prints of both versions of the film be taken out of circulation. On 29 June 1962 the Queen's Bench Division of the High Court of Justice officially announced that a settlement had been reached.³⁸

While the Speidel libel case was making legal history, Plato and its new sister company ETV were struggling on.³⁹ Although The Thorndike documentaries were booked by a few cinemas in London, Coventry and Newcastle, Plato's efforts to approach trade union organisations with a 'Films for Peace' programme, which included THE GERMAN STORY and GENERAL SPEIDEL – THE ARCHIVES TESTIFY at prices ranging from 10/- to £ 4, were largely unsuccessful.⁴⁰ As Plato had learnt from the 'Films and the Labour Movement' conferences in the 1950s, a British film was needed if it

33 'Letter from Executive Committee CPGB to Central Committee SED', 1.11.1960, in: SAPMO-BArch, NL Walter Ulbricht, NY 4182/1308.

34 'Letter from Annelie Thorndike to Walter Ulbricht', 21.1.1960, in: *ibid.*

35 'Besprechung über den Speidel-Prozess', 13.2.1960, in: *ibid.*

36 'Copy of letter from Kegel to Kann', 28.12.1960, in: SAPMO-BArch NL Prof. Dr. F.K. Kaul, file 321.

37 *The Times*, 3.3.1961.

38 *Ibid.*, 30.6.1962.

39 The 'Speidel case' is for example treated by Colin Duncan, who had appeared for General Speidel in the case, in a forword to Peter F.Carter-Buck, *Libel and Slander* (London, 1973), pp. 26–27.

40 File 'Plato Films' in: TUC Archive, MRC, MSS 292/675.94.

wanted to win over the trade unions. It would take another dozen years for such a film to arrive.

Co-productions

Thanks to the Leipzig Film Festival exchanges between British and East German film makers increased during the 1960s. Each year Stanley Forman headed a British delegation, which included both big names in documentary (e.g. John Grierson, Paul Rotha) and talented youngsters, to enliven the festival with its presence. Leipzig also offered an excellent opportunity for 'networking'. ETV not only continued to act as a distributor for GDR films in the UK (releasing among others the next documentary of the Thorndike couple, *THE RUSSIAN MIRACLE*, in 1963), but it was also frequently asked to shoot footage for East German Television news. For such jobs Forman would hire the British cameraman Manny Yospa. The latter would also cover for ETV important events in the British Communist Movement, like the funeral of former CPGB general secretary Harry Pollitt in 1960. In the late 1960's another British cameraman John Green, who thanks to Forman had been able to study at the East German film school in Babelsberg, became the London representative for GDR Television, as a member of the semi-conspiratorial Dr. Katins group.⁴¹ But ETV too would remain deeply involved projects for GDR Television such as English language courses.

East German support enabled ETV to finally produce the British labour film that had been so badly missing in the 1950s and early 1960s. The occasion was the 50th anniversary of *Labour Monthly*, the magazine that Rajani Palme Dutt had been editing since 1921. Although Palme Dutt was a 'hardliner' who was 100% loyal to 'Moscow', *Labour Monthly* was seen by many as a periodical for the broad Left and – true to its subtitle of 'a Magazine of Left Unity' – did indeed have a substantial following outside the CPGB community. The 50th anniversary film set to show the history of the labour movement from the beginning of the century. In 1960 Stanley Forman had sent a letter to the left-wing weekly *Tribune* asking its 'readers

41 From 1972 until 1979 Dr Sabina Katins headed a group of anonymous cameramen and reporters in possession of West German and British passports, who made a wide range of documentary films for GDR television. Cf. John Green, *Taking The Pulse* (London, 1994); Rüdiger Steinmetz and Tilo Prase, *Dokumentarfilm zwischen Beweis und Pamphlet. Heynowski & Scheumann und Gruppe Katins* (Leipzig, 2002); Tilo Prase, 'The Structure, Coverage and Surprising End of a Conspiratorial Film Team, in: *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 24: 3 (2004), pp. 381–390.

who possess (or who have knowledge of the whereabouts of) any film material on such subjects as, labour conditions in the 'twenties and 'thirties, the General Strike and Hunger Marches, the Spanish Civil War and pre-war meetings, demonstrations, etc. [to] get in touch with us'.⁴² Good use could now be made of this and other archival footage that Plato and ETV had been assiduously collecting over the years. Thanks to the fact that Ivor Montagu had direct access to SED big shot Albert Norden and to Stanley Forman's numerous contacts with GDR film people production support for the *Labour Monthly* film could be obtained from East Germany. Forman shared the director's credits with Roland Bischoff, a cameraman and director at the DEFA Studio. Based on a script by Ivor Montagu, FIFTY FIGHTING YEARS was a professionally made documentary of 45 minutes, that featured Palme Dutt and his associate editor Robin Page Arnot. The film's premiere on 10 June 1973 (two years after the 50th anniversary of the magazine) attracted a full house in the National Film Theatre in London.⁴³ FIFTY FIGHTING YEARS was distributed by both ETV and Contemporary.

In 1973 ETV was no longer the only outfit dealing with left-wing films in Great Britain and FIFTY FIGHTING YEARS was not the only film on the British working-class that was available. In the wake of the Vietnam demonstrations and the students' revolts a number of film collectives or workshops, mainly based in London, had been founded: Cinema Action and Amber (Newcastle-upon-Tyne) in 1968, Berwick Street Collective and Liberation Films in 1970, FOUR CORNERS in 1973 and NEWSREEL in 1974. Their aim was to develop a cinema by and for the working-class.⁴⁴ Whether they were inclined to accept the 'really existing socialism' or not, none of these groups had the desire to develop such close relationships with the Socialist world, as Stanley Forman had done for Plato and ETV. It was not until 1986 that one of them, Amber, actually embarked upon on a British-GDR co-production. Thanks to a tour through the UK with Winfried and Barbara Junge and their documentary LEBENSLÄUFE (1981), organised by none other than Stanley Forman, Amber had met the East German couple.⁴⁵ Their joint project was supported by the DEFA and Channel Four and resulted in two 50-minutes documentaries: FROM MARX AND ENGELS TO

42 *Tribune*, 16.12.1960, p. 8.

43 *Labour Monthly*, July 1973, pp. 309–315.

44 Cf. Margaret Dickinson (ed.), *Rogue Reels. Oppositional Film in Britain 1945-90* (London, 1999).

45 Dieter Wolf (ed.), *Lebensläufe. Die Kinder von Golzow: Bilder – Dokumente – Erinnerungen zur ältesten Langzeitbeobachtung der Filmgeschichte von Barbara und Winfried Junge* (Marburg, 2004).

MARKS & SPENCER (1988), shot by the Junges in Newcastle, and FROM MARKS & SPENCER TO MARX AND ENGELS (1988), shot by Amber in Rostock.⁴⁶

ETV too was involved in a further co-production with the GDR, DIE GENERALE (THE GENERALS, 1986). This was a documentary film by Walter Heynowski and Gerhard Scheumann dealing with the Generals for Peace and Disarmament. Studio H&S, the name under which the two were operating, together with cameraman Peter Hellmich (a West German citizen), was continuing the tradition of Andrew and Annelie Thorndike. Heynowski and Scheumann produced a series of dissecting political documentaries, for which they used every trick in the book, such as filming incognito, in order to get the results that they wanted. Already in 1960 Stanley Forman had helped to bring MORD IN LWOW (MURDER IN LWOW), a television film made by Walter Heynowski (who had not yet teamed up with Gerhard Scheumann) to the attention of the British press and members of Parliament. Like HOLIDAY ON SYLT and OPERATION TEUTONIC SWORD the film revealed the Nazi past of a high Bonn official, Minister for the exiled (Bundesvertriebenenminister) Theodor Oberländer. In 1966 the duo made a name for themselves with DER LACHENDE MANN (THE LAUGHING MAN). This film exposed the mentality of former Wehrmacht soldier and West German citizen Siegfried Müller who, with a little help from a bottle of Pernod, did not hesitate to boast in front of the camera about his murderous exploits as a Foreign Legionnaire in the Congo.⁴⁷ Over the next twenty years Studio H&S produced some forty documentaries, including such remarkable films as PILOTEN IN PYJAMA (PILOTS IN PYJAMAS, 1968) about American bomber pilots taken prisoner in North Vietnam and DER KRIEG DER MUMIEN (THE WAR OF THE MUMMIES, 1974) about the Pinochet putsch in Chile.⁴⁸ It is conspicuous that, despite their often controversial point of view, none of the Studio H&S documentaries released by ETV in the 1970s and 1980s met with any kind of resistance from the authorities, unlike the Thorndikes films in the 1950s. There seems to be at least two reasons for this. As a result of the *Neue Ostpolitik* the Federal Republic of Germany no longer put pressure on the British government to ban controversial films

46 For a detailed treatment of this film, see the chapter by Martin Brady and Helen Hughes in the volume.

47 Walter Heynowski and Gerhard Scheumann, *Der lachende Mann. Bekentnisse eines Mörders* (Berlin, 1966).

48 Cf. Steinmetz and Prase, *Dokumentarfilm*; Rüdiger Steinmetz, 'Heynowski & Schuemann: the GDR's leading documentary film team', in: *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 24:3 (2004), pp. 365–380.

from the GDR. Moreover, during these decades political censorship on film was, more generally, felt to be unacceptable.

Conclusion

As usual ETV chose the National Film Theatre in London for the premiere of *DIE GENERALE*. Since the screening of *THE GERMAN STORY* in 1957 this theatre had acted as a shop window for East German films. But the takings were rather disappointing. East German films failed to make a theatrical breakthrough. Their money-making potential was considered negligible, unlike the films from Poland, Czechoslovakia or Hungary, which did make a definite impact in the art house circuit. Of course, it did not help that the best films from the GDR were documentaries instead of feature films. Blatant interference by the authorities, particularly in the 1950's and early 1960's, was another handicap. At times the political slant of the films too was a handicap, even for their non-theatrical distribution. That East German films could be seen at all in the UK was thanks to the perseverance of such committed individuals as Ivor Montagu, Charles Cooper and in particular Stanley Forman.