

A response to the interview with filmmaker Volker Schlöndorff

A clarification of essential historical issues

By David Walsh
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On February 3 the *World Socialist Web Site* posted an interview with veteran German filmmaker Volker Schlöndorff, conducted by Prairie Miller. [<http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2001/02/schl-f03.html>] Certain issues raised in that conversation need to be clarified.

In *Legends of Rita*, Schlöndorff portrays the fate of a Red Army Faction terrorist who escapes from West to East Germany and is given a new identity by the East German (German Democratic Republic—GDR) Stalinist regime and its secret police. In fact, as it turns out, the West German radicals are pawns in a cynical diplomatic chess match conducted by officials in both parts of Germany.

As our review of the film indicated [Putting his finger on a wound: *Rita's Legends* (*Die Stille nach dem Schuß*) 3 March 2000]: “The film ends tragically for Rita, whose clandestine existence is once again and finally jeopardised by the fall of the wall [in 1989] and German reunification. Forced to flee, she is shot down by police as she attempts to cross a police checkpoint. One of the closing lines of the film falls to a member of the East German *Volkspolizei* who, following the fall of the wall, now works seamlessly together with his West German police colleagues: “Order and security must apply everywhere.”

The film represents an honest, if limited, attempt to deal with the failure of Stalinism and terrorism. It suggests that the courage and idealism of Rita were legitimate, although her ideology and perspective were not. One might say that, politically, the critique of these tendencies is carried out from a left social-democratic point of view.

An honest artistic effort is one thing, the political views of the artist, expressed, so to speak, in programmatic form, may be another. In the interview posted February 3

Schlöndorff makes certain assertions that should not go unanswered.

Above all, it is his consistent identification of the GDR and the Soviet Union with socialism that we must reject. In the Soviet Union a Stalinist bureaucracy, a petty-bourgeois layer hostile to the perspective of world socialist revolution, usurped power from the working class in the 1920s. It betrayed the aspirations of the Soviet and international working class, transforming the Communist parties, on the basis of national-opportunist politics, into counterrevolutionary instruments. These parties led the working class to a series of defeats from whose consequences we have not yet recovered. The Stalinist bureaucracy carried out a bloody purge of Marxist elements within the Soviet Union and blocked the path of the Russian and international working class to the realization of socialism, culminating its counterrevolutionary work in the liquidation of the Soviet Union a decade ago. Leon Trotsky established the Fourth International, whose work the *WSWS* carries on, as the political continuation of the international socialist principles underlying the October Revolution and the successor to the Third International, which was destroyed by Stalinism.

The regimes in eastern Europe, including the GDR, were not the creations of an independent, socialist movement of the working class—in fact, the Stalinists suppressed such movements in eastern Germany in the aftermath of World War Two—but rather the result of the manipulations and machinations of the Stalinist bureaucracies. They were, as the Trotskyist movement defined them at the time, “deformed workers states,” with the emphasis on the word “deformed.” Politically, they functioned as police states, with an absence of elementary democratic rights. These regimes discredited socialism in

the eyes of millions of workers and intellectuals over a period of four decades, helping to disarm the working class politically and pave the way for the restoration of capitalism in the post-1989 period.

It is simply not true that, as Schlöndorff states, “the founding fathers of that state meant well.” The East German Stalinist leaders of the late 1940s and early 1950s were those who had demonstrated, by their political pliancy and willingness to carry out any number of crimes against the working class, that they could be relied upon by Stalin and his murderous regime in the Soviet Union. The working class grew increasingly discontented in the GDR and rose up in massive numbers in June 1953. The Stalinists put down this revolt with an iron hand.

As for the filmmaker's assertion that individuals such as Bertolt Brecht were carrying out “a very honest attempt ... to build a truly pacific, never again fascist state,” while a little more complicated, this too is fundamentally false. Brecht was not simply a puppet of Stalinism, and made considerable artistic contributions early in his career, but his role in the GDR was reprehensible. While privately (according to Walter Benjamin) he had declared Trotsky the greatest living writer in Europe, Brecht never made a single critical public comment about Stalinism and its crimes. He provided the GDR regime with much needed credibility and during the bloody events of 1953 lined up with the government against the working class.

Schlöndorff's lack of perspective leads him to adopt quite pessimistic positions. He speaks of “the impossibility” of realizing a socialist economy and the fact that “the Soviet Union didn't work.” This is not historically accurate. What failed was the attempt to build a bureaucratic-nationalist “socialism” within the bounds of a single country, or in the case of the GDR, a portion of a country.

As Peter Schwarz explained in his lecture *Stalinism in Eastern Europe: the Rise and Fall of the GDR*, [<http://www.wsws.org/history/1998/01/gdr.html>], describing the GDR in the 1960s: “Despite considerable progress, its [East Germany's] productivity of labour lagged far behind that of the most advanced capitalist countries. A higher productivity of labour can only be achieved on the basis of an international division of labour. But the GDR was based on the doctrine of ‘socialism in one country’ and had only limited access to the resources of the world market. Not even between themselves were the economies of Eastern Europe ever really integrated by the Stalinist regimes. Like the economic relations inside the Stalinist countries, those

between them were also flawed by bureaucratic corruption and incompetence.

“Neither did the social concessions indicate the existence of socialism. Their purpose was not to raise the general cultural level of the working class and of society as a whole. Rather they served as a means to appease the working class and secure the rule of the bureaucracy, which never loosened its grip over every aspect of society for a moment.

“In a country of 17 million, it maintained an army of 200,000 full-time and part-time secret agents to monitor every aspect of the lives of its citizens. The Stasi even collected smell samples from suspicious elements, so it could use dogs to look for them if it wanted to arrest them. The samples were carefully stored in plastic bags. In the Stasi, as in many other fields, efficiency and monstrosity mingled with incompetence.

“The bureaucracy not only feared political opposition, it feared any independent or original thought. Artists were particularly carefully monitored, even though most of them were completely apolitical.”

The character of the GDR and the Soviet Union is a critical historical and perspectives question. Confusion on this, as the events in the former Soviet Union and eastern Europe over the past 10 years have demonstrated, can have disastrous consequences. The restoration of unfettered market relations in that part of the world has led to a social catastrophe of an unprecedented kind.

This is why we also cannot let pass without comment Miller's question, “How do you feel about the possibility that this is a film that could be embraced by the political right because it is more critical of socialism than of capitalism?” Again, there is the false identification of the eastern European states with socialism, which leads, frankly, in the direction of the old Stalinist canard that any critic past or present of these repressive regimes is “anti-socialist” and guilty of giving aid to the enemy. A serious political advance today is possible only on the basis of a conscientious study of the history of the socialist movement of the twentieth century, and, above all, the struggle against Stalinism led by Trotsky and the Fourth International.

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