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Television and protest in East Germany's revolution, 1989–1990: A mixed-methods analysis



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ABSTRACT

This article uses a mixed-methods approach to analyze the relationship between television and protest during East Germany's revolution. The content of television newscasts, both West German and East German, is analyzed together with protest event data. There are two key findings. First, West German coverage of protests is associated with an increase in protest in the first phase of the revolution. This finding emerges from time series analysis. Second, West German and East German television coverage were interacting, with the latter reacting to the former. This finding emerges from both quantitative and qualitative analysis.

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1. Introduction

This article investigates the relationship between television and protest during East Germany's revolution of 1989. The article asks two questions. First, did television in general, and West German television in particular, encourage and drive the protests? And second, what was the relationship between West German and East German television during the revolutionary Fall and Winter of 1989 and 1990? This analysis uses a mixed-methods approach: it combines a statistical analysis using time series methods with a qualitative analysis of television newscasts, both West German and East German.

There are two main conclusions. First, in contrast to some previous work this article shows that West German television coverage of protests drove protest levels up in the first phase of the revolution, but not in the second phase, when state repression subsided and the conditions for organizing eased. This conclusion emerges from the use of time series methods such as Granger causality tests. Second, West German television and East German television formed an interacting system. Within this system, East German television was the weaker side, the one that reacted to what was taking place in Western media. This conclusion emerges from an analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data.

East Germany's revolution is not relevant only to scholars interested in that particular country. The potential impact of West German television on protest activity in East Germany raises the more general question of the potentially destabilizing impact of foreign media on authoritarian regimes in general and communist regimes in particular. During the Cold War, the United States invested a lot of effort into reaching East European audiences with media such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America. In the age of the internet, the impact of foreign media on authoritarian regimes continues to be a relevant question, including the world's remaining communist regimes such as China or Cuba (Taubman, 1998; Yang, 2003; Kalathil and Boas, 2003). The issue of interaction between East German and West German television is the one that can also be of interest to scholars of societies that have experienced similar territorial partitions, the most apparent example being North and South Korea (Rhee, 1993).

2. The role of television in East Germany's revolution

The East German revolution is a key link in the interconnected revolutions of 1989. Subsequent revolutions in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania and the Soviet Union were all inspired by the East German example. Since Germany was the crucial battleground of the Cold War, it was the fall of the Berlin Wall that became the symbolic watershed dividing the Cold War from the post-Cold War era. The historical significance of the East German case, the heightened symbolic importance of the Berlin Wall, and unmatched quality of data made the East German case a central one in the literature on the fall of communism (Opp et al., 1995; Maier, 1997; Dale, 2006; Pfaff, 2006). The re-unification of West and East Germany has led to an opening of East German archives, all in the spirit of Western-imposed “coming to terms with the past” (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) (Torpey, 1993; Silberman, 1993; Epstein, 2003). This Western liberal push to open up the archives of East Germany comes together with the impressive state of these archives, derived from typically German meticulousness as well as the paranoid data-gathering of East Germany's communist regime. This extends to protest catalogs and mass media materials, data which form the empirical basis of this study.

For a long time, the East German regime appeared to be among the most stable communist regimes in Eastern Europe (Kern, 2010, p. 3). Before the 1980s, East Germany was even considered to be one of East Europe's better performing economies (Kopstein, 1997). Yet, the revolution gathered momentum quickly and spread from the initial Monday demonstrations in Leipzig into a full-blown protest wave (Kuran, 1991; Lohmann, 1994). The harsh political climate made life difficult for dissidents and overt organizing was practically impossible, not least because of the oversight of the regime's secret police, the Stasi. Gorbachev's reforms were unpopular with East Germany's ruling class in general and Erich Honecker, the general secretary of the SED (Socialist Unity Party's/Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands) in particular. The SED oligarchy was determined to remain true to communist orthodoxy, despite the popularity of Gorbachev amongst East German citizens (Philipsen, 1993, p. 50; Maier, 1997, pp. 155–156). Honecker insisted that “there was no need for changes”, even as Gorbachev warned him that “dangers await those who do not react to life” (Philipsen, 1993, p. 394). In such an austere political context, it is only natural to ask if West German television, which was widely available in East Germany, had something to do with the unexpected success of protests in East Germany.

Now, let us focus on the issue whether television played any role in the East German revolution. Most researchers would agree that media exposure is important to the diffusion of protest (Myers, 2000; Andrews and Biggs, 2006). At the same time, much of the research has been on the printed press, with special focus on the potential biases of newspapers as a source of event data (Myers and Schaefer Caniglia, 2004; Earl et al., 2004; Davenport, 2010). There is much less research on television or radio (Straus, 2007; Yanagizawa, 2012). The case of East Germany has been the site of some of the most interesting research. Many authors claim that West German television was a significant factor in driving protests. This thesis exists in the German language literature in stronger (Hanke, 1990; Czaplicki, 2000), as well as in moderate forms (Hesse, 1990; Lindgens and Mahle, 1992; Holzweißig, 1996). There are also works in English that emphasize the importance of West German television for the East German revolution (Kuran, 1991; Opp and Gern, 1993; Opp et al., 1995; Jaraus, 1994; Grix, 2000). In one formulation, the East German revolution is even referred to as “the first television revolution in the world” (Hanke, 1990, p. 319).

However, this view has been challenged by two recent articles by Kern and Hainmueller which make use of the fact that most but not all of East Germany could receive West German television broadcasts (Kern and Hainmueller, 2009; Kern, 2010). The signal could not reach the so-called “valley of the clueless” (*Tal der Ahnungslosen*), that is, the southeastern area around Dresden and the northeastern part of the country near Greifswald. Such a quasi-experimental setting makes it possible to compare counties that are as similar as possible but diverge on whether they had access to West German television. The interesting conclusion from these studies is that it does not appear to be the case that areas with access to West German television had a higher propensity to protest.

This new research gives us the most sophisticated analysis of the relationship between television and protest in East Germany published so far. However, it leaves two questions unanswered. First, it tells us nothing about the content of West German broadcasts and whether it varied over space and over time. Did West German television talk about the protests and if so when? Is there a temporal pattern between their discussion of protests and the protests themselves? And second, Kern and Hainmueller ignore East German television. What was the relationship between West German and East German television? What was the relationship between East German television and the protests?

Kern and Hainmueller bring up the entertainment aspect of West German television as the potential “opium for the masses”. The notion that East Germans would turn to West German television primarily for entertainment is plausible but not without its problems. First, some of the most popular entertainment shows were actually aired on East German television. For example, “Polizeiruf 110” (Police call 110) and “Der Staatsanwalt hat das Wort” (The state attorney has the word) had the highest ratings of around 40 percent (Wolff, 2002, p. 285; Meyen, 2003, p. 117). And second, during times of revolutionary upheaval people tune in to watch the news and political shows much more often than before. When asked what they wanted from television in 1987, 72 percent of East German viewers said they wanted entertainment and relaxation and 59 percent said they wanted information on important political events. In December of 1989, when revolutionary protests were in full swing, roughly the same percentage of people said they wanted entertainment but 77 percent of viewers said they wanted information on important political events (Meyen, 2003, p. 70). In short, people became more politicized during the revolutionary Fall of 1989. Furthermore, the wish to be entertained may co-exist with a desire to be politically informed and involved, as it happened in East Germany.

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