

## Diplomatic Notes on North Korea and Wikileaks

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Wikileaks indicated that China has expressed some reservations about the Democratic Peoples Republic of North Korea (DPRK), even contemplating its possible unification with South Korea. (It isn't much of a secret that China is worried that, in the event of the collapse of the DPRK, China might be overwhelmed by refugees). It is my assumption that the DPRK had already wanted to broaden its openings to the world, and not be so heavily dependent on China as its only ally.

(In a piece I sent out earlier this week I had noted the visit by two delegates from the DPRK to a conference in Norway of the International Peace Bureau, and the odd visit of three North Korean trade unionists in 1997 looking for contact with the "U.S. Labor Party").

As some of you know, I'm a terrible proof reader, and should let someone check this first, but let me send this out as a bit of history while the time is right - which is now. This is a story which doesn't begin in Asia at all, but with the German Democratic Republic (GDR). So here it is, my first and final draft of some diplomatic memories.

My own role is, at best, merely a guest at history's table, but I have had the chance to see some things before others were aware of them. I had been in East Berlin a couple of times during the height of the Cold War and found it terribly oppressive. The police, whom I remember as dressed in grey, marched through the streets with their rifles. The apartment buildings had none of the wonderful bursts of flowers in window boxes which one saw in even the poorest sections of West Berlin. On one occasion the members of the War Resisters International Council, of which I was a member, were meeting in West Berlin and were invited by the GDR's Peace Committee to dinner at what I think was called the Bertold Brecht House.

We had to choose our delegates with care - one or two would not have been permitted past the Berlin Wall because of involvement with dissidents. Our delegation included a courageous Danish member of our Council who had been active in the underground during the war, and our Chair at the time - the redoubtable Myrtle Solomon.

There was one brief moment of unease when a little "pocket calculator and clock", which I carried in my jacket and which sounded the time once every hour, beeped during the middle of something I was saying. I turned to my jacket pocket and said "Be quiet". I assume the GDR folks were convinced it was a CIA device recording all.

The GDR sent delegations to the US and on one occasion the US Peace Council asked if I would host their delegation. I said yes, and, knowing that most of the time they would have been wined and dined in the spacious apartments of Communists in New York City, I said we would meet at my apartment, a fourth floor walkup on the Lower East Side. I spent all day cleaning the house and preparing a meal of genuine chili (no beans) and rice.

We had a small group of our people, Paul Mayer and Norma Becker were there - I'm not sure who else. The Germans were very late in coming, Norma, who had a habit of smoking pot, had broken out a joint and passed it around, so that when the Germans finally did come "our side" was mildly high. The occasion was rather stiff and formal. They were talking in platitudes about peace and democracy, while we wanted to have a real discussion. At one point, somewhat impatient, I said "This is all very interesting, but we would like to have your views on Solidarity". (The Polish union was just then much in the news). I'm afraid my question brought the meeting to an early conclusion, and their American minders got them safely out.

But from time to time, at the office of War Resisters League, I would have visitors drop by from Pravda, from the Soviet Peace Committee and, somewhat oddly, a young man from the GDR Consulate in Washington DC. The Soviets always brought a bottle of vodka, and while I had by then stopped drinking, it was shared with friends.

One afternoon the young man from the GDR came to visit, shortly after Yuri Andropov had assumed command of the Soviet Union. He told me to expect major shifts in Soviet policy. He said "I've been to parts of the Soviet Union that are off limits to tourists - the situation is not good. There will be changes, so great you may not believe them". Andropov, who had headed the KGB, had been a hard-liner in dealing with the crisis in Czechoslovakia in 1968. But he was, as my East German friend had said, a man who sought major reforms in the Soviet Union. (It was during his time in office that Samantha Smith was invited to the Soviet Union - Samantha was an American child who had written Andropov urging peace). When his health began to fail, he strongly urged that Gorbachev replace him. That however, didn't happen - Cherenenko took his place before, in turn, falling ill and dying. That was when Gorbachev became the head of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev was the KGB candidate.

Because of that visit from the young man from the GDR who had told me what Andropov would do, (but who had died before he could do it), when the first signs of change came from Gorbachev, I knew something major was in the wind. At about that time I was going down to Washington DC to give a talk to a pacifist group. My friend from the GDR suggested he meet me for lunch. When we met, I said "I'm not clear what we are supposed to talk about - the FBI is probably following me and the CIA is certainly following you".

On my last trip to East Berlin I asked a young friend who lived in West Berlin to take me across the wall so that I could meet with East German dissidents. I met first with some student dissidents and then with some East German pastors. As I was leaving the pastors I said "I'm going next to meet with the official committee - should I tell them that I've met with you or would that place you in a difficult position?"

They said "By all means tell them you've met with us - it is important for the official committee to know that these discussions are going on - in fact, we'll drive you there", and so they drove me to the headquarters of the GDR's Peace Committee. Clearly things had eased enormously from my first visit to East Berlin.

Looking back on this after the collapse of the GDR I realized that what the GDR was doing in a somewhat clumsy way was to try to "open a door to the West", to see if they might find ways of having relations with the West, rather than going through Moscow. Tragically that movement

toward change in East Germany ended with the collapse of the GDR. Very strange, that year. I had a wall calendar in my office which I'd been sent by the GDR - before the year was out, the calendar was still up but the GDR had vanished.

In looking at the DPRK I suspect that at least some of those in high places in Pyongyang would like to have a more open window to the West. China has been a very good friend, having sent its own troops to die in the Korean War, and supplying food and energy to a country that is desperately poor. But if I were in Pyongyang and read the Wikileaks in which China and the US discussed possible futures for Korea, I'd want to look for more options. It is quite certain - there is no doubt of this in my mind - that some key forces in the US want to maintain the state of "no peace / no war" with North Korea as an excuse to keep US bases in South Korea and Japan in an effort to encircle China. But there are other key figures - certainly former President Jimmy Carter - who feel that this hard line military approach is neither safe nor sensible.

Thus the kind of relations between the Christian Churches in North and South Korea are of special importance. And the relief work of the Mennonites, while totally non-political, provides a door through which both sides can get a better sense of the other.

Remember the famous "Ping Pong Diplomacy" in 1971, when a team of American ping pong players, who had been in Japan, were invited to China, the first break in the wall, opening the door, eventually, to the visit by Nixon.

So those of us who are outside the doors of power should not think our actions do not count. The end of the Cold War was, in my view, made possible in part because the truly independent "European Nuclear Disarmament" movement (END) gave the Soviets some assurance that if they took the kind of gamble for peace which Gorbachev did, the Americans could not take advantage of it. (Tragically the West never realized the chance it had to move toward genuine disarmament and the dissolution of NATO - still trapped in its old game of domination it simply moved NATO's borders closer to Russia).

These are brief notes, typed in haste. They are meant to assure those of us who think all things in Korea are locked up solidly, that we must watch for any opening to extend a hand of friendship. Not because we are in love with the policies of the DPRK, but because the dangers of war are so much greater and more harmful to all sides than the risks of peace. Signals of great change often come as softly as a drop of water. An open hand achieves more than a closed fist.