Australia and the GDR: Elective Affinities

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At first glance Australia and the German Democratic Republic do not appear to have had much in common. Geographically they were divided by half a world. Politically and ideologically they were firmly embedded in their respective alliance systems, giving them very little room to manoeuvre as independent states. From its establishment in 1949 the GDR was heavily influenced by the Soviet Union; Australia's most powerful and enduring imperial ties were with Great Britain, and from World War II Australia looked increasingly to the United States for security.

Yet there were also points of connection between Australia and the GDR. When the colonisation of Australia began in the late eighteenth century and accelerated through the nineteenth, Germans from various German states made their way to the 'fifth continent'. They played their role in its settlement and, with it, the dispossession of its Indigenous population.

In the Nazi period German refugees made their way to distant Australia. As committed anti-fascists, a number made the decision after the war to return to that part of their homeland which seemed to represent a better, 'other' Germany. One of them was the Berlin-born Walter Kaufmann, a German refugee of Polish origin who had arrived in Australia in 1940, was detained in an Australian internment camp before volunteering for service in the Australian Army, and in 1957 settled in the GDR. He became one of the GDR's best-known writers. Several years later he was followed by Berlin-born Salomea Genin, who had fled with her siblings and Polish-Jewish parents to Australia in 1939, and moved to the GDR in 1963.

While as a political entity Australia was older than the GDR – the federation of the Australian colonies was achieved in 1901 – both Australia and the GDR were newcomers to internation-
al relations and diplomacy in 1949. Prior to the Second World War Australia's diplomatic relations were conducted in large part by Great Britain and its diplomatic representatives on Australia's behalf. From its foundation to its demise, the GDR remained heavily dependent on its relations with the Soviet Union. Both would struggle to assert their independence in international affairs.

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Australia and the GDR entered the world of diplomacy at a similar time, and with the status of minor states representing small populations. The limitations imposed on them at the time of the Cold War soon became very clear. Both had little choice but to take their places on their respective sides of the Iron Curtain.

Australia extended formal diplomatic recognition to the Federal Republic of Germany on 28 January 1952 and established an embassy in Bonn. During this phase of the Cold War, there was no realistic possibility of extending the same recognition to the GDR. The formal stance adopted by the Australian government over a period of almost two decades was expressed by then Minister for External Affairs, Paul Hasluck, in April 1965:

...the self-styled 'German Democratic Republic' is not recognized by Australia and the other Western Powers as a State. The territory in question has remained under the control of the Soviet Union and its armed forces; no free elections have been permitted; and the institutions set up in the zone have no obvious basis in the will of the people of the zone. The territory is still regarded as a zone under Soviet military occupation not possessing national sovereignty or independence. In these circum-
stances the Australian Government, in common with other Western Governments, has considered that rec-
ognition of the territory as a State is out of the question.

As Australian formal diplomatic recognition of the GDR was 'out of the question', Australian authorities did not recognize the name 'German Democratic Republic', did not recognize GDR passports, and insisted that no Australian acting in the service of the Australian government take up contact with a representative of the GDR government.¹

For its part, the GDR viewed Australia in similarly narrow ways. Historically Australia was regarded as a product of Brit-
ish colonialism; in the postwar context it was seen to be firmly embedded in an imperialist western alliance committed to the destruction of socialism.

In the absence of an embassy there was a form of Australian representation in Berlin, though not in East Berlin. That was the Australian Military Mission, which was accredited to the quadripartite Allied Control Council [Alliiertes Kontrollrat] from October 1945, and which was located initially in the Olympic complex in the British sector of Berlin. Later it was shifted to Joachimstaler Strasse and finally the Europa Centre in the heart of West Berlin. Australia's Department of External Af-
fairs acquired responsibility for the Military Mission from the Department of Defence at the beginning of 1948. One of the functions of the Military Mission was to report to Canberra on developments in the Soviet Zone of Occupation, later the GDR. The members of the Mission were witness to the deepening divisions in Berlin and to Australian participation in the Airlift from September 1948.
While Australia refused formal diplomatic recognition of the GDR, relations of other kinds could nonetheless be cultivated. A small volume of trade was established. There were visits between the two countries made by writers, trade unionists, communists, activists and academics. Athletes from the GDR were part of the combined German team which participated in the Melbourne Olympic Games in 1956.

Cold War politics meant that at the end of the 1960s there were just 30 states which had extended formal recognition to the GDR, most of them in the Soviet bloc and the Middle East. The GDR craved a much wider level of international recognition. Australia for its part sought to expand its trade and commercial ties with the world outside the Commonwealth and identified the Soviet bloc as an area of considerable potential. The GDR was viewed as a promising partner, because its strength in manufacturing seemed to complement Australian strengths in primary resources.

Below the level of official government contact, both sides investigated possibilities of expanding relations. In 1965, for example, the GDR's Chamber of Foreign Trade wrote to the Associated Chambers of Commerce of Australia (ACCA) to investigate the possibility of establishing a trade office in Australia. This matter was discussed over a considerable period by Australian authorities, as they sought to balance the political imperative of withholding formal recognition of the GDR with the economic imperative of expanding Australian trade. Eventually it was agreed that a trade office could be established in Sydney on the conditions that it be run as a private company (called 'KfA Limited') registered in Australia, that it should not have direct contact with any organ of the Australian govern-
ment, and it should not carry any insignia not approved by the government.\textsuperscript{2} A representative of the GDR's Chamber of Foreign Trade finally arrived in Sydney in mid-1970 to set up the office. In the meantime, the Australians agreed that an Australian trade official should make regular visits to East Berlin – though not the rest of the GDR – using a diplomatic or official passport, in the same manner as members of the Australian Military Mission.

By this time, circumstances in Europe and the wider world were undergoing a seismic shift. The Brandt government in the Federal Republic of Germany was 'normalising' relations between the two German States. Following the principles of his Ostpolitik, the FRG was abandoning the so-called 'Hallstein Doctrine', which determined in effect that the FRG would not maintain diplomatic relations with any state that recognized the GDR. The Four Power Agreement [Viermächte-Abkommen] of 1971 – which regulated relations between the two parts of Berlin – was followed in 1972 by the signing of the Basic Treaty [Grundlagenvertrag] – by which the two German states pledged to recognize and respect each other's sovereignty. This opened the possibility for countries the world over – including Australia – to recognize the GDR without consequences for their relations with the FRG or other allies.

In Australia, too, the political climate was changing. After 23 years of conservative rule, a Labor government led by Gough Whitlam was elected in December 1972. Whitlam was prepared to assert a greater level of independence in Australian foreign policy than the previous governments. Very soon after coming to power he explored the possibility of extending formal diplomatic recognition to the GDR. In doing so he watched very closely developments in Europe, awaiting in particular the signing of the Basic Treaty. When that was complete, Whitlam
arranged for formal diplomatic recognition of the GDR, which occurred on 22 December. He did so before Great Britain and the United States and without seeking their approval.

With mutual recognition granted, both states planned the establishment of embassies in each other's capital cities. As other states added to the sudden surge in the recognition of the GDR, East Berlin's 'diplomatic quarter' Pankow experienced rapid growth. For the Australian Embassy a suitable site was found at Grabbeallee 34 and an architectural design chosen.

Among the visitors to the embassy after its completion in 1975 were the small number of Australians resident in the GDR. One of them was Fred Rose, an anthropologist. Born in London in 1915 to politically conservative parents, Rose's own political views began to shift to the left during his studies at 'Red' Cambridge in the 1930s and through his exposure to the consequences of the Great Depression in the United Kingdom.

Rose's views were radicalised further after he graduated from Cambridge and moved to Australia in 1937. While conducting fieldwork in various parts of Northern Australia he gained direct experience of the neglect and exploitation of Indigenous Australians. In Broome in north-western Australia he became acquainted with a medical doctor, Alec Jolly, who introduced him to Marxist approaches to anthropology and ultimately persuaded Rose to join the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), which he did in Perth in 1942.

Although he had studied anthropology, Rose was employed at the time as an meteorologist, a position which facilitated contact with Indigenous Australians and enabled him to conduct
studies of a number of remote communities. His most influential work was conducted among the Anindilyakwa people of Groote Eylandt in the Northern Territory. After the war Rose became the CPA's expert on Aboriginal issues. For Rose this meant not only establishing a materialist understanding of Aboriginal people and their culture, but also acknowledging the devastating impact of their dispossession and promoting Indigenous civil and land rights.

In the wake of the defection in Australia of the Soviet spy Vladimir Petrov in 1954, Rose was accused of aiding Soviet espionage in Australia and required to appear before a Royal Commission. For several years the Australian security authorities, above all the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), had been watching Rose and his circle of acquaintances closely. In 1956 Rose moved to the GDR, where he took up a position as anthropologist at the Humboldt University and raised his young family with his German-born wife Edith Linde, the daughter of the anti-fascist lawyer Richard Linde. When possible he returned to Australia to carry out further fieldwork and engage in activism in the cause of Indigenous rights.

From the 1960s and later through the period of the existence of the Australian Embassy, Rose operated as an 'unofficial collaborator' for the Ministry of State Security, the Stasi. He was given the cover name 'Aust'. One of his tasks was to visit the embassy in Pankow and provide advice to the Stasi on the building itself and on events inside it; his British passport enabled him also to gather information on visits to West Berlin and the Federal Republic of Germany. When former Prime Minister Gough Whitlam visited the GDR in 1976, Fred and Edith Rose accompanied him on a visit to the State Opera on Unter den Linden.
Rose established a friendship with the Australian Ambassador Malcolm Morris, the first of the ambassadors to reside in East Berlin and work at the embassy in the Grabbeallee. Rose's visits to the Ambassador and the embassy library allowed him to put together detailed plans of the interior of the building and pass them on to the Stasi. Rose remained in the GDR until its collapse; he died in 1991, his faith in socialism and commitment to Indigenous rights unbroken.

Despite good intentions on both sides, the volume of work performed by the Australian Embassy in Pankow remained low. Trade between the two states continued to flow, but it did not expand to the levels hoped for on both sides. As a result the embassy was closed on 19 December 1986, after which time non-resident representation continued via the Australian Ambassador in Warsaw.

The Australian Embassy to the German Democratic Republic, the visible expression of relations between two states, thus existed a mere eleven years. The hope invested in a building whose architectural form appeared to promise a brighter future, unencumbered by the past, was short-lived. The embassy's brief history reminds us that international affairs are rarely what they seem. Relations of a certain kind between Australia and the GDR existed before formal recognition and before the construction of the embassy; they carried on after its doors were closed, ending only with the demise of the GDR itself. Moreover, as the case of Fred Rose shows, not everything that took place inside the embassy was transparent. Embassies have their secrets; all operate in the space between what is said and what remains silent.
1 'German Democratic Republic', NAA: A1838/272 30/1/3 Part 3, German Democratic Republic - Relations with Australia, 318.

2 'German Democratic Republic', NAA: A1838/272 30/1/3 Part 3, German Democratic Republic - Relations with Australia, 316.

3 Monteath and Munt, Red Professor, 275.
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Walter Kaufmann, Im Fluss der Zeit, Berlin: Dittrich Verlag, 2010.


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