




RESEARCH ARTICLE

# “Without Solidarity, No People”: International Solidarity in the East German People’s Solidarity

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## Abstract

People’s Solidarity (Volkssolidarität) is an East German organization founded in Dresden, Saxony, in 1945. It is primarily known for its activities dedicated to the care of older people. However, in the early 1950s, members of People’s Solidarity were also involved in international solidarity campaigns for Greece, North Korea, and Vietnam. This article examines this little-known chapter of the organization’s past. It reveals an unusual willingness among older East Germans both to donate money for the benefit of people in distant countries, and to relate to their suffering regardless of the (post-war) hardships faced at home. As the example of People’s Solidarity shows, internationalism to some extent informed the roots of everyday, voluntary care practices under socialist rule in East Germany.

## Introduction

This article introduces an unusual case of everyday internationalism in East Germany (GDR). Volkssolidarität (People’s Solidarity, PS) is an organization founded in Dresden, Saxony, in 1945, which primarily dedicated its activities to the care and needs of older people. It is an unusual case insofar as it emerged in the initial post-war years, that is, at a time of exceptional hardship, when forms of solidarity might have been limited to local, everyday encounters instead of reaching out to the Global South. The case is even more unusual as it documents international solidarity expressed by older people, who are usually considered to be particularly vulnerable and thus in need of help themselves. Hundreds of thousands of older people, as well as their caregivers (often older themselves), were members of PS in the GDR. In its first years, PS acted as a kind of “social fire brigade” for various critical life situations, but its remit was forcibly reduced to the care of older people under socialist rule in the early 1950s.<sup>1</sup>

The focus on older people adds to the unusualness of the case, which this article examines, since people beyond the breadwinning stage of life are not generally

<sup>1</sup>Andrea Rook, *Geschichte der Volkssolidarität 1990–2010. Zwischen Tradition und Zukunft* (Dresden, 2010), p. 6.

expected to have money to spare for charitable donations. In a socialist society, they would not have accumulated wealth in the same way as their counterparts in the capitalist world, where older people were often considered to be particularly generous donors.<sup>2</sup> The post-war years were a period of uncertainty for them, characterized by scarce pensions and even scarcer supplies. As a PS chronicle points out: “The trauma of surviving the war seemed to be followed by the trauma of surviving the time after the war.”<sup>3</sup>

Why then, and how, were older people willing to show solidarity with people(s) from the socialist South? The question is not only whether older people had anything to give away at the time, but also how they related to people in the socialist South, regardless of the hardships they faced at home. This article approaches these questions, firstly, by analysing what conception of solidarity PS stood for, and how it changed over time, and secondly, by tracing PS’s solidarity activities as well as the places where they occurred.

Little is known about international solidarity within PS structures, although a considerable number of its members must have been involved in it at the time. There seems to be no place for reminiscing about international solidarity within PS today; it is unlikely that anyone with first-hand experience of it remains alive, and there is an unwillingness to discuss this chapter of the organization’s past, in which solidarity might have been initiated by the state and not its members alone. In fact, older members whom I interviewed in the period 2020–2022 strongly rejected the idea of state intervention in PS and narrated their membership as a form of “lived solidarity” on the local level.<sup>4</sup> The few academic works on PS reproduce this blank space. In a portrait of PS in the Soviet occupation zone and the GDR from 1945 to 1969, the period in which a trend towards international solidarity in both East and West has been observed,<sup>5</sup> historian Philipp Springer does not mention socialist South relations even once.<sup>6</sup> But there are certainly archival materials (admittedly, archival snippets) and photographs in the Saxon Main State Archive in Dresden, the Brandenburgian State Main Archive in Potsdam, and the Deutsche Fotothek (a picture library in the Saxon State Library in Dresden), which indicate PS involvement in solidarity campaigns for Greece, North Korea, and Vietnam.

My initial observation was that this involvement peaked in the 1950s and that PS’s focus then shifted back to domestic concerns of veterans and older people, perhaps even legitimizing PS demands for better elderly care from the state. However, it turns

<sup>2</sup>Gerald Auten and Gabriel Rudney, “The Variability of the Charitable Giving by the Wealthy”, in Richard Magat (ed.), *Philanthropic Giving: Studies in Varieties and Goals* (New York, 1989), pp. 72–91, 80; Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, *Die Stellung der Freien Wohlfahrtspflege. Kenntnisse, Erwartungen, Engagement der Bundesbürger: Ergebnisse repräsentativer Bevölkerungsumfragen 1962–1985* (Allensbach, 1985), table A18 (n.p.); Eckhard Priller and Jana Sommerfeld, “Wer spendet in Deutschland? Eine sozialstrukturelle Analyse”, *WZB Discussion Paper*, Nr. SP I 2005–202 (2005), p. 16.

<sup>3</sup>Rook, *Geschichte der Volkssolidarität 1990–2010*, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup>See Maren Hachmeister, “Volunteering and Care in Old Age: Voices from People’s Solidarity in East Germany”, *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, 31:1 (2023), pp. 27–43.

<sup>5</sup>Frank Bösch et al., *Internationale Solidarität. Globales Engagement in der Bundesrepublik und der DDR* (Göttingen, 2018), p. 7.

<sup>6</sup>Philipp Springer, *Da konnt’ ich mich dann so’n bißchen entfalten. Die Volkssolidarität in der SBZ/DDR 1945–1969* (Frankfurt am Main, 1999), pp. 12–192.

out that internationalism was part of PS activities for several decades, at least in some cases. The article thus, thirdly, also aims to make visible a nearly forgotten East German case of everyday internationalism. A closer look at PS circles sheds new light on a time when practices of solidarity were being aligned “from above”, but also constantly renegotiated “from below”.

The article is in no way intended to pass judgement on who did and who did not, rightfully or wrongfully, believe in socialist solidarity. Nor does it seek to distinguish between supposedly right or false solidarity. Rather, it is meant to integrate the history of a central East German solidarity project and the life stories of its older participants into a broader history of state socialism. Taking the perspective of older people is, indeed, unusual and, in terms of sources, also a little experimental. This article hopes to demonstrate that it is, however, a perspective that teaches us something new about social relations, identities, and cultures of solidarity in and across socialist societies – and not least about the promises and realities of East German–socialist South relations.

### *Solidarity in the Making: PS as a Name and a Mission*

The historian Frank Bösch has found that international solidarity developed simultaneously in West and East Germany only in the 1960s, with the East German version being organized by the state from above. In the GDR, donations were collected in a formalized manner under the guidance of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED). “Nevertheless”, Bösch concludes, “an emotionally and ethically based broad willingness to help [...] developed among the population in East Germany [...]. Two decades after National Socialism, both parts of Germany thus discovered their global responsibility within the framework of worldwide trends, albeit under specific political auspices”.<sup>7</sup>

Notions and practices of solidarity in PS date further back. Like other local initiatives, they emerged directly from the conflicts caused by the suffering of war. Solidarity in the face of massive destruction of housing and the resulting homelessness (in Berlin and other major centres in the Soviet occupation zone, for example) is a well-researched example among these initiatives.<sup>8</sup> Widespread shortages of housing, food, and medicine across the zone were exacerbated by the seizure of homes by occupation forces.<sup>9</sup> In Dresden, the first call to “People’s Solidarity against the winter hardships” (*Volkssolidarität gegen Wintersnot*) was published in October 1945 and led to multiple – at the time, local – initiatives for people in need.<sup>10</sup> The call was launched by the bloc of anti-fascist democratic

<sup>7</sup>Bösch et al., *Internationale Solidarität*, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup>See Bernard Schäfers, *Sozialstruktur und sozialer Wandel in Deutschland* (Konstanz, 2021), p. 35; Björn Egner, “Wohnungspolitik seit 1945”, *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 5 May 2014. Available at: <https://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/183442/wohnungspolitik-seit-1945/>; last accessed 11 October 2023; Antonelle Scopacasa et al., *The Social City: Urban Development and Housing Projects in Berlin and Naples in the Post-War Era: A Comparison. Theoretical Models, Implemented Projects, Social and Political Impacts Today* (Berlin, 2022), p. 34.

<sup>9</sup>Jessica Reinisch, *The Perils of Peace: The Public Health Crisis in Occupied Germany* (Oxford, 2013), p. 290.

<sup>10</sup>“Volkssolidarität gegen Wintersnot”, *Sächsische Volkszeitung. Organ der Kommunistischen Partei Deutschlands, Bezirk Sachsen [Dresden, Freiberg]*, 19 October 1945, p. 1.

parties, which the Soviet Military Administration in Germany had allowed to form shortly before, that is, the Communist Party (KPD), the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDPD), together with the Free German Trade Union Federation (FDGB) and the national churches. The call stated, for instance, that “People’s Solidarity means that all those who still have a home give everything dispensable to those who are faced with ruin”,<sup>11</sup> and it asked for “tremendous actions of People’s Solidarity”.<sup>12</sup> This call must be seen in the context of the heavy bombing of Dresden in February 1945, as well as the approximately 4 million people from the former German territories in Eastern Europe who arrived in the Soviet occupation zone in the initial post-war years.<sup>13</sup> This first joint initiative was such a relief to people in need that PS was founded as an organization shortly afterwards.

The photojournalists Erich Höhne and Erich Pohl documented an extensive solidarity campaign in the city of Dresden in which the newly formed PS called upon the citizens to “show People’s Solidarity” (*Übt Volkssolidarität*). This wording holds a certain ambiguity as it refers to the organization’s name, on the one hand, and to the desired behaviour, on the other. The name of the organization is composed of the German nouns for people (*Volk*) and solidarity (*Solidarität*), indicating solidarity among people – in the sense of persons collectively – who constitute a nation. According to a later-proclaimed “communist” narrative, the name was suggested by Hermann Matern (who would become a member of the SED Politburo) and prevailed over other suggestions from Johannes Dieckmann (later president of the parliament of East Germany).<sup>14</sup> For the campaigns in the late 1940s, the organization also used its name as a mission statement. Instead of asking people to show solidarity, banners literally asked them to show People’s Solidarity.

Moreover, the German verb *üben*, which was used in the main slogan, can be translated not only as showing, but also as performing, practising, exerting, or, more broadly, doing the solidarity in question. The wording here is important. Today, no native speaker would call for solidarity to be performed, rather they would ask that it be expressed or shown (*Solidarität zeigen*). This specific wording was used frequently from the post-war period up to the early 1960s and it became particularly common in the international solidarity of East German trade unions and youth associations with people in Southeast Asia and Africa.<sup>15</sup>

In April 1948, the slogan “show People’s Solidarity” (with the above-described wording) appeared on huge banners on the roof and above the entrances to the railway station in Dresden Neustadt, and steam locomotives and train carriages there displayed messages such as “Show People’s Solidarity and everything will be better”

<sup>11</sup>Rook, *Geschichte der Volkssolidarität 1990–2010*, p. 179.

<sup>12</sup>“Volkssolidarität gegen Wintersonot”, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup>Ira Spieker, “Angekommen? Verortungen im Kontext von Flucht und Vertreibung in der SBZ und DDR”, in Reinhard Johler and Jan Lange (eds), *Konfliktfeld Fluchtmigration* (Bielefeld, 2019), pp. 121–136, 121.

<sup>14</sup>Johannes Dieckmann, “Blick zurück–Blick vorwärts”, *Solidarität*, 2 (1965), p. 5.

<sup>15</sup>See “WGB. Übt Solidarität mit dem vietnamesischen Volk in seinem nationalen Befreiungskampf!” (1953), Barch PLAKY 2/302; “Übt Solidarität–Afrika kämpft um seine Freiheit, FDGB–Sécurité Sociale UGTAN” (1960), Barch PLAKY 2/306.

(*Übt Volkssolidarität und alles wird besser*),<sup>16</sup> “The imperative of the hour: People’s Solidarity” (*Das Gebot der Stunde: Volkssolidarität*) (Figure 1), and “Don’t complain, help” (*Nicht klagen, sondern helfen*).<sup>17</sup> Banners displayed on the power plant Kraftwerk Mitte (Figure 2) and the Heinz-Steyer-Stadion appealed to the people of Dresden to “have a heart, show People’s Solidarity” (*Hab ein Herz, übe Volkssolidarität*).

In the period 1945–1949, PS activities included the distribution of heating materials, food, and clothing, as well as care provision for children, older people, and disabled persons. These were the grounds on which PS branches, circles, and clubs were founded all over eastern Germany. Campaigns in Brandenburg, for instance, reflect the inclusiveness of PS activities in these first constitutive years particularly well. PS posters in Potsdam and Neuruppin (Brandenburg) featured rhymes such as “Who provides the old and the sick with clothing, household utensils, and money? That is [...] People’s Solidarity”,<sup>18</sup> or “Who will help the parentless child who begs for love silently? We all want to help in [...] People’s Solidarity”.<sup>19</sup> These slogans make it clear that solidarity in PS included both material and immaterial aspects of mutual aid. Another call in Tharandt (a municipality near Dresden, Saxony) was, unusually, explicitly directed at “those who have incurred a great debt through their [...] support of [...] NSDAP [the Nazi Party]”<sup>20</sup> and demanded of them “not only to donate, but to sacrifice”.<sup>21</sup> The term “social fire brigade”,<sup>22</sup> chosen retrospectively by PS itself, thus well describes the wide range of social tasks PS performed, on the one hand, and its initiative in addressing smouldering societal conflicts (e.g. the question of guilt), on the other.

After the creation of the GDR in 1949, working conditions for PS changed drastically. PS transformed into a socialist mass organization, integrated into the ruling SED’s structures, and it had to reduce the scope of its activities to the care of veterans and older people. From the mid-1950s, however, PS also took part in aid campaigns for Greece, North Korea, and Vietnam. How does this fit with the position assigned to PS “from above”? Did this not contradict its role as a mass organization dedicated exclusively to older people? Was it not highly unlikely that an organization literally caring for society’s old and needy could win support for international solidarity within its ranks? Or was it precisely their idealistic commitment to the needy that prompted PS members to participate in international solidarity? What did participating even mean?

<sup>16</sup>Erich Höhne and Erich Pohl, *Dresden. Werbewochen der Volkssolidarität* (Dresden, 1948), photograph in SLUB/Deutsche Fotothek, picture number: df\_hp\_0000632\_010. Available at: [https://www.deutschefotothek.de/documents/obj/70600290/df\\_hp\\_0000632\\_010](https://www.deutschefotothek.de/documents/obj/70600290/df_hp_0000632_010); last accessed 5 June 2023.

<sup>17</sup>Höhne and Pohl, *Dresden*, photograph in SLUB/Deutsche Fotothek, picture number: df\_hp\_0000632\_011. Available at: [https://www.deutschefotothek.de/documents/obj/70600290/df\\_hp\\_0000632\\_011](https://www.deutschefotothek.de/documents/obj/70600290/df_hp_0000632_011); last accessed 5 June 2023.

<sup>18</sup>“Wer schafft den Alten und Kranken Geld, Kleidung und Hausgerät? Das ist die [...] Volkssolidarität” (1946–1949), BLHA 102/Plakate/C292.

<sup>19</sup>“Wer hilft dem elternlosen Kind, das stumm um Liebe fleht. Wir alle wollen helfen in der [...] Volkssolidarität” (1946–1949), BLHA 102/Plakate/C291.

<sup>20</sup>“Aufruf an die Einwohner von Tharandt” (Tharandt, 1945), HstAD 11860/IV/4.05/140.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup>Rook, *Geschichte der Volkssolidarität 1990–2010*, p. 6.



**Figure 1.** Campaign of People's Solidarity displayed on a train carriage at the railway station Dresden Neustadt in April 1948.

Source: © Deutsche Fotothek/Erich Höhne & Erich Pohl.

Socialist mass organizations were not created from scratch. Between 1949 and 1953, many apolitical groups and associations in East Germany were transformed into mass organizations by strategic merging, renaming, reassigning, and the replacement of unwanted participants. This was also the case for PS. As per the intention of the SED leadership, socialist mass organizations served primarily to (politically) control the masses, especially those who were not part of the active party elite.<sup>23</sup>

James Chappel identifies two organizations in German history that, like PS, “linked care with the political aims of the state apparatus” from which they received preferential treatment: “Red Aid” (*Rote Hilfe*), an organization affiliated with the Communist Party of Germany in the 1920s and 1930s; and the “National Socialist People's Welfare” (Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt), a major social welfare organization of the Third Reich.<sup>24</sup> However, neither of these focused on the care of older people as did PS, and neither should be seen as a direct predecessor of PS.

When looking at the evolution of PS as an organization, there is one important political circumstance we must keep in mind: while PS was embraced as a problem-solver for all kinds of social ills in the late 1940s, it also pointed to the

<sup>23</sup>Klaus Schubert and Martina Klein, “Massenorganisation”, in *Das Politlexikon* (Bonn, 2020). Available at: <https://www.bpb.de/kurz-knapp/lexika/politiklexikon/17827/massenorganisation/>; last accessed 12 October 2023; Susanne Angerhausen, *Radikaler Organisationswandel: wie die 'Volkssolidarität' die deutsche Vereinigung überlebte* (Opladen, 2003), p. 101.

<sup>24</sup>James Chappel, “‘On the Border of Old Age’: An Entangled History of Eldercare in East Germany”, *Central European History*, 53:2 (2020), pp. 353–371, 360–361.



**Figure 2.** Campaign of People's Solidarity displayed on the power plant Kraftwerk Mitte in April 1948.  
Source: © Deutsche Fotothek/Erich Höhne & Erich Pohl.

existence of precisely such societal problems, which the SED desperately sought to relabel in the 1950s. Being responsible for the needy meant literally being responsible for those who represented a political inconvenience. It was already apparent at the end of the 1940s that the area of social policy – at least rhetorically – was about to lose importance for those in power. This determined the social policy of the 1950s, because neediness was no longer supposed to exist in the socialist society.<sup>25</sup> The extraordinary identification with the term solidarity in PS is to be understood against this background. Members adopted PS as a name and a mission, and framed their concerns around issues that politicians found undesirable (e.g. social problems), proclaiming that their goal was “to leave no one alone and to give everyone the opportunity to participate in social life until old age”.<sup>26</sup>

Meanwhile, solidarity was promoted by communist parties across Eastern Europe as the opposite of individualism, and eventually as the antithesis of capitalism. The East German communist party – SED – was, of course, no exception. Solidarity was one of the key terms of socialist ideology also in East Germany. Firstly, solidarity was central to the creation of the so-called New (Soviet) man, who ideally welcomed every opportunity to sacrifice for others (meaning the collective) and thus represented the seed from which the socialist society as a whole was meant to grow. Solidarity was supposed to become a guiding feature of that society, which is why party officials introduced it “from above”. Its implementation, however, was up to the people “on the ground”.

With PS, an organization had already formed before the founding of the GDR that perfectly corresponded to this idea of solidarity. It already enjoyed broad support among the population and, appropriately enough, called itself People’s Solidarity. PS could thus be easily integrated into the new socialist system – or rather, it needed to be integrated, because of its popularity, in order to remain under the control of the now ruling SED.

Socialist societies were ideally designed to also express and spread notions of solidarity in the world. This process, called socialist internationalism, likewise paved the way for closer identification with socialist ideology among the people living in these societies. But when, and why, did PS in the GDR join in international campaigns for the Global South? The following two sections more closely examine this first shift of PS from local to international solidarity in the early 1950s. As will be shown, there was a shift, but international solidarity tended to happen on the sidelines and it never replaced local solidarity actions. At the same time, PS’s activities in the 1950s complement the picture that scholars have drawn of later and better-known activism (e.g. in North Korea or surrounding the Vietnam War), in which international solidarity was referred to as a “moral barometer” for building solidarity within the GDR.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup>Springer, *Da kommt’ ich mich dann so’n bißchen entfalten*, p. 76.

<sup>26</sup>Sekretariat des Zentralausschusses der Volkssolidarität, *Volkshelfer-Vertrauter der Veteranen* (Berlin, 1981), p. 2.

<sup>27</sup>Gregory Witkowski, “Between Fighters and Beggars: Socialist Philanthropy and the Imagery of Solidarity in East Germany”, in Quinn Slobodian (ed.), *Comrades of Color: East Germany in the Cold War World* (New York, 2017), pp. 72–94, 74.



### Causes and Locations of PS Solidarity

Birgit Wolf-Bleiß, a specialist in German studies, called on historians to explore the cultural, social, and historical situation in which a word, with its specific meaning, was used in East German state socialism. She assumed that words had a special socio-cultural imprint that was difficult for those outside the linguistic community to understand.<sup>28</sup> She defined solidarity in the GDR as the:

readiness to work for friendly states or national liberation movements expected from every citizen of the GDR by making material sacrifices in cash or in kind. Since the solidarity campaigns were often launched arbitrarily by the SED, and there was never any public accountability for the use of the donations, there was little inclination among the population to support such appeals, which were not based on an emergency situation known to everyone (such as after natural disasters).<sup>29</sup>

This definition contradicts Bösch's observation of East Germans developing "an emotionally and ethically based broad willingness to help",<sup>30</sup> and it completely overlooks the history of PS. Furthermore, this definition suggests that PS members voluntarily cared for people in their neighbourhoods but had to be forced by the SED to support people in distant countries. The following two examples confirm this conclusion (but only partially, as we will see).

On the occasion of its ninth anniversary in October 1954, the PS honorary board in Berlin published a flyer proclaiming "Solidarity is a national duty!" (*Solidarität ist nationale Verpflichtung!*). The flyer is particularly revealing with regard to the forms of everyday internationalism aspired to by PS members. It named it a task for the PS to "help organize solidarity with those peoples who are defending their freedom against the same imperialist forces that threaten the existence of the German nation",<sup>31</sup> thus pointing out that East Germans shared the experience of the struggle for freedom with peoples elsewhere in the world. In addition, the honorary board declared itself convinced that "every German [...] would happily [...] make a monthly solidarity contribution for the care of the people's veterans and for other humanitarian tasks of People's Solidarity".<sup>32</sup>

The PS regional committee in Saxony similarly mentioned that local solidarity had to be extended to international forms of solidarity. It stated:

[We] must organize solidarity aid that encompasses the entire population, and it will thus be shown with certainty that the strong force of solidarity is an effective means in the struggle for the unity of our country. In addition, the People's Solidarity has the task of organizing solidarity aid for other peoples. Many

<sup>28</sup>Birgit Wolf-Bleiß, "Sprache und Sprachgebrauch in der DDR", 15 October 2010. Available at: <https://www.bpb.de/themen/parteien/sprache-und-politik/42769/sprache-und-sprachgebrauch-in-der-ddr>; last accessed 5 June 2023.

<sup>29</sup>Birgit Wolf-Bleiß, *Sprache in der DDR. Ein Wörterbuch* (Berlin [etc.], 2000), p. 205.

<sup>30</sup>Bösch *et al.*, *Internationale Solidarität*, p. 7.

<sup>31</sup>"Solidarität als nationale Verpflichtung, Berlin, 22 October 1954", BLHA 102/Plakate/A612.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*

peoples are engaged in a bitter struggle against Anglo-American imperialism. In Korea, Vietnam, Greece, etc., peoples are fighting for their independence. It is also a question of humanity to organize solidarity aid to support the struggle for independence of these peoples. This international solidarity help was already expressed in the reception of the children of Greek freedom fighters in our German Democratic Republic, in the friendly reception of the Spanish freedom fighters expelled from France, and in the help for the brave Korean people. [...] It must now be the task of People's Solidarity to form the coordinating centre for these actions and to unite the helpful forces in tremendous actions of solidarity.<sup>33</sup>

These examples made use of solidarity in two dimensions. The first dimension was a moral one, indicating what a good citizen and a good human being was expected to do to support others who were struggling on the supposedly right side of the bipolar world order. Though aiming to stress what East Germans had in common with them, the flyer reinforced notions of other people as being different, that is, not (yet) as successful in their class struggle and in need of help from the more experienced and supposedly wealthier East Germans, who were assumed to be willing to help. Obviously, this moral dimension of international solidarity did not cover all people in need of humanitarian aid, but only those in selected socialist or would-be socialist countries. It was highly politicized and stood in contrast to the usual principle of PS to "leave no one alone".<sup>34</sup>

International solidarity, as promoted by PS in the early 1950s, was thus very selective in external relations while demonstratively inclusive in internal relations. Accordingly, the Berlin flyer closed with an appeal uniting all citizens: "May everyone play their part in making the tasks of People's Solidarity the cause of the whole people."<sup>35</sup> In the early post-war period, Hermann Matern, a member of the SED Politburo, said that "People's Solidarity is the struggle of the working people to overcome the difficulties of rebuilding and reshaping our lives".<sup>36</sup> In 1954, it appears, this notion had changed. Solidarity was expected from all citizens, not only those of working age, but also those beyond their working life. This was the period when schoolchildren and older people from PS got involved in solidarity actions.

PS in Saxony strongly addressed international developments, whereas PS in Saxony-Anhalt, for instance, up to the 1950s, remained primarily concerned with issues of care and accommodation for refugees arriving in the region. PS organized monthly collections of donations for this purpose, but many communities and city districts in Saxony-Anhalt lacked volunteers to carry out these collections. Thus, before international solidarity could be discussed there, it was necessary to find local people to help deal with local problems. The moral dimension of solidarity was similarly important in these local activities. In April 1950, the general assembly

<sup>33</sup>"New Tasks for People's Solidarity" (1950/1952), HStAD 11376/4239, p. 1.

<sup>34</sup>"Sekretariat des Zentralausschusses der Volkssolidarität, *Volkshelfer-Vertrauter der Veteranen*, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup>"Solidarität als nationale Verpflichtung", Berlin, 22 October 1954, BLHA 102/Plakate/A612.

<sup>36</sup>"Volkssolidarität", *Sächsische Zeitung. Organ der Kommunistischen Partei Deutschlands, Bezirk Sachsen [Dresden, Freiberg]*, 7 December 1945, p. 8.

(Landesdelegiertenkonferenz) in Halle (Saxony-Anhalt) explicitly put on record how they thought solidarity should be morally justified:

The question of the people's willingness to give is essentially a question of morale. It is up to us to address the questions of how this morale can be achieved and increased. This is only possible through constant education and influencing of the people. The best, most effective and sustainable way to do this is through word of mouth from our volunteers. The way the volunteer acts is the way the people will behave.<sup>37</sup>

As this last example reminds us, solidarity was a central concept for PS and it was passed down from the upper levels to individual volunteers, as well as spread from person to person on the ground. The general assembly in Halle further concluded that "good will alone, lacking the ability to translate into action, is [...] not enough. Conviction, commitment, mental alertness, readiness for action and the power to carry it out must unite into one". Accordingly, though promoting the idea "to leave no one alone",<sup>38</sup> PS saw itself as an organization of motivated people who were capable of translating their morale into action. Or, in the words of the assembly: "We know that a personality of a certain calibre is needed to accomplish great tasks."<sup>39</sup>

The second dimension to be mentioned here was a pragmatic one that alluded to PS's traditional role as a provider of help in the face of hardship. The regional committee in Saxony ended its 1950s statement with the sentence "tremendous actions of solidarity",<sup>40</sup> which had been the key sentence from the very first call for People's Solidarity in October 1945. Despite the political changes, this suggested that the very same readiness to help would be required from the people in order to save lives (once more). The fact that even traditions from the pre-socialist era were allowed to be publicly invoked, if only people could be won over to provide donations or voluntary care work in this way, is remarkable. PS was, indeed, one of very few organizations active before, during, and also after communist rule. Only a few similar cases can be found in neighbouring Poland or Czechoslovakia (e.g. the Polish Committee for Social Help, Polish Red Cross, or Czechoslovak Red Cross) – which likewise were active in the sphere of social welfare and partially involved in international humanitarian aid.<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, these traditional associations, which were already established before the formation of the socialist regimes, played an important role in the provision of domestic social services as well as in the demonstration of international solidarity to the outside world, thereby (at least to some extent) sustaining the ruling regimes.

What made solidarity among members of such organizations pragmatic is that they literally worked to save lives. PS members were concerned about the everyday quality of life and the life chances of older people. Or, as one of my interviewees recalled when

<sup>37</sup>Eduard Bickel, *5 Jahre Volkssolidarität Sachsen-Anhalt: Rechenschaftsbericht* (Halle, 1950), p. 23.

<sup>38</sup>Sekretariat des Zentrallausschusses der Volkssolidarität, *Volkshelfer-Vertrauter der Veteranen*, p. 2.

<sup>39</sup>Bickel, *5 Jahre Volkssolidarität Sachsen-Anhalt*, p. 25.

<sup>40</sup>"Volkssolidarität gegen Wintersnot", p. 1.

<sup>41</sup>Hachmeister, "Volunteering and Care in Old Age", p. 30; Maren Hachmeister, "Care at Home: Voluntary Care in the Lives of Those Who Provide and Need Help in Three (Post)socialist States", *Studia historica Brunensia*, 69:1 (2022), pp. 175–194.

asked about her motivation to participate in PS: “There were living people behind it. There was not just a thing. I can give up a thing, but I cannot simply give up a person.”<sup>42</sup> So, when someone from the SED or from the Berlin level of PS called on PS members “from above” to advance the cause of international solidarity, they most probably met listeners with strong care values, empathy, and loyalty towards their fellow members as well as for the older people they cared for.

One could even go so far as to assume that older people – because of their age – were, at the time, particularly aware of the suffering related to war (which they had experienced first-hand only years earlier), and that their age gave them a special sensitivity when it came to being dependent on the help of others. This may be a simplistic representation of older people’s experiences in the post-war period, but it can help explain why and how PS was approached for these international campaigns.

At this point, it should be noted once again that participation in such campaigns was limited to providing donations as long as the recipients were abroad. Only when the recipients entered the GDR could PS members come into direct contact with them. Opportunities to show solidarity for members of PS were therefore mainly restricted to the domestic front, that is, residential areas, local veterans’ clubs, and in interactions with older people in the neighbourhood who received help with household chores and meal provision. However, as we have seen above, the 1950s brought the expectation that PS would turn into a “coordinating centre” for international solidarity actions for Greece, North Korea, and Vietnam.<sup>43</sup>

### *PS and Socialist South Relations (the Cases of Greece and North Korea)*

The earliest international activity of PS to be documented in the Saxon Main State Archive refers to the Greek Civil War (1946–1949), in which the so-called Democratic Greeks (supported by the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia) fought the Greek monarchy (supported by the United Kingdom and the United States) and were ultimately defeated.<sup>44</sup> As Nikola Tohma and Julia Reinke have shown, several thousand Greek refugees found shelter in Eastern bloc countries, such as Czechoslovakia and the just emerging GDR. With the “Czechoslovak–Greek Society” in Czechoslovakia and the “Relief Committee for Democratic Greece” (*Hilfskomitee für das demokratische Griechenland*) in eastern Germany, both countries created official bodies to raise support for these refugees.<sup>45</sup> By granting asylum to about 1,000 political immigrants, the SED intended to support the communist movement in the so-called Third World and “to demonstrate the high value placed on solidarity in the GDR”.<sup>46</sup> In this context, the PS Central Committee

<sup>42</sup>PS member in Saxony, interviewed by the author (January 2022, time-stamp: 01:10:47).

<sup>43</sup>“New Tasks for People’s Solidarity” (1950/1952), HStAD 11376/4239, p. 1.

<sup>44</sup>“Unterstützung des Komitees ‘Freies Griechenland’ der Volkssolidarität”, Dresden, 1950–1951, HstAD 11393/055.

<sup>45</sup>Nikola Thoma and Julia Reinke, “Soudruzi, nebo uprchlíci? Děti řecké občanské války v NDR a Československu”, *Dějiny a současnost* 5 (2021). Available at: <http://dejinyasoucasnost.cz/archiv/2021/5/soudruzi-nebo-uprchlici/>; last accessed 12 October 2023.

<sup>46</sup>Maria Panoussi, “Die griechischen politischen Immigranten in der DDR”, 29 July 2014. Available at: [www.bpb.de/189030](http://www.bpb.de/189030); last accessed 5 June 2023.

declared, “100 Greek children who lost their parents in the fighting, will be accepted in PS [children’s] homes in Altenburg [Thuringia]” in order to support “Greek freedom fighters”.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, the cities of Dresden and Radebeul (a suburb of Dresden, Saxony) provided care for more than 1,000 Greek children, most of them accommodated in a children’s home run by the local PS youth welfare.<sup>48</sup> As already mentioned, the SED reduced PS’s remit to caring for older people shortly afterwards, so, in 1953, a new committee of the Ministry of National Education (Ministerium für Volksbildung), called “Free Greece” (Komitee Freies Griechenland), and which actually replaced the earlier Relief Committee for Democratic Greece, took over most of these tasks.<sup>49</sup>

In the period from 1949 (i.e. the official end of the Greek Civil War) up to the founding of this ministerial committee, PS was by no means the only East German institution to support “Greek freedom fighters” and their families, but it was the only regionally important player. In February 1949, a delegation from Greece was reported to have met with the Saxon government to negotiate for the free care of widows and orphans of “Greek freedom fighters” in the GDR. The cities of Dresden and Görlitz (a town in Upper Lusatia, Saxony) had collected several thousand East German marks in donations, and the Saxon branch of the “Free Greece” committee promised further support. PS was in no way coordinating these (political) initiatives, as its regional committee imagined, but it certainly played a central role in the donations sent from Saxony to Greece (e.g. medicines and dressing materials worth thousands of marks) and in the reception of families of “Greek freedom fighters” in Saxon nursing homes.<sup>50</sup>

So soon after the war, one might assume, people actually had nothing to spare. However, their experiences of violent hostilities were recent and the socialist propaganda of anti-fascism was very pronounced in these first post-war years. The Greek Civil War provided an ideal opportunity for the early GDR regime to demonstrate its humanist values and to demand the same from its citizens. Besides, PS members seemed to be particularly concerned with the families, especially the children of “Greek freedom fighters”, who had been left behind.<sup>51</sup> While the organization otherwise focused increasingly on the target group of older people due to pressure from the top, this was an opportunity to still engage in a completely different area of work, namely the care of children and their mothers. In response to their extraordinary compassion, in December 1951, a Greek representative wrote a letter assuring PS members in Radebeul that “the Greek children will never forget and be eternally grateful for the brotherly hospitality they found in your free and democratic country [GDR]. [...] They will also [...] tell the entire Greek people [about it] when they return to our homeland freed from the American yoke”.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>47</sup>“Frauen werden Anpacken”, *Berliner Zeitung*, 29 January 1949, p. 6.

<sup>48</sup>Volkssolidarität Elbtalkreis e.V., *Eine starke Gemeinschaft 1945–2005. Festschrift–60 Jahre Volkssolidarität Elbtalkreis e.V.* (Radebeul, 2005), StA Radebeul B03593, p. 8.

<sup>49</sup>Thoma and Reinke, “Soudruzi, nebo uprchlíci?”; Panoussi, “Die griechischen politischen Immigranten in der DDR”.

<sup>50</sup>“Hilfe für das demokratische Griechenland”, *Neues Deutschland*, 9 February 1949, p. 2.

<sup>51</sup>“Griechische Kinder in der Ostzone”, *Neues Deutschland*, 28 January 1949, p. 2.

<sup>52</sup>Volkssolidarität Elbtalkreis e.V., *Eine starke Gemeinschaft 1945–2005*, p. 8.

Such expressions of gratitude certainly contributed to the fact that the children's home in Radebeul continued to operate up to 1958 and, in addition to the Greek children, later welcomed children from North Korea. Other children's homes run by PS in the post-war period (altogether 200 facilities in the Soviet occupation zone), which accommodated children of refugees or so-called resettlers, were discontinued much earlier.<sup>53</sup> Reports about the children's home in Radebeul speak of loving care for war-weary Greek children, but from today's perspective one cannot overlook a certain practice of othering that went along with that care. Greek children were received not only out of solidarity, but also, literally, because "solidarity went even further",<sup>54</sup> and their otherness – such as "the dark eyes of Spyros and Aglaia [which] will soon again laugh childlike"<sup>55</sup> – was constantly emphasized.

Moreover, PS was surely using campaigns for Greece to legitimize its own existence within the emerging socialist power relations as well. According to Gunnar Winkler (PS president, 2002–2014), PS found itself in a "crisis of legitimacy" (*Legitimationskrise*) in the eyes of the SED, which considered welfare organizations as "a partially independent representation of interests neither necessary nor desirable" at the beginning of the 1950s.<sup>56</sup> PS had become a niche in which some people engaged so as to demonstrate the socio-political activities that the SED required of them. This was a politically undesirable trend, of course, which could also be observed in other social mass organizations, such as the Red Cross, the Cultural Association (Kulturbund), and some sports associations.<sup>57</sup> It is thus not surprising that public demonstrations of loyalty to the regime increased in that period.

PS was already able to rely on strong public support – or, in the words of Winkler, "resonance in the population"<sup>58</sup> (*Bevölkerungsresonanz*) – which prevented it from being dissolved immediately. However, a certain reorientation was unavoidable under SED rule. This included a shift from national to international solidarity, for example for Greece, and later North Korea and Vietnam. In this way, the international contacts and reputation that the GDR needed were to be partly realized through a welfare organization and its work.<sup>59</sup>

When PS celebrated its fifteenth anniversary in the German Hygiene Museum (Deutsches Hygiene Museum) in Dresden, in October 1960, several "Greek freedom fighters" were among the international guests,<sup>60</sup> and the GDR press still featured articles in the mid-1960s in which PS aid for a democratic Greece was presented as a "highlight of solidarity".<sup>61</sup> Since the 1990s, however, PS – in an attempt to detach itself from the communist legacy – has rarely mentioned it at all.

<sup>53</sup>Marion Tangemann, *Intermediäre Organisationen im deutsch-deutschen Einigungsprozeß Deutsches Rotes Kreuz, Diakonisches Werk, Volkssolidarität* (Konstanz, 1995), p. 78.

<sup>54</sup>Original quotation: "Noch weiter ging die Solidarität!", in Volkssolidarität Landessekretariat Sachsen, *5 Jahre Volkssolidarität ein soziales Friedenswerk 1945–1950* (Dresden, 1950), p. 13.

<sup>55</sup>Volkssolidarität Landessekretariat Sachsen, *5 Jahre Volkssolidarität ein soziales Friedenswerk*, p. 13.

<sup>56</sup>Gunnar Winkler, *Zur Geschichte der Volkssolidarität 1945–2010* (Berlin, 2010), pp. 11–13.

<sup>57</sup>Winkler, *Zur Geschichte der Volkssolidarität*, p. 13.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>60</sup>Zentralausschuss der Volkssolidarität, *15 Jahre Volkssolidarität. Aus der Festansprache und den Grußadressen zum 15. Jahrestag der Gründung der Volkssolidarität* (Berlin, 1960), p. 1.

<sup>61</sup>"Solidarität–Sache aller", *Berliner Zeitung*, 15 August 1965, p. 2.

The second case of international solidarity to which PS committed was that of North Korea. Against the backdrop of close diplomatic relations between the GDR and North Korea, the “Korea Aid Committee” (Korea-Hilfsausschuss) was founded in 1950, and four years later it was extended to become the “Solidarity Committee for Korea and Vietnam” (Solidaritätsausschuss für Korea und Vietnam). In the first two years alone, PS collected more than 14 million East German marks to support the Korea Aid Committee, which were then sent to Pyongyang in the form of medicine, bandages, medical equipment, and clothing.<sup>62</sup> In total, the Solidarity Committee for Korea and Vietnam had received donations of about 40 million marks by 1954.<sup>63</sup> Considering the average monthly income of an East German worker (ranging from between 300 and 400 marks at the time), this was an incredible sum.<sup>64</sup> However, it should not go unmentioned that PS handled a total of 280 million marks in donations during the time of its existence before the founding of the GDR.<sup>65</sup> Even though it is difficult to put such amounts of money into perspective, these numbers show that PS was able to mobilize a large willingness to donate – not just from its own members but from the entire population. Thus, the organization was instrumental in the success of all kinds of solidarity campaigns in the GDR, whether they were politically motivated or actually accepted by society (to reduce the matter to the two ends of a spectrum).

The places where solidarity with North Korea took form varied widely. For instance, PS collected money at the local brown coal plant in Hoyerswerda (a district town in Saxony), demonstrating that the workforce “cares about world peace and friendship with all the peoples of the world [...] making a donation of 3,000 Marks to the District Committee of the PS for the liberation struggle of the Korean people, and thus a fine contribution to the promotion of international solidarity”.<sup>66</sup> At the same time, the president of the Saxon parliament (*Landtag*), Otto Buchwitz, in a radio interview, explained that:

It is thanks to the work of People’s Solidarity [...] that our people were led to an honest commitment to peace [...]. This attitude in turn led quite inevitably to the task of helping to deepen the idea of international understanding, in order to make a contribution to the question of preserving and securing world peace.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>62</sup>“Segensreiche Arbeit. Sieben Jahre Volkssolidarität”, *Berliner Zeitung*, 26 October 1952, p. 8.

<sup>63</sup>Young-Sun Hong, *Cold War Germany, the Third World, and the Global Humanitarian Regime* (New York, 2015), p. 337.

<sup>64</sup>“Durchschnittliches monatliches Bruttoarbeitseinkommen der vollzeitbeschäftigten Arbeitnehmer in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (DDR) von 1949 bis 1989”, *Statista* (2023). Available at <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/249254/umfrage/durchschnittseinkommen-in-der-ddr/>; last accessed 5 June 2023.

<sup>65</sup>“Sekretariat des Zentralausschusses der Volkssolidarität, “40 Jahre Volkssolidarität. Zeittafel und Bilanz” (Berlin 1985), HstAD 12721/69, p. 6.

<sup>66</sup>“Das interessiert auch Dich – Nr. 4, Für Presse, Rundfunk, Betriebszeitung und Betriebsfunk”, 1952, HStAD 11376/4239, p. 2.

<sup>67</sup>“Für Presse und Funk. Warum muß jeder Deutsche ein Freund der Volkssolidarität sein?”, 1952, HStAD 11376/4239.

The topic of international solidarity can also be found in unexpected places, such as an instruction sheet for PS volunteers in Berlin from April 1954. It encouraged volunteers to bring up the topic while performing their daily care work, stating:

It must be avoided that People's Solidarity appears in public merely as an organization for care purposes. The character of the political work of People's Solidarity for national and international solidarity, for the struggle for unity and peace, must not recede into the background, but must always remain the main line of our work.<sup>68</sup>

This quotation reveals how the realities of PS work on the ground were sometimes mismatched with the role party officials (and some PS officials) envisioned for the organization. Care workers were apparently instructed to speak with older people in their homes about international solidarity. Whether this was meant to prevent conversations about other topics, or to ensure permanent support from the ground, is unclear. It is clear, however, that international solidarity was considered a topic relevant to people's everyday lives, that is, a topic worth discussing while someone was delivering a hot meal or helping with household tasks. This example pins down a piece of evidence regarding the everyday experience of socialist internationalism in the 1950s. PS envisioned everyday practices of volunteering and caring as a starting point for internationalism and not as a separate issue. In their daily routines, PS volunteers thus acted as mediators between the internationalist aspirations of the state and the care values of the population. Historian James Chappel has aptly noted that, "never before had a state-sponsored organization engaged so [...] directly with the elderly population".<sup>69</sup>

The most important occasion on which solidarity with North Korea was documented was the tenth anniversary of PS in 1955, again a public event far removed from the members' everyday lives. This huge event put leading figures of PS and SED centre stage, together with so-called international guests from North Korea, building on, but not making visible, the thousands of older people who either donated money themselves or helped collect donations for North Korea in their neighbourhoods. Going door to door to ask for money was not the most popular task, as one can imagine. When a ninety-two-year-old group leader was being interviewed in 2020, she described collecting donations as one of the PS activities that was perceived by the public as begging, sometimes even a nuisance. She added: "But I really rang [at] every house, every person. There were some who [...] I didn't beg. I said: I come and ask them if they can spare something for our People's Solidarity, if not [...] Most of the time I got something, sometimes not".<sup>70</sup> Even though she refers to a much later period in this statement, that is, the 1980s, she points to an important circumstance, namely, that donating as a form of solidarity was viewed quite differently from within and from outside PS.

<sup>68</sup>"Arbeitsanleitung für die soziale Betreuung von Veteranen des Volkes", Berlin, 27 April 1954, BArch DY 34/22458, p. 8.

<sup>69</sup>Chappel, "On the Border of Old Age", 359.

<sup>70</sup>PS member in Saxony, interviewed by the author (October 2020, time-stamp: 00:30:00).



The tenth anniversary was a major event that served, on the one hand, to consolidate PS as a provider of social welfare at home and of humanitarian aid to the world. On the other hand, it was an opportunity for the SED to cultivate diplomatic relations between the GDR and North Korea and to showcase them as an achievement of the people. Photojournalists Höhne and Pohl, who had been taking pictures of PS activities since its beginning, also documented this event. One of their photographs (Figure 3) shows the podium, which provided room for two large tables, richly decorated with bouquets of dahlias and dianthus, where important representatives and guests such as Otto Buchwitz (president of the East German Red Cross, 1953–1964) were seated. The curtain in the background of the podium was decorated with the dates 1945 and 1955, the lettering “10 years of organized help”, and the PS logo, a bold V (the initial letter of PS’s name in German) with a flame flickering out of it, surrounded by the words “unity – freedom – solidarity”.<sup>71</sup> According to PS, the flame symbolizes “the inextinguishable flame of support for the needy and older people”.<sup>72</sup> Right behind the speaker, a group of international guests in pinstripes and overcoats appear to be waiting to be called to the front. The photograph captures very well the atmosphere in which the representatives of North Korea (a Democratic People’s Republic divided from the country’s South) and the GDR (a so-called workers’ and peasants’ state divided from the country’s West) met.

International solidarity actions for North Korea were of course always about money. As we have seen, there was a latent distrust of SED collections because “there was never any public accountability for the use of the donations”.<sup>73</sup> PS, in contrast, paid considerable attention to transparency from the beginning, and as early as 1948, printed accountability reports disclosed to the public what amounts were collected and what they were used for.<sup>74</sup> No money was sent directly to North Korea – instead PS first transferred monetary donations into material resources, for example medical equipment.<sup>75</sup> Historian Young-Sun Hong identifies one reason for this procedure: the SED regime sought to prevent spontaneous, voluntary demonstrations of solidarity with North Korea which it would have been unable to control. Accordingly, the official Korea Aid Committee was created in September 1950, and solidarity henceforth was channelled through donations.<sup>76</sup>

The decision to invite North Korean guests to the PS’s tenth anniversary celebration was a clever move, as it presented to PS members the faces of some of the real people who (at least hypothetically) received their donations. The message which the photograph by Höhne and Pohl preserved is that PS was a trustworthy and

<sup>71</sup>Erich Höhne and Erich Pohl, *10 Jahre Volkssolidarität. Festakt, Auszeichnung verdienender Mitarbeiter* (Dresden, October 1955), photograph in SLUB/Deutsche Fotothek, picture number: df\_hp\_0000684\_006. Available at: [https://www.deutschefotothek.de/documents/obj/70600304/df\\_hp\\_0000684\\_006](https://www.deutschefotothek.de/documents/obj/70600304/df_hp_0000684_006); last accessed 5 June 2023.

<sup>72</sup>Astrid Hupka, “Die Geschichte hinter unserem Vereinseblem”, *Lebensbilder*, 2 (2016), p. 3.

<sup>73</sup>Wolf-Bleiß, *Sprache in der DDR*, p. 205.

<sup>74</sup>Volkssolidarität Landesausschuss Sachsen, *3 Jahre Volkssolidarität in Sachsen 3 Jahre Hilfe aller für alle* (Dresden, 1948), p. 9.

<sup>75</sup>“Segensreiche Arbeit. Sieben Jahre Volkssolidarität”, *Berliner Zeitung*, 26 October 1952, p. 8.

<sup>76</sup>Young-Sun Hong, “Through a Glass Darkly: East German Assistance to North Korea and Alternative Narratives of the Cold War”, in Quinn Slobodian (ed.), *Comrades of Color: East Germany in the Cold War World* (New York, 2017), pp. 43–72, 45.



**Figure 3.** Podium at the tenth anniversary celebration of People's Solidarity in Dresden in October 1955. Source: © Deutsche Fotothek/Erich Höhne & Erich Pohl.

transparent manager of international solidarity that not only distributed money and goods, but also brought distant people(s) closer together. On that day, they were literally standing side by side on the podium.

In contrast to the Greek case, in which children were the main target group of PS care, encounters with North Korea happened more or less between East German and North Korean adults. As Young-Sun Hong has shown in her case study on “fraternal help” in the North Korean Hamhung region, only a handful of selected engineers and architects were able to travel from the GDR to Korea.<sup>77</sup> The number of PS members who actually came into contact with North Koreans was limited, and the organization’s tenth anniversary may have been the only chance for many of them to even see someone from the distant country for which they raised money. It is difficult to estimate what impact such international involvement had on the organizational development of PS. Between 1950 and 1960, however, the number of PS members rose from about 800,000 to more than 1.1 million (which was a considerable number compared with the total population of about 18 million in that decade).<sup>78</sup> If international solidarity was not the main reason for this success, it was at least correlated with it.

Another ten years later in PS history, the president of the East German parliament still praised the work of the organization as a “calling card”<sup>79</sup> (*Visitenkarte*) for the GDR, “which has been respected and admired by countless well-meaning [...] people

<sup>77</sup>Hong, “Through a Glass Darkly”, p. 48.

<sup>78</sup>Winkler, *Zur Geschichte der Volkssolidarität*, p. 15.

<sup>79</sup>Johannes Dieckmann, “Blick zurück–Blick vorwärts”, *Solidarität*, 2 (1965), p. 5.

in the farthest corners of the world”.<sup>80</sup> My initial hypothesis that PS involvement in international solidarity peaked in the 1950s was thus only partially true. Rather, everyday internationalism was part of PS activities for much longer – in the case of North Korea for at least fifteen years, and even longer in the case of Greece.

The search for information on the solidarity of PS with Vietnam proved to be particularly difficult. Some references can be found in the Brandenburgian State Main Archive in Potsdam about special solidarity campaigns for Vietnam, which were initiated on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of PS in 1955.<sup>81</sup> The Korea Aid Committee had only just been renamed as the Solidarity Committee for Korea and Vietnam, so it would have made sense to find more information on solidarity with Vietnam in that year. A newspaper article confirms at least that PS president Helmut Lehmann attended a meeting of the committee, which announced that as a “first sign of solidarity” it would soon send medicine, bandages, and medical equipment worth 1.5 million marks to Vietnam.<sup>82</sup> Unfortunately, the trace is lost thereafter, so that (at least within this article) it cannot be explored further to what extent PS was involved in solidarity campaigns with Vietnam, or to what extent they were different from those for Greece and North Korea. However, with this background, it is very likely that members of PS, like members of other mass organizations, were involved in some way.

### *The Older People’s Perspective on Solidarity (Instead of a Conclusion)*

The title statement of this article – “without solidarity no people” – is taken from the field notes to an interview with a man, now over eighty years old, who joined PS (for political and career reasons) at an exceptionally young age in the early 1960s. In the course of the encounter, the former skilled trade worker, now a father and grandfather, repeatedly stated that “without solidarity [there was] no people”.<sup>83</sup> It is not clear whether he was referring to solidarity and people or to People’s Solidarity in this statement. Perhaps the term solidarity became equivalent to the organization for him over the years. This would be unsurprising considering that he had spent his entire adult life working for PS. He specified his definition of solidarity as follows:

Once you grow old, your place is in PS. There you can enjoy your old age together with others, in solidarity, jointly. [...] What I keep pointing out is that People’s Solidarity was the organization, where if the solidarity was taken away, it was nothing.<sup>84</sup>

This quotation illustrates that the interviewee believed in a specific conception of solidarity that is actually rooted in narratives of the 1950s. Thanks to PS, he learnt to

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup>“Zusammenarbeit der Kreisgeschäftsstelle Falkenberg mit Behörden, Parteien und Massenorganisationen”, 1955, BLHA 851/IHK/Ctb 32. Available at: <http://blha-recherche.brandenburg.de/detail.aspx?ID=1171594>; last accessed 5 June 2023.

<sup>82</sup>“Helft Vietnam die Kriegswunden heilen. Solidaritätsausschuß für Korea und Vietnam gebildet”, *Neues Deutschland*, 24 July 1954, p. 1.

<sup>83</sup>PS member in Saxony, interviewed by the author (November 2020, field notes to a phone call).

<sup>84</sup>PS member in Saxony, interviewed by the author (December 2020, time-stamp 00:48:00).

see the world through the eyes of older people early in his life and holds on to this experience today. In his definition of People's Solidarity, two aspects are of particular interest to this article. Firstly, he recognizes that everyone needs to have a place and strives to find out where that place is. When he worked for PS, he helped to create places for older people. Now that he is of advanced age himself, he also sees his place in PS, because this is where "you can enjoy your old age together with others".<sup>85</sup> As we have seen, the international solidarity of PS was often about creating places for the needy, for example refugee children or the sick in need of treatment. Secondly, he points out how important membership (in the sense of belonging) is for the project of People's Solidarity. Indeed, none of PS's achievements would have been possible without the steady support of its members and the occasional participation of non-members. The fact that PS had about 2 million members by 1989 – out of a total population of about 16 million in that decade – underlines its image as a mass organization for older people, literally capable of gathering the masses.<sup>86</sup>

Another interviewee, who is now over eighty years old, whose entire family joined the PS in the 1950s, discussed solidarity in context of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to him,

the most important thing is the lived solidarity [...] We now take care of our members when it comes to vaccination, drive them to the vaccination centre if they cannot take the tram. This is where you see the solidarity action. [...] My wife was a PS helper. This is, after all, the most genuine help that can be given, help to the individual person. That is the real solidarity.<sup>87</sup>

I give this second quote, too, as it very well summarizes the similarities of local and international solidarity of PS members from the 1950s to date, most notably, the readiness to take care of someone (or something) personally, if possible, as well as to find other ways to assist if necessary. One might argue that donating money in the 1950s for medical equipment in North Korea was something else entirely than taking someone to the COVID vaccination centre in 2021. And this is certainly no attempt to equate these two examples. However, both actions were based on "lived solidarity" as a lifestyle, expressed by individuals who were convinced that providing whatever help they could was the right thing to do (and that it would make a difference).

Looking back at PS history from this angle, it becomes apparent that different notions of (international) solidarity always co-existed among its members both in the GDR and in post-socialist East Germany. Individuals certainly modified or substituted the master narrative of "showing People's Solidarity" by creating a "lived solidarity" of their own. Prior to the system change of 1989, PS had to adapt to official rhetoric. Afterwards, it needed to detach itself from the communist past and

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<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup>Springer, *Da kommt' ich mich dann so'n bißchen entfalten*, p. 193; Susanne Angerhausen, *Überholen ohne einzuholen: Freie Wohlfahrtspflege in Ostdeutschland* (Opladen, 1998), p. 124; Winkler, *Zur Geschichte der Volkssolidarität*, p. 26.

<sup>87</sup>PS member in Saxony, interviewed by the author (February 2021, field notes to a phone call).

reinvent its structures entirely. Under these conditions, the topic of international solidarity was silently obliterated from PS history. Awareness of this solidarity project, so central to everyday internationalism in the early GDR and likely to have shaped PS history ever since, has yet to be restored.

Taking the perspective of older people in this article was an unusual approach and, in terms of sources, also difficult. On the one hand, everyday internationalism is not the best-documented topic in PS history. On the other hand, the hundreds of thousands of older people who supported the solidarity campaigns of PS at the time – whether through donations or volunteer work – seem to have left almost no record on this topic. The extraordinary amounts of money and goods that were donated to North Korea and Vietnam, as well as the various efforts made to support “Greek freedom fighters” and their families, teach us, however, that older people did, indeed, relate to the fate of – admittedly handpicked – peoples in the Global South, in particular to their most vulnerable members.

In the 1950s, there was first the aspiration that PS would transform into a coordinating centre for international solidarity with Greece, North Korea, and Vietnam. This did not come true, although PS successfully took the lead in organizing regional care for the children of “Greek freedom fighters”, as well as in collecting donations for North Korea. Thus, PS engaged its members in international activities mainly where they were strongest: on the regional and local levels, in direct contact with people in their neighbourhoods. Plans for a coordinating centre were temporarily abandoned and were not taken up again by the SED leadership until the early 1960s, when the Solidarity Committee was founded (Solidaritätskomitee der DDR).

The widespread assumption that East Germans needed to be forced by the SED to support people in distant countries could not be verified. The question of why people participated in these solidarity campaigns is, of course, easier to ask than to answer. This article offers only a first insight into the topic, but it shows that international solidarity was not a mere trend of the 1950s. For PS members, it was a matter of morale, which never replaced local solidarity actions but nevertheless constituted a part of PS’s agenda for nearly two decades. For this reason – among others, because all organizations had to commit internationally at the time – PS became involved in international solidarity actions of the early 1950s that preceded the later Solidarity Committee of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>88</sup> Internationalism can therefore be seen as a surprisingly strong rationale (among several others) that motivated people to engage in voluntary aid activities and care work in their daily lives during this period.

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<sup>88</sup>Witkowski, “Between Fighters and Beggars”, p. 74.