



On Finnish television:

Erich Honecker's Moose Hunting Trip and other News

Laura Ellen Saarenmaa /
University of Lund

The death of Helmut Kohl on 16 June 2017 awakened nostalgic reactions on social media, including the circulation of news clips about the historic meeting between Kohl and Erich Honecker in Bonn in 1987. Among the circulated clips was the television coverage of the event by the Finnish Broadcasting Company Yleisradio (YLE). It reported on the ceremonies at the Bonn chancellery; the red carpets spread out into the courtyard; the fluttering GDR and BRD flags; and the army of reporters standing by behind a fence, ready to capture the historic moment with their cameras.

In his optimistic stand-in report, the YLE foreign correspondent stated that even though the unification of the two German states was not to be expected, cooperation and contacts between GDR and BRD citizens were vibrant. The number of admitted travel clearances from the GDR to the BRD had risen between 1982 and 1987 from 50 000 to 1 000 000. Moreover, the German states were now expected to increase their coordination on environmental issues. The hosting party was even expected to take on the human rights issue in the GDR. Conversely, Honecker was expected to underline the permanence of peace on German soil. The optimistic analysis of the eventual normalization of the relationships between the two German states reflected the official



Finnish Cold War political mindset: the status quo as an assurance of peace in Europe.

Throughout the Cold War, the YLE covered the relationship between the two German states extensively. On the one hand, this can be explained by the Finnish public's interest in the GDR: Until the early 1970s, Finns had more contact and cooperation with East Germany than with any other Western state after West Germany. On the other, Fernsehen der DDR (DDR-FS) generously delivered news footage to the YLE for distribution in Finland. Broadcast historians Thomas Beutelschmidt and Richard Oehmig have noted that existing research on the GDR has largely neglected the East German media's integration with the West, including the continuous exchange of news, the joint broadcasting of major sports and political events, the intense trade in films, and encounters at festivals and trade fairs. As a member of both the western and eastern broadcasting networks, the International Broadcast Union (IBU) and the International Radio and Television Organisation (OIRT), the YLE maintained active ties to Fernsehen der DDR. In addition to news exchanges and co-productions, YLE broadcasted a number of Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft (DEFA) feature film productions and children's animations as part of their culture programming.

Regular reporting on German news and current affairs made Erich Honecker a familiar figure to Finnish television viewers. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Honecker's international visits and meetings, as well as the annual SED party meetings and the increasingly intensive negotiations between the two German states were carefully dissected. In



the early 1970s, Finnish TV news considered the laying of the first telecommunications cables connecting East and West Berlin (January 1971), and the negotiations surrounding entry permits for East Berlin during the Easter holidays (March 1971), as newsworthy. According to the Finnish TV news, Honecker was evidently one of the Cold War's key players. When Honecker visited Finland in 1984, he was asked to comment on relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, casting the East German leader as a possible guarantor in Cold War power politics. That statement for the cameras was given in the middle of a moose hunting trip organized by the Finnish foreign office specifically for Honecker. In the report, Honecker sits in a tent in the company of President Mauno Koivisto and a high-ranking entourage, all dressed in red hunting vests. Erich Honecker even had a branch of spruce pinned to his hunting hat to camouflage him in the forest, and to express his enthusiasm for the activity. ([Please find the photo in the image collection about Mauno Koivisto.](#))

When it was abruptly announced that Honecker would pay a visit to West Germany in September 1987, the event and its lead-up were analyzed in Finnish TV news and current affairs programmes for days: Finnish TV viewers followed Honecker through the streets of his hometown Wiebelskirchen, the Dachau concentration camp, and finally to the airport where he was bid farewell by the Minister-President of Bavaria, Franz Josef Strauss.

The ongoing Lund University research project Transborder Television explores the television program exchange between East Germany and



the militarily-neutral Nordic countries, Finland and Sweden. The notion of television diplomacy developed by the project captures the role of public broadcasting in Nordic Cold War diplomacy. So far, the literature on the Western media's role as a mouthpiece for the government has mostly focused on the United States during the early decades of the Cold War. According to American historian Susan Carruthers, the US media's acceptance of government influence was essential in the production of public support for state actions. In other words, the Western Allied governments could never have produced and maintained sufficient public support for the long conflict without the media's contribution.

In Finland, the YLE adopted the role of patron for Finnish foreign politics, based on a careful balancing act between East and West. In the case of the two German states, this balance can be seen in YLE program policy, news criteria, uses of sources and story angles. Moreover, the tireless recording of welcome and farewell ceremonies at Helsinki airport created suitable frames for official state diplomacy. Thanks to the YLE online archive material, the Cold War appears for posterity as a series of handshakes, hearty embraces, and warm welcomes.

Recent debates on digital media archives have raised the twin issues of accessibility and archival standards, including the question of by which standards samples are made publicly available, for free, or kept inaccessible by means of a fee or other barrier. Danish television historian Helle Jensen Strandgaard (2016) calls for studies of the cultural economy of digital archives, in order to better understand the corporate, political, and economic structures that govern their content.



This includes studies of the role of the Western public broadcasting companies as recorders, archivers, and managers of Cold War television history.

Dr. Laura Ellen Saarenmaa works as a Visiting Research Fellow in the Media History unit at the University of Lund, Sweden. The ongoing research project, Transborder Television (2016-2018) run by associate professor Marie Cronqvist, explores television program exchanges between the GDR and the Nordic countries.

Recommended Citation:

Laura Ellen Saarenmaa, On Finnish television: Erich Honecker's Moose Hunting Trip and other News, 11/07/2017,
<http://www.berlinerkolleg.com/en/blog/finnish-television-erich-honeckers-moose-hunting-trip-and-other-news> (please add the date of the last call to this page in brackets).