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The GDR's Boogeyman: An Unacclaimed Interview with Robert Havemann

Hammer, Jean-Pierre. "Un entretien avec le physicien Robert Havemann sur la contestation en Allemagne de l'Est « Les contradictions vont s'aiguiser dans le pays et dans le parti." *Le Monde*, 1-2, January 21, 1978, retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/un-entretien-avec-le-physicien-robert-havemann/docview/2531824608/se-2>.

Jean-Pierre Hammer is a French artist of multiple mediums who served as a Professor of German at numerous universities between 1951 and 1988.¹ In December of 1977, Hammer secretly met with and interviewed Robert Havemann, a prominent chemist and political dissident in the GDR, who was under strict house arrest and surveillance at that time.² A partially truncated version of the interview was first published in *Le Monde* newspaper on the front page on January 21, 1978.³

In 1976, Wolf Biermann, a German poet and musician who opposed the GDR government, had his East German citizenship revoked while he was on an official tour in the West. Robert Havemann, a former teacher and good friend of Biermann, protested against his exile by writing a public appeal to Erich Honecker. This appeal resulted in Havemann being placed under strict house arrest. It was around this time that Hammer met with and interviewed Havemann.

Long before meeting with Havemann, Hammer founded the *Allemagne d'aujourd'hui* newspaper alongside Félix Lusset in 1966.⁴ Hammer published the interview in *Allemagne d'aujourd'hui* a few months after it was published in *Le Monde*, and Hammer later published a

¹"Biographie - Jean-Pierre Hammer," n.d., <https://www.jean-pierre-hammer.fr/biographie>.

²Jean-Pierre Hammer and Robert Havemann, "Interview with Robert Havemann," trans. Jack Zipes, *New German Critique* no. 15 (Duke University Press, 1978): 37, <https://www-jstor-org.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/stable/pdf/487904>; Wikipedia-Autoren, "Robert Havemann," January 8, 2003, [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Havemann#Hausarrest_\(1976_bis_1979\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Havemann#Hausarrest_(1976_bis_1979)).

³Jean-Pierre Hammer, "Un Entretien Avec Le Physicien Robert Havemann Sur La Contestation En Allemagne De l'Est « Les Contradictions Vont s'Aiguiser Dans Le Pays Et Dans Le Parti », " *Le Monde*, 1-2, January 21, 1978, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/un-entretien-avec-le-physicien-robert-havemann/docview/2531824608/se-2>. I explain how I know it is the first print publication in the narrative.

⁴"Biographie - Jean-Pierre Hammer," <https://www.jean-pierre-hammer.fr/biographie>.

2015 article in his newspaper dedicated to Havemann and quoted his interview, in which he cited the *Le Monde* article, which indicates that it was the first print publication of this source.⁵

Hammer's biography on his website agrees that the interview first appeared in *Le Monde*, but it also notes that "Thanks to the interview, the scientist's house arrest was lifted," which is a statement that is not replicated in either of Havemann's Wikipedia pages or any of the other sources explored in this project.⁶ The veracity of this claim is shaky, but it is also worth noting that most of the sources that publish or reference Hammer's interview do so within a few months of the discussion taking place, so they could not have known whether the publication would absolve the dissident of his house arrest. Contrary to Hammer's biography, the *Washington Post* article from May 9, 1979, covers Havemann's house arrest being lifted, stating that "No reason was apparently given" when Havemann was relieved of house arrest by a state attorney.⁷

The *Le Monde* article was published for the French public on January 21, 1978, featuring most of Hammer's interview with Havemann on the front page.⁸ The entire text is written in French; therefore, Jack Zipes' translated version of the full interview, published a few months later in 1978, and the *Le Monde* article translated through Google will be compared to guide this summary.⁹ The paper claims that this is Havemann's first time addressing France before beginning the transcript. Also, the article briefly introduces Robert Havemann, characterizing him as a long-standing political opponent of the GDR who is at the forefront of protests for Wolf Biermann to be reinstated in East Germany.¹⁰ In response to how he was protesting for Biermann's return, Havemann discusses how he wrote a public appeal to Honecker, which resulted in his arrest and trial.¹¹ Havemann believed that his trial was illicit, and his friend and reputable attorney, Götz Berger, was disbarred two days after trying to help Havemann,

⁵ "Biographie - Jean-Pierre Hammer," <https://www.jean-pierre-hammer.fr/biographie>; Hammer and Havemann, "Interview with Robert Havemann," 37; Jean-Pierre Hammer, "Vision d'avenir d'un oppositionnel de RDA : Robert Havemann (1910-1982), résistant, utopiste et écologiste," *Allemagne d'aujourd'hui* no. 211, January, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.3917/all.211.0130>.

⁶ "Biographie - Jean-Pierre Hammer," <https://www.jean-pierre-hammer.fr/biographie>.

⁷ "East German Reportedly Has House Arrest Lifted," *The Washington Post*, May 10, 1979, <https://wapo.st/41kNG3O>.

⁸ Hammer, "Un Entretien Avec...Le Parti," 1; Hammer and Havemann, "Interview with Robert Havemann," 37.

⁹ Wikipedia contributors, "Jack Zipes," Wikipedia, August 13, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_Zipes. Jack Zipes was formerly a Professor at the University of Minnesota who was involved in the German, Dutch, Slavic, and Nordic departments.

¹⁰ Hammer, "Un Entretien Avec...Le Parti," 1.

¹¹ Hammer, "Un Entretien Avec...Le Parti," 1.

regardless of his prior reputation.¹² Havemann next discussed his house arrest and the extensive surveillance efforts the state ensured were placed on him, including an entourage of police cars if he left his village, Grünheide, police officers replacing his neighbors, and a very brief list of people allowed to visit him.¹³ Havemann also discussed how the police intercepted meetings he planned with anybody and also terrorized everyone who lived near him, as every person who spoke to Havemann was noted by his Stasi entourage and his village was swarming with excessive police officers.¹⁴ When asked about the meaning behind these precautions, Havemann suggested that roughly 95% of the population has grown disillusioned with the SED's government and Press, with virtually nobody caring to read *Neues Deutschland* anymore.¹⁵ The final section in *Le Monde* discusses the GDR's dilapidated economy, focusing on how the price/wage system has created a schism between the elites with high-paying jobs to afford expensive luxury goods and the workforce with access to cheap staples but cheap wages to match. Havemann also posited that the significantly higher suicide rates in the GDR were partly due to poor economic conditions. A workforce member, Havemann stated, could earn the equivalent of a week's salary at their day job by working at a high-salary individual's home for a few hours in their free time, further highlighting the unfair wealth distribution.¹⁶ The interview ends with Hammer asking Havemann if he thinks the GDR can evolve, with Havemann considering some possible solutions he claimed he would address in his upcoming book.¹⁷ A few portions of the transcript in Zipes' version do not appear in the original publication, which will be discussed in more detail in the annotated bibliography. The missing information does not seem to subtract crucial components from Havemann's rhetorical mechanism, as the bulk of the content cut from the *Le Monde* are some of Havemann's additional corroboratory examples, which will be addressed further in the annotated bibliography. Thus, the portions of the

¹² Hammer and Havemann, "Interview with Robert Havemann," 38-39; Hammer, "Un Entretien Avec...Le Parti," 1.

¹³ Hammer and Havemann, "Interview with Robert Havemann," 39-40; Hammer, "Un Entretien Avec...Le Parti," 2.

¹⁴ Hammer and Havemann, "Interview with Robert Havemann," 40-41; Hammer, "Un Entretien Avec...Le Parti," 2.

¹⁵ Hammer and Havemann, "Interview with Robert Havemann," 41-42; Hammer, "Un Entretien Avec...Le Parti," 2.

¹⁶ Hammer and Havemann, "Interview with Robert Havemann," 43-45; Hammer, "Un Entretien Avec...Le Parti," 2.

¹⁷ Hammer and Havemann, "Interview with Robert Havemann," 46; Hammer, "Un Entretien Avec...Le Parti," 2.

interview that were absent were likely to have been omitted to concentrate on Havemann's main arguments.

Additional publications of the interview bring the remainder of Hammer's transcript to the public eye. Hammer's subsequent publication in *Allemagnes D'aujourd'hui* fills in the gaps in the transcript left by *Le Monde* and indicates the interview's broader circulation internationally.¹⁸ Zipes' publication provides the complete transcript used to construct both of Hammer's publications in *Le Monde* and *Allemagnes D'aujourd'hui*.¹⁹ However, the interview's publication is said to have received a good amount of international coverage in Hammer's *Allemagnes D'aujourd'hui* article, while no reference is made to these additional publications in Zipes' work.²⁰ There is also the case of Havemann's house arrest being lifted, which Hammer's biography attributes directly to the interview, which contradicts the *Washington Post* article, which stated that the GDR provided no official reason for the absolution of Havemann's arrest.²¹ Oddly, this interview has purportedly been covered by multiple international periodicals yet is somehow absent in most Robert Havemann biographies today, including his German and English Wikipedia pages.

¹⁸ Jean-Pierre Hammer, "A Berlin Est, j'ai rencontré le diable Le diable en R.D.A., c'est Robert Havemann," *Allemagnes D'aujourd'hui*. Ser.2, no. 61-65 (April 1978): 29-38.

¹⁹ Hammer and Havemann, "Interview with Robert Havemann," 37-46.

²⁰ "A Berlin Est, j'ai rencontré le diable Le diable en R.D.A., c'est Robert Havemann," *Allemagnes D'aujourd'hui*. Ser.2, no. 61-65 (April 1978): 29-30; Hammer and Havemann, "Interview with Robert Havemann," 37-46.

²¹ "Biographie - Jean-Pierre Hammer," <https://www.jean-pierre-hammer.fr/biographie>; "East German Reportedly Has House Arrest Lifted," *The Washington Post*, May 10, 1979, <https://wapo.st/41kNG3O>.

Annotated Bibliography in Chronological Order

Hammer, Jean-Pierre. "A Berlin Est, j'ai rencontré le diable Le diable en R.D.A., c'est Robert Havemann." *Allemagne D'aujourd'hui*. Ser.2, no. 61–65 (April 1978): 29–38.

This source is among the earliest publications of Hammer's interview with Havemann. Even though it was published only three months after the original *Le Monde* publication, this article references multiple publications that occurred in the interim, including *La Stampa*, *Die Welt*, and *Le Times*. These periodicals illustrate widespread international coverage of the interview, as the source lists an Italian, German, and British or potentially American periodical followed by "etc.," pointing towards a more widespread coverage of the event. It is strange that no other sources reference these foreign publications of the interview. Furthermore, despite this alleged international press, his interview with Hammer still appears somewhat obscure in the scope of Havemann's biography. Although it does not occur directly after *Le Monde*, this article, also written by Jean-Pierre Hammer, appears to be supplementary to the original publication. Havemann is given a similar biography to the original in *Le Monde*, with a notable exception being Hammer giving his interviewee the moniker, roughly translated from French, the devil of the GDR, an ironic title due to his antagonization by the GDR. Hammer, however, continues the narrative, briefly summarizing the initial discussion in the interview before quoting the issue of Havemann interacting with the public and the example discussing Havemann's wife's inability to go grocery shopping due to Stasi intervention. Here and throughout the article, Hammer briefly touches upon what was covered in the *Le Monde* publication and provides the transcripts for the interview portions that were not included in the original publication, including the Trabant car and "gray market" sections.

Havemann, Robert, and Hammer, Jean-Pierre. "Interview with Robert Havemann." Translated by Jack Zipes. In *New German Critique*, no. 15, 37–46. Duke University Press, 1978, <https://doi.org/10.2307/487904>.

This publication occurred in the Fall of 1978, and the translator notes from Jack Zipes include a brief history of Havemann's life and career, similar to the one found in *Le Monde*, and the first complete publication of the interview. For example, Havemann mentioned an example when discussing his surveillance entourage. He recalled how his wife was usually forbidden from grocery shopping on page 41, which does not appear in

the *Le Monde* version. When discussing the price system, Havemann described an example relating to Trabant cars and how ridiculously overpriced they were compared to their production cost on pages 43-44. This anecdote is also absent from the first publication. Lastly, Havemann discussed the “gray market,” which consisted of goods obtained from specific connections and goods that should be exported from the GDR. This particular portion of Havemann’s economic discourse is not found in *Le Monde*’s publication. These missing components bolster Havemann’s arguments but are not crucial to executing his rhetoric entirely. So, as mentioned earlier, these sections were likely redacted for a more concise article, with the target audience being the French populace. Examples relating to Havemann’s wife or East German cars were likely not as relatable to a French audience. Otherwise, Zipes seems to have been relatively faithful to the original French text, as can be observed by comparing the Google Translated article from *Le Monde* with Zipes’s translated version. The *Allemagnes D’aujourd’hui* edition, acting seemingly more as a supplementary reading to the original publication, is combined with its predecessor in Zipes’ work, as he publishes the full, uninterrupted transcript of the interview.

“East German Reportedly Has House Arrest Lifted.” *The Washington Post*, May 10, 1979, <https://wapo.st/41kNG3O>.

This newspaper article is brief but provides some crucial details about the status of Havemann’s house arrest. The article states that the state attorney did not give a reason for lifting his house arrest after 2.5 years of Stasi encirclement. The article details Havemann’s professional career and references a letter he published a month before the article stating that his house arrest had become more constrained and that his family could not even go shopping, which is reminiscent of the interview examined in this project.

Hammer, Jean-Pierre. “Vision d’avenir d’un oppositionnel de RDA : Robert Havemann (1910-1982), résistant, utopiste et écologiste.” *Allemagne d’aujourd’hui* N° 211, no. 211 (2015): 130–136. <https://doi.org/10.3917/all.211.0130>.

Hammer published this journal article in honor of his close friend Robert Havemann. The article opened with a brief biography of Havemann, this time concluding with his passing in 1982. Hammer encourages the reader to read Havemann’s last book, *Morgen*,

which provides a timely admonition against continuing to industrialize, predicting future economic and ecological ruin beyond the scale of the World Wars if nothing is done. Hammer discusses Havemann's ideas for a utopian society, emphasizing a return to natural living and the sufficiency of natural products without additives. The system Havemann proposed also emphasizes a moneyless society to prevent monopolies and promote true social equality. To corroborate this proposed society, Hammer quoted his interview with Havemann, specifically the excerpt, "It is absurd for the GDR to want to chase after the Western countries in the field of industrial production," which neatly aligns with what Havemann has posited in his work, *Morgen*. Havemann likely had this in mind while troubleshooting an alternative to a capitalist society.

"Biographie - Jean-Pierre Hammer," n.d. <https://www.jean-pierre-hammer.fr/biographie>.

This source is a biography of Jean-Pierre Hammer from what appears to be his website. The Copyright indicates that the site was likely established circa 2017. However, it is difficult to ascertain the veracity of this source, as the site does not seem to have a references tab. No Wikipedia pages exist for Hammer, and no other biographies outside of Amazon were seemingly available. This biography references Hammer and Havemann's secret meeting in 1977, exactly where and when it was published in *Le Monde*, but no reference to the *Allemagnes d'aujourd'h* publication published by Hammer's own newspaper. Also, as mentioned in the narrative, the claim that "Thanks to the interview, the scientist's house arrest will be lifted" does not appear anywhere else in the sources referencing the interview with Havemann. The veracity of this claim is disproven by the aforementioned *Washington Post* article from 1979. Still, given the interview's international coverage, it, at the very least, pressured the GDR to release Havemann to some extent.

