

## The GDR at the End of the 1970s (August 10, 1979)

### Abstract

---

Peter Bender, an astute commentator on East-West German relations, identifies two crucial problems that would continue to hinder not only the GDR's political and economic stabilization but also its legitimacy: economic problems and ideological erosion. Those weaknesses, Bender argues, were common among communist regimes but more problematic in East Germany on account of West Germany's presence. He asserts that those weaknesses promised to complicate the continuation of West Germany's decade-long policy of normalization toward East Germany.

### Source

---

#### The Weak German Neighbor

#### The GDR's Dual Crisis: Economic Difficulties Exacerbate Ideological Problems

Until August 13, 1961, three peculiarities distinguished the GDR from all other communist states in Europe. It had an uncontrolled border in Berlin; it was not recognized internationally; and it was the smaller and weaker part of a divided country. All three circumstances hampered and disrupted its internal consolidation.

By the time the eastern sector of Berlin was sealed off from the West eighteen years ago, more than three million had fled Ulbricht's socialism—for a time, this [exodus] had not necessarily been detrimental to the GDR, which got rid of its fiercest opponents this way. In the long run, however, no communist state can sustain an open border—not only because it runs the risk of hemorrhaging its labor force. Perhaps even more important is that the GDR could only achieve complete power over its citizens by confining them. For many in the GDR, the possibility of making it to the western part of Germany from time to time was an indispensable component of their psychological and mental makeup. Above all, their internal freedom was largely based on the fact that an escape route to external freedom still existed. As long as they were able to leave that state, they did not have to endure everything it did.

August 13 was undeniably a triumph for the resolute application of power; its psychological effects seemed hardly less profound than its concrete ones. At the time, the leadership and many SED functionaries felt both proud and relieved that the surprise nighttime coup had succeeded, without the West noticing anything beforehand or doing anything about it afterwards. Still today, the Unity Party<sup>[1]</sup> boasts about its feat.

#### Second-best “Solution”

But it had not achieved everything. Since the end of 1958, Soviet party leader Nikita Khrushchev and SED chief Walter Ulbricht had been trying to settle the Berlin problem to their advantage. Using the pressure of ultimatums and a variety of tricks, they sought to maneuver the three Western powers out of Berlin and gradually gain control of the Western sectors. But they were thwarted by the tenacious resistance of the Americans, the British, and the French, and most recently by Kennedy's toughness, and eventually they had to settle for the second-best “solution”: the Wall blocked the flight from the GDR, though it left West Berlin untouched.

For Ulbricht it represented a grave disappointment; and for the development of the GDR it was a constant strain. We are used to always seeing West Berlin as merely an island surrounded by foreign

---

territory, permanently threatened or feeling threatened. For the SED leadership, that lively city, constantly eager for a new attraction, is an alien element in the midst of its state; it was able to isolate it, but it still remains.

Only at the beginning of the seventies did the GDR overcome its second handicap. It was no longer questioned as a state but recognized by the whole world and accepted into the United Nations. Still, aspects of the earlier situation remained: the GDR is allowed to be a separate state, but many refuse to grant it a citizenship of its own. Formally it is equal, socially not yet: East Berlin is only slowly being incorporated into international diplomatic visits. Visitors from the Third World included heads of governments and heads of states; from non-communist Europe only the neutral Kekkonen and Kreisky have visited so far; for NATO-member countries, foreign minister is as high as it goes: the Norwegian and Belgian foreign ministers made a start [by visiting the GDR] in the mid-seventies, and two weeks ago François-Poncet arrived as the first foreign minister of the three Western powers (responsible for all of Germany).

In its dealings with the outside world, the East German state has not yet acquired a convincing self-confidence. Some of its diplomats are superb, but the two-decades long discrimination lingers in many ways, not least because it is only slowly disappearing even after recognition. One glance into the newspaper *Neues Deutschland* is enough to see that: the lowliest visit is accorded the stiff, solemn significance of a historic event on the front page—protocol as a form of self-affirmation. Honecker even interrupted his vacation to receive François-Poncet.

The third obstacle to the consolidation of the GDR will remain in place for the foreseeable future. Although the sense of a shared nationality has definitely declined in the two German states, it is highly doubtful that it will die off. The time, it would seem, belongs more to nationalisms than ideologies; and its highest god, prosperity, is revealing itself in the GDR in German form: its consumer “model” is the Federal Republic, which penetrates daily through the ether.

Additionally, the *Ostpolitik* of Brandt and Scheel brought the East Berlin leadership not only recognition, but it also demanded a price: a state that wants to be normal must be accessible. Since 1972–73, West Germans have been streaming across the GDR; six million visitors every year, half of them from West Berlin, which also has its own role in this small but constantly recurring reunification. Walter Ulbricht knew why he resisted Brandt’s offensive *détente* right away in 1969—and he resisted so vehemently and doggedly that he eventually had to be forced into resigning in the interest of the Berlin Agreement. At least *one* purpose of the Berlin Wall was blunted: it serves only to control, no longer to keep out, visitors, who could upset the domestic peace of the SED regime by exposing their Westernness.

Even today, the GDR is a special case among the communist countries of Europe, though much less so than eighteen years ago. It continues to have difficulty with the German nation, but otherwise it shares the fate of its brother states. Our tendency to see the GDR in isolation and to explain it solely on its own terms (and on the basis of Soviet directives) easily leads to misjudgments. Neither the *Intershops* [retail stores that required hard currency for purchases] nor its dealings with headstrong intellectuals are its specialty. The determining factors are identical or similar everywhere in the East. Most of what attracts notice in the GDR—for good or ill—soon proves to be the German expression of a general development in the East. The only difference is that in the German front-line state of communism, almost everything carries greater weight—it is, or seems, more consequential, or also more dangerous.

Anyone who asks about the stability of the GDR must focus on the entire East: the same problems with the economy and ideology are prevalent everywhere. As is well known, shortages of and rising prices for commodities and energy affect Eastern Europe not only directly but also indirectly. Its economic opening up at the beginning of the seventies, a difficult decision at the time, rested on the presumption of sustained economic strength in the West. The global economic crisis thus dealt the East a double blow;

---

one is almost inclined to say three blows, for such a frozen system has an even more difficult time dealing with it. What a to-do just to adjust the politically tabooed price system to reality. Only Hungary and Czechoslovakia have managed to do so thus far; Poles were especially inept and ended up with two episodes of unrest; the GDR does not have the courage to do it and has been content so far with meaningful references to the enormous sums that the price subsidies devour each year.

### **The Limits to Growth**

The impact of the economic crisis is so devastating because it is combined with the ideological one. The ideological crisis is that the cadres themselves barely still believe in Marxism-Leninism. Therefore, they cannot persuade the much-heralded “masses” that only communists know the path to the future and deserve to be trusted as leaders. Where the ideological divine-right theory of political legitimacy vanishes, a new legitimation is needed—a closer look reveals it is the oldest in the world: a government must prove itself through good governance; it must do something for its people.

At first, this pressure had a beneficial effect. For the first time, the needs of the population were considered along with those of the economy—in some countries, they almost achieved an equal status. Two random examples: between 1971 and 1978, nearly as many housing units were built in the GDR as during the previous twenty years. In Poland, real wages grew by around one to two percent in the sixties, but by around fifty percent between 1971 and 1978. Even though reality looks a little more complicated, the progress throughout Eastern Europe in the past decade can be neither overlooked nor denied. In addition to consumption, it also encompasses social welfare in many different forms, in most countries also more freedom for the arts and more relaxed relations between the state and the citizens.

[...]

But appetite comes with eating. Once you start fulfilling long-cherished desires, expectations grow faster than the possibility of meeting them. This explains why, once the consumer policy had begun, the mood in the East was very soon much worse than the actual situation; but that could have been managed, appeals to reason need not have been in vain. What caused the setback is that the economies of all the Eastern countries could not even produce as much as they planned. The improvement wasn't just too slow; it was stopped.

For the West, too, the “limits to growth” are a problem, but the East has been much harder hit, because it is not yet in the sated phase of development, but still in the greedy phase. Another barrier falls precisely at the moment when those who have always been shortchanged see their share of material and spiritual progress before their eyes.

The disappointment about this is put back on the governing parties. [...]

Although there are self-critical discussions about this state of affairs in most of the Eastern states, the drive for modernity (or what one thinks it is) has much more force than the wish for socialism (which people think they already have anyway). The leadership and the people think pretty similarly on this point, and even more importantly: the leaders usually no longer have the strength to resist the demands from below.

The new values are coming from the West, from fashion to human rights—and here, too, those in power are not without fault. By declaring the highly developed industrialized countries as the quantitative benchmark, measured in per capita production, they initiated a process whereby the West also became the qualitative model. The political consequences are ruinous, because a yardstick was created that made the failure of the Eastern system even more apparent.

Moreover, people who live in the East are aware every day of what is not working; and if they are smart,

---

they know why it cannot work at all. Time is another factor. That there were no bed sheets in 1959 was annoying; that they were still in short supply in 1969 was a severe strain on one's patience; but that meat, too, became a rarity in 1979 had to convince people that nothing more could be expected from this system.

[...]

The half measures are the current weakness of the East. The ideology has exhausted itself, but it is not abolished and prevents any meaningful change. Economic reason gets off the ground, but as soon as it picks up momentum, it is immediately stopped. Politically, the system is no longer convincing, and in practical terms it achieves too little. There is no improvement in sight. In the coming decade, the economic difficulties will increase, and the demands of the population will not decrease. The need for thorough reform is growing, but whether the ruling parties still have the strength to implement it seems very doubtful.

[...]

### **Total State Security**

[...] Leaving aside practical questions, the Western *Ostpolitik* always had to content itself with not impeding positive developments and not promoting negative ones. Applied to the most immediate situation, the relationship to the GDR, this means: now and even more so in the future, we are dealing with a partner who is struggling with internal difficulties and who will be difficult to deal with. That is why the following points should be considered:

1. The ideological crisis is hitting the GDR hardest, because it can claim its right to exist only by virtue of ideology: if it can no longer claim to be more advanced than the Federal Republic [the original text refers to a "historical stage"]—why, then, no reunification? Thus, any invocation of the German nation hits the SED leadership harder today and is less useful because it compels sharper resistance.
2. The GDR is already burdened by its very existence—making this burden even more difficult by giving Berlin a "national task" is damaging both the city and its surroundings.
3. If anyone had prophesied five years ago that West German television correspondents would be interviewing GDR citizens regularly, publicly, and also about politically sensitive topics, that West German newspapers would become the permanent discussion forum for East German writers and their troubles with the party, that the West German currency, finally, would become the three-quarter official second currency of the GDR—that person would have appeared to be a fantasist. Now that all this has been reality for some time, we have become so used to it that general indignation erupts when the GDR changes anything about it. Of course, the development there was natural—but only to our eyes, not to Eastern ones. When dealing with Eastern countries, we have always had to distinguish between what was right and what was possible. What is politically worrisome about East Berlin's course of action is not that it did something, but that it lost a sense of proportion. Its most recent expansion of penal law reflects an obsession with total state security—if this spirit prevails, then there is cause for concern.
4. In recent years, the Federal Republic and the GDR have demonstrated the meaning of escalation, making them a good case study for seminars in political science. A certain normality seems to exist only at the very top and the very bottom, with the top leaders in Bonn and East Berlin and with the average citizen who is visiting his relatives.

But it is still true that it is much easier to deal with a stable and self-assured GDR than with a state that worries about its own existence. The hope that an internally strengthened GDR would find the strength for domestic reform was probably misplaced. Still, we will have to continue to make the effort—even

---

though it will get more difficult, promise less success, and will bring no thanks at all.

## NOTES

[1] Socialist Unity Party of Germany or SED—eds.

Source: Peter Bender, “Der schwache deutsche Nachbar,” *Die Zeit*, Nr. 33/1979.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

Recommended Citation: The GDR at the End of the 1970s (August 10, 1979), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-5043>> [December 09, 2023].