

The GDR's Struggle for International Recognition (Retrospective Account, 2004)

Abstract

Former members of the GDR diplomatic service discuss and assess East German efforts to achieve international recognition, both before and after the period shaped by the Hallstein Doctrine. This retrospective account shows the extent to which East and West German relations were embedded in their wider international context.

Source

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The GDR's struggle for international recognition lasted for more than twenty years. One can divide it, roughly speaking, into two directions: first, in the direction of its own allies in the developing "socialist world system." Here, foreign policy efforts focused on developing and deepening relationships. The second direction aimed to undermine the Hallstein Doctrine. Most colleagues in our circles [of diplomats] actively experienced this period at the beginning of their diplomatic careers.

After the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in 1955, West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer declared in front of the Bundestag that the federal government would continue to see the establishment of diplomatic relations with the GDR by third countries with which the FRG maintained official relations as a hostile act that was apt to deepen the division of Germany. With this phrasing, called the Hallstein Doctrine after one of its co-authors, the FRG had created an instrument with which it could assert its claim to sole representation in international affairs. Until 1972, the threat of breaking off its relations in the event of recognition of the GDR prevented the establishment of normal relations between the GDR and the countries of the Western world and the majority of the developing countries, and an equal participation in international bodies like the United Nations and its subsidiary organizations. Thus, ending the Hallstein Doctrine, the normalization of bilateral as well as international relations, the establishment of diplomatic relations, and membership in the UN were of fundamental interest for the GDR, since they served as a precondition for a successful foreign policy.

At the end of the fifties and in the sixties, the main locales of conflict over the Hallstein Doctrine were the Third World countries, above all in the Arab and Southeast Asian areas as well as in Africa. Here the Federal Republic already maintained an extensive network of diplomatic missions. The GDR hoped that the anti-colonial struggle of the liberation movements would provide connections to build relations. Both Bonn and Berlin waged this battle uncompromisingly, with extensive material resources and the commitment of personnel, until it no longer fit into the international landscape at the beginning of the seventies. It was at this time that the first plans about a political détente developed between Moscow and Washington, in the wake of which the "new *Ostpolitik*" was advanced in Bonn. The latter was promoted because it became obvious that a continuation of the Hallstein Doctrine would, in the long run, undermine the credibility of the Federal Republic's foreign policy vis-à-vis the developing countries,

which increasingly perceived the wielding of this instrument as blackmail. In 1972/73, the signing of the Basic Treaty between the GDR and the FRG opened up the path for the GDR to international recognition, participation in the CSCE [Conference of Security and Cooperation] process, and admission as a member of the UN.

Until the start of the seventies, I gained my own experiences during this first stage chiefly in and with Latin America. Leaving aside Cuba, the primary issues revolved around the gradual upgrading of the status of our missions to the threshold of diplomatic relations, the GDR's legitimization under international law, the portrayal of the GDR as a societal alternative to the FRG and as an equal bilateral and international partner, as well as the creation of lobbies to support the establishment of diplomatic relations, of parliamentary relations, all the way to the creation of Friendship Societies. Looking back, I'd like to say about these efforts, even if it might elicit objections: this time until the beginning of the seventies, when we had to fight for the diplomatic recognition of the GDR in most countries of the world, seems to me, with respect to the treasure trove of experiences it brought us, almost more important than the nearly two decades of normal diplomatic work that followed.

During this period the GDR had created the preconditions for the smoothest possible transition to embassies in Latin America. Fairly good basic relations existed in the political, cultural, and parliamentary circles. We had achieved favorable conditions for bilateral cooperation and the development of a treaty system. Starting in the mid-sixties, beginning with regular training in Havana, the foreign ministry had schooled a whole string of qualified regional cadres. Still, what happened to us in Latin America was similar to what happened shortly after the CSCE conference in Helsinki: we were not adequately prepared nor in a position to meet the new demands in terms of personnel, material resources, and finances. The global recognition of the GDR was possibly our greatest foreign policy success. But as soon as we were recognized, it also landed on our toes, because we were not able to use the opportunities in a comprehensive and targeted way that would reflect our policy priorities. This [statement] actually applies to the entire period up to 1989, despite differences in various countries on the sub-continent and differences during specific phases.

We had raised expectations among our partners in the years before diplomatic recognition that we could not meet subsequently in the cultural-scientific realm, in scientific-technical cooperation, in the field of education, and in sports. In the political-diplomatic field, for example, the GDR never rose beyond the level of the foreign minister in Latin America, leaving aside Erich Honecker's visit to Mexico in 1982. Although a series of formal agreements about diplomatic consultations was in place, these were no consultations or discussions in the true sense, but an exchange of positions. [...]

By about 1974, after the GDR had satisfied its principal interest in establishing diplomatic relations with Latin America, the last country was Venezuela, the intensification of bilateral relations had reached its limits. It focused on "priority countries," and we worked almost always below the level of what was achievable. Incidentally, this also holds true for trade, with a brief exception involving Brazil.

[...]

Norbert Jaeschke

born 1927, locksmith, lawyer, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1952–90, among other positions, Deputy Head of the GDR Mission in Burma 1958–61, Consul General in Iraq 1964–68, Ambassador to Turkey 1974–79, Ambassador to Denmark 1983–88, and Ambassador to Turkey 1989–90.

The periods we have just sketched out were also reflected, in my experience, in the way the diplomats of the two German states related to one another. In the beginning, we essentially treated each other like diplomats of two warring parties. It took a fairly long time, as I experienced it in Burma, before we at least said "Hello" to each other during the second period. When a West German diplomat joined a group

engaged in a conversation, we slowly retreated. And it was no different the other way around. After the establishment of diplomatic relations, the operating modus was to treat diplomats from the FRG like those from any other state. People dealt with one another in a normal way, without getting any closer.

[...]

Wolfgang Bator

born 1927, bricklayer, Romance Philologist, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1959–90 (1968–79 staff member in the Department IV of the Central Committee of the SED), among others Deputy Head of the GDR Mission in Morocco 1964–67, Ambassador to Libya 1980–85, and Ambassador to Iran 1987–90.

I would like to stress also for the Arab world what Achim Naumann has said about the immediate consequences of the wave of recognitions. The framework we had won had suddenly grown too big. We were not able to fulfill the hopes we had raised with many partners that were well-disposed toward us. Trade played a bigger role in relations with the Arab world. Since we were not able to play our part in foreign relations, political relations at the party level suddenly took on a weight in foreign relations that could not be justified at times. Of course, this development also resulted from the fact that a number of parties with which the SED was cultivating contacts were in power, for example in Syria or Lebanon.

In the area of cultural and scientific-technical cooperation, there would have been many opportunities on the ground, but we were not able to cover them in terms of material or personnel. Some of the partners that would have cooperated with us were bitterly disappointed by us. They had counted on the GDR “getting in big time” after recognition.

In the Arab world we never got beyond bilateral politics with the various countries and never had a say in Middle East politics. We also had no sensible policy or approach with respect to the Middle East problem.

Siegfried Bock

born 1926, Professor Dr. jur., lawyer, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1951–90, among other positions, Head of the Legal and Treaty Department 1953–57, Head of the Chief Division Fundamental Questions and Planning 1967–77, from 1972 simultaneously Head of the GDR Delegation at the CSCE Negotiations, Ambassador to Romania 1977–84, Head of the Department of South-Eastern Europe 1984–88, Ambassador to the SFRY (Yugoslavia) 1988–90, since 1993 President of the Association for International Politics and International Law.

I do believe that the most significant and most visible success of the GDR’s foreign policy was the normalization of relations and the establishment of bilateral relations. This was also in line with the interests of the GDR, even though we simply took on too much in certain ways. We had to take on too much, we had to in the face of the constellation of forces that sustained this policy. For the GDR, to build its own international profile demanded the establishment of the greatest possible number of bilateral relations, regardless of what was, under the existing circumstances, possible in each specific instance. To some extent, and perhaps we overestimated this somewhat then and later, recognition also meant that the problem of reestablishing German unity and the return to the territorial structures from the time before 1945 was rejected.

However, as this policy unfolded, a good deal was left to chance or to the course of events. Relations were established when they happened to present themselves. There was obviously no strategic approach which conveyed the focal points, with whom one should establish relations more quickly, and where one could definitely take one’s time.

[...]

Overall, I would like to support the thesis of the previous speakers. With regard to a number of issues we were inadequately prepared. From the personnel perspective this was without doubt difficult. But we were also not prepared conceptually, either with regard to the individual regions [of the world] or the individual countries, in such a way that we would have been able to say: When we establish relations, then particular questions need to be addressed. And when it is not possible to solve them in the first attempt, then one has to be prepared to show staying power.

[...]

Source: Siegfried Bock, Ingrid Muth, Hermann Schwiesau, eds., *DDR-Außenpolitik im Rückspiegel. Diplomaten im Gespräch*. Politikwissenschaft Band 106. Münster: LIT Verlag, 2004, pp. 82–93, 344–45.

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