

The Honecker Era (1971–1989)

Abstract

This short documentary describes the political career of Erich Honecker, who succeeded Walter Ulbricht as First Secretary of the SED on May 3, 1971, and later also became head of state of the German Democratic Republic. Honecker's ascent to power was supported by CPSU General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev, who had become concerned about Ulbricht's increasing political independence. Honecker continued to cooperate with West Germany in the context of *Ost-* and *Deutschlandpolitik* and used it strategically to achieve greater international recognition of the GDR. The two German states recognized each other as sovereign states for the first time since 1949 in the 1972 Basic Treaty. However, the West German government still insisted that both German states were part of one German nation. Membership in the United Nations for both states followed in 1973. Under Honecker's leadership the GDR also signed the 1975 Helsinki Accords which aimed at securing peace and cooperation in Europe. Despite Honecker's efforts to reform the country's economic policy under the slogan "unity of social and economic policy," supply shortages and the collapse of state finances became prominent in the mid-1980s. The party leadership retained its repressive policies against any opposition and dissent until Honecker resigned in October 1989, shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Source

The Honecker Era: Translation of transcription

Slowly, the SED party leadership grew tired of the now 77-year-old Walter Ulbricht. He wanted to withdraw somewhat from Soviet paternalism and independently shape the incipient policy of détente between East and West – too independently for the Soviet leadership.

The crown prince and potential successor Erich Honecker was already shuffling his feet. On May 3, 1971, the time had come. With the support of Soviet CP leader Leonid Brezhnev, Walter Ulbricht was ousted and replaced by Erich Honecker as first secretary of the SED and thus the most powerful man in the GDR.

Foreign policy developments in the Honecker era: Ulbricht was already struggling with the problem that the GDR had only been recognized as a state by 29 governments in 1971. The Federal Republic's claim to sole representation for all of Germany had prevented others from doing so. The path to recognition therefore led to negotiations with the FRG. For this reason, talks between the two German governments had already taken place under Ulbricht in Erfurt in 1970, initially without any concrete results.

In the Transit Agreement of 1971, traffic between West Germany and West Berlin was made easier. West Germans could now travel to and from West Berlin on three clearly defined routes through the GDR without the border searches that had been customary until then, but they were not allowed to leave these routes under any circumstances.

The breakthrough came in 1972. In the so-called Basic Treaty, the FRG and the GDR recognized each other as states with equal rights. The SPD politician Egon Bahr had developed a political plan for détente between East and West described by the slogan "change through rapprochement".

The CDU criticized this as a "betrayal of German unity." In 1973, both the FRG and the GDR were admitted to the UN. 135 states established diplomatic relations with the GDR. Meanwhile the FRG's goal of making

the Wall more permeable remained unfulfilled for the time being. The GDR participated in the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE for short), which also stipulated respect for human rights, without any effect on GDR citizens at the time, however.

Here Honecker and Chancellor Helmut Schmidt are shown at the signing of the Final Act in Helsinki in 1975. A highlight of GDR foreign policy was a state visit by Honecker to Chancellor Helmut Kohl in Bonn in 1987. It had only become possible after Soviet Communist Party leader Mikhail Gorbachev had granted the states of the Eastern Bloc more domestic and foreign policy freedoms as part of his reform policy.

Economic and social policy in the Honecker era: There was a certain economic prosperity in the 1970s, but it soon became unsustainable. Rising raw material and energy costs and the inefficiency of the GDR economy soon led to massive problems. In order to keep GDR citizens calm and avoid provoking a second popular uprising like the one in 1953, generous social programs were launched, especially in housing construction.

Erich Honecker (speech): “With all people, we want to make socialist society ever more perfect for all people. Nothing is done for its own sake. Everything we do is for the benefit of our working people.”

Newly built housing blocks in prefabricated slab construction spread out while the old buildings fell into disrepair and in some cases were left to collapse. If you took a glance at the back streets of GDR cities, you could just see how much resources were lacking, plus there were always supply shortages. Subsidizing rents and food prices while the GDR economy was poorly productive eventually became unsustainable.

In the 1980s, the GDR was close to national bankruptcy. The GDR government was forced to borrow even from the class enemy FRG, with the mediation of the Bavarian prime minister and political arch-enemy Franz Josef Strauß. The quid pro quo was the dismantling of spring guns at the GDR border.

In domestic policy, the GDR leadership remained restrictive; any opposition was suppressed by the Stasi. The expatriation of the singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann, which brought about a great wave of protest among GDR citizens, represented a dramatic climax. Resignation and a lack of perspective spread. Many applied to leave the country for the West, while others forced their way out by occupying West German embassies in Eastern Europe starting in the late 1980s.

In the 1980s, a peace and environmental movement arose within the GDR in the shelter of the church, demanding political reforms in the GDR and becoming the nucleus of the peaceful revolution of 1989.

What remains of Honecker? Walter Ulbricht still believed in the utopia of the superiority of socialism. Walter Ulbricht (speech): “The Five-Year Plan envisages an increase in peaceful industrial production twofold over the level of 1936. It will prove possible, on the basis of our new democratic order, to achieve a rate of industrial development per year unattainable by any capitalist country.”

Erich Honecker, however, rigidly pursued the established course even shortly before his fall in 1989. He was only concerned with maintaining the SED’s grip on power. The Wall, Honecker said, “will remain in place in 50 years and even in 100 years if the reasons for it have not yet been eliminated. Neither ox nor donkey will stop socialism in its village.”

Source: History Vision ([history-vision.de](https://www.history-vision.de)), Clip-ID: DieAeraHonecker_HVHigh.

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