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HONECKER'S LEGACY

STEPHEN R. BOWERS

From 1971 until 1989, under the leadership of Erich Honecker, the German Democratic Republic shed its thoroughly dogmatic image and developed a tradition of implementing reforms, particularly economic ones, and successfully blended technology with political orthodoxy when the rest of East Europe was locked in a Stalinist model. Yet, by the time of his removal from power in October, 1989, this former advocate of reforms was widely viewed as the leading opponent of reformist movements within the Soviet bloc. In making this transition from subservient Soviet ally to "maverick", Honecker's regime demonstrated not only an ability to resist reformist pressures and formulate policies that defied the Kremlin's leadership, but also a confidence to make decisions in accordance with the institutional interests of the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED). It is, therefore, reasonable to suggest that Honecker should be remembered, not for his eventual expulsion from the party he once led and his subsequent arrest for treason, but for his development of an institutional maturity that repudiated suggestions during the GDR's first decades that this state was nothing more than a westward extension of the Kremlin. The achievement of institutional maturity by the Honecker regime was made possible by legitimate East German accomplishments in domestic policy and the grounding of SED policy within the framework of clear and emphatic Soviet endorsement of an East German "model" that enjoyed the Kremlin's respect. The eventual withdrawal of that support by Mikhail Gorbachev undermined a system that was beginning to establish itself as an unloved but nevertheless genuine socialist state on German soil.

The Soviet Union's more flexible policy toward its Eastern European allies, one of the basic elements of the Gorbachev reforms, gave Honecker full authority to advocate independent positions. During the latter Honecker years, the GDR leadership insisted that it was formulating policies in accordance with the unique East German conditions. SED spokesmen frequently cited their nation's strong economy as the main factor that barred the necessity of imitating economic reforms such as those advocated by Gorbachev for the USSR's struggling economy. Other more subtle factors, such as the GDR's proximity to an especially attractive West Germany, also gave coherence to a policy that attempted to maintain rather than diminish the differences between their own society and those of the non-communist West. The flight of thousands of East German citizens to the FRG in Honecker's

final days and the subsequent rush toward reunification underscored the validity of this concern.

As a loyal junior partner of the Soviet Union, East Germany was free to make explicit its opposition to reforms being pursued by the USSR. The SED's opposition was outlined in an internal SED memorandum distributed among middle-ranking party officials following Erich Honecker's talk with Bishop Werner Leich in 1988. In the document, which was released by the West German press in June, 1988, Honecker stressed his agreement with Gorbachev's view that every country must act in accordance with its own conditions of national development but argued that the GDR's ideological "consolidation" gave East Germany a different set of requirements from those of the USSR. Therefore, Honecker concluded that the GDR must approach its problems differently from other socialist countries and rejected basic features of the Soviet reform program. The SED statement rejected suggestions by East German church leaders that the GDR should accept the political implications of Soviet reforms by changing various features of the party's social policies, including educational policies that discriminated against Christians in East German schools.[1]

As enthusiastic public discussions of Soviet restructuring efforts spread throughout both the Communist and non-Communist worlds, the Kremlin's East German allies were remarkably reserved with regard to these historic Soviet innovations. Following the CPSU Conference in June, 1988 it became clear that the SED was reluctant to support Gorbachev's reform efforts as Honecker's public comments on the Conference were limited to bland generalizations about the strengthening of socialism. He made no reference to any of the reforms embodied in Gorbachev's program nor, for that matter, to Gorbachev himself. While the Conference proceedings were broadcast live throughout the GDR and the party daily printed the full text of Gorbachev's speech, the SED leadership did not comment on the conference and avoided all references to perestroika, glasnost, or Gorbachev.[2]

In the autumn of 1988 the SED Central Committee further elaborated its opposition when General Secretary Honecker denounced the advice of "influential" Westerners, such as West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who wanted the GDR to transform into a more "pragmatic" regime. Several prominent party figures such as Gunter Schabowski chose this opportunity to attack the application of glasnost to the study of Soviet and East European history. According to the SED view of history, a re-examination of the basic

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1 *Die Welt*, June 25, 1988, p. 4 and June 30, 1988, p. 8

2 *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*- Eastern Europe (hereafter noted as FBIS-EEU) No.88-124, p. 28 and Michael Shafir, "East European Coverage of the Soviet Party Conference", Radio Free Europe (RFE), Research and Development (RAD) Background Report/126, July 1, 1988, pp. 3-4

assumptions about the consolidation of Marxist-Leninist power in the USSR and Eastern Europe is a dangerous error. Such an undertaking, according to Schabowski, would only aid those West German foes of the GDR determined to misuse such concepts as "perestroika" and "glasnost" in an effort to undermine socialism. While stressing the unshakable foundations of the Soviet-GDR alliance, the SED Central Committee maintained that the international reputation of the GDR and its political and economic successes were the result of the SED's "prudent policy". This policy, the Central Committee insisted, was "based on Marxism-Leninism, the specific conditions of the GDR", and a recognition of the fact that "the class struggle is escalating in an ideological sense". The latter observation was an obvious rejection of Gorbachev's suggestion that the role of the party be reduced and the Soviet leadership's emphasis on "humanitarian" issues in contrast to "class" issues. Such a reduction in the role of the party would, in the view of several SED spokesmen, transform the party from an instrument of socialist construction into a mere debating society.[3]

Under Honecker's leadership East German opposition to the re-examination of history was exhibited in two incidents. One was the government's announcement in November, 1988 of a prohibition against the import into the GDR of the popular Soviet monthly press digest *Sputnik*. Although specific issues of Soviet periodicals had been banned in the past when they dealt with sensitive issues, there had never been a general ban of this nature. Shortly after this announcement, there were protest demonstrations in East Berlin, Leipzig, Jena, Weimar, and Halle as well as numerous withdrawals from the SED by party members who objected to the action against *Sputnik*, events that served as a prelude to the dramatic displays of popular unrest that occurred less than a year later.[4] The second incident was sparked by the activism of the Soviet film industry and was directed against the film "Repentance", one of the USSR's most critical examinations of Stalinism and a feature on West German television in 1987. "Repentance" was denounced by both *Neues Deutschland* and *Junge Welt*, the journal of the party youth organization, as a "stone-age view mocking all those millions of people who risked their lives for mankind's progress" and a "mocking denunciation of revolutionary vigilance." In the SED's view, there were "practical and theoretical mistakes" during the Stalin period, but Stalin should receive credit for leading the USSR through collectivization and industrialization and for securing the unanimity of the party when socialism was faced with daily threats to its very survival. It was only through Stalin's

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3 *Neues Deutschland*, December 3-4, 1988, pp. 3-16 and RFE, RAD Background Report/240, December 6, 1988, pp. 1-4

4 RFE, RAD Background Report/233, November 23, 1988, pp. 1-3 and *Suddeutsche Zeitung*, January 10, 1989, p. 2

leadership, the SED insisted, that the Soviet Union was able to overcome foreign "intervention, sabotage, opportunism, Trotskyism, and bourgeois nationalism". According to a *Neues Deutschland* editorial, the only purpose served by "Repentance" was the provision of new ammunition for the enemies of socialism, especially those in West Germany who sought to smear the SED for its association with what was being presented as a "terrorist" Soviet regime.[5]

East German criticisms targeted both economic and political reforms advanced by its WTO allies . A general observation in *Neues Deutschland* summarized the SED position with its insistance that the party should always play the leading role in society, that industry should be operated by the state rather than by private enterprises whether East German or Western, and that the economic foundations of the regime should be based not on capitalistic laws of supply and demand but upon an arrangement of subsidized prices. Unemployment, a basic element of many Eastern European economic reforms, did not, in the SED's view, represent a rational alternative to the problem of inefficient industry but was a violation of the constitutionally guaranteed right to work.[6]

Confidence as a motive for opposition

A significant indication of the GDR's institutional development by the end of the Honecker era was that the regime displayed a greater confidence in its own achievements. In spite of the obvious problems the government faced, the dramatic flight of thousands of its citizens in 1989 being one of the most conspicuous, the regime did enjoy some advantages, especially when the GDR is compared with the other communist party regimes of East Europe. One that was rarely noted and infrequently documented was the level of popular support that the government enjoyed as a result of its active social welfare programs. The exodus of 1989 and the large public protests immediately prior to Honecker's removal have obscured indications of support that the policies of the SED had won among some segments of the GDR's population. A West German polling organization, the Infas Polling Institute, examined this question in the spring of 1989 and found that a surprising 53% of its sample of 880 East German adults expressed a positive view of the government's work. At the same time, 44% of the respondents indicated a desire to see the SED adopt some of the reforms being undertaken by the Poles and the Hungarians while only 22% specifically rejected those

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5 *Neues Deutschland*, October 30, 1987, p. 1 and RFE, RAD Background Report/215, November 9, 1987, pp 2-3

6 IBID., February 27, 1989, p. 2

efforts. Granted, there are obvious qualifications that must be made with regard to this type of research in the GDR. What does one conclude, for example, from the fact that an additional 800 or more people who were contacted simply refused to respond? Yet, this fragmentary indication could well support the suggestion that the regime enjoyed some popular support, even among citizens expressing a desire far reforms. Comments of East German young people, widely reported in the Western press in the autumn of 1989, about their continued preference for a separate East German state, in spite of its shortcomings, offer further support for the view that the GDR enjoyed some genuine popular support during that time. Equally significant was another survey, conducted in the more open if turbulent atmosphere of mid-November, which indicated that a majority of the GDR's younger citizens rejected the notion of dismantling the GDR in order to reunify Germany. A December survey conducted by the GDR Academy of Social Science found that 69.2% of the respondents wanted the GDR to persist as a separate nation while only 23.5% supported reunification with the FRG.[7]

A more direct justification for the regime's optimism and confidence was Honecker's insistence that the SED political and economic policies had been effective. With this propositon as a starting point, the SED established an argument that only minimal adjustments were required to conform either to necessity or to general Soviet guidance. Accordingly, there were few SED voices calling for major reforms and the few that were heard were relatively restrained. The Central Committee's sixth plenum indicated the weakness of reformist elements in the GDR's ruling party. At the plenum, the leadership noted that East Germany was plagued by various economic problems such as shortages of good quality consumer goods but issued no demands for a restructuring of the nation's economic or political mechanisms. According to SED Central Committee Secretary Joachim Herrmann, the East German leadership had no need to alter its economic course because the Marxist-Leninist method had always been right as long as "it has not been applied dogmatically." What the GDR needed, he stressed, in order to overcome its economic difficulties was greater discipline and the introduction of microelectronics in all branches of the national economy. In commenting on the extensive reforms of its allies, Herrmann noted that the GDR was "waiting for the results" of those efforts before considering their relevance to their needs.[8]

For the most part, during this pre-glasnost era in the GDR, the leadership stressed only the most positive economic news and muted indications of negative economic trends. Accordingly, in assessing economic performance

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7 *The Washington Post*, October 8, 1989, p. Al, *Die Welt*, April 26, 1989, p. 1, NBC Evening News, November 21, 1989, and FBIS-EEU-90-002, January 3, 1990, p. 40.

8 *Volksstimme*, June 10, 1988, p. 4

for 1989, authorities boasted that during the first quarter the economy had already achieved the percentage share of the growth rate planned for the whole year and that national income had risen by an impressive 4 percent while net production and labour productivity had increased by 6 percent. The application of key technologies, *Neues Deutschland* claimed, was continuing at "a rapid pace".[9] By mid-year, authorities were boasting that in its 40th year the GDR had proven itself to be a "modern socialist state on German soil which is developing in a politically stable way, with great economic dynamism and a continuing performance growth in all field.of social life." It was not until after Honecker's removal and the flight of over 200,000 East German citizens, many of whom were their best workers, that the SED was forced to acknowledge a crisis situation in which sweeping reforms were needed to avoid an economic disaster that would threaten the very foundations of the GDR.[10]

Yet, even in Honecker's last days, the regime was not oblivious to the economic difficulties that most citizens perceived through direct experience. Authorities were willing to engage in glasnost, but limited it to discussions of matters such as the availability of adequate housing and other social services. For example, while public pronouncements declared the unqualified success of the nation's economic plan, a confidential resolution of the SED Politburo instructed local leaderships to admit economic difficulties and bottlenecks that plague the economy. As the Politburo instructed local authorities to pay attention to critical remarks from citizens, it insisted that leading journalists take the lead in reporting on supply shortages in the official media and identifying responsible officials. Shortages of vegetables, industrial goods, and spare parts as well as poor public services were the targets of this effort. This directive may have been an early indication that the GDR was considering the eventual introduction of elements of a market economy before events raced out of control following Honecker's removal.[11]

The SED's optimism often assumed some curious manifestations as East German authorities expressed a belief that their public health situation was a tribute to the regime's efficient practices and clear evidence of the GDR's superiority to Western society. For example, in 1989 one official boasted that the GDR had been almost completely spared from the AIDS epidemic. According to Niels Soennichsen, the nation's most prominent AIDS specialist, only 55 East German citizens were infected with HIV as of January, 1989 while no more than 10 actually suffered from AIDS. This fortunate situation, authorities insisted, was the result of a strategy that combined effective testing and proper treatment and a popular attitude in

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9 *Neues Deutschland*, April 8-9, 1989, p. 1

10 IBID., July 20, 1989, p. 3 and *The Washington Post*, November 24, 1989, p. Al.

11 *Der Standard* (Vienna), August 3, 1989, p. 3

which most citizens want to "do something for their health and a healthy way of life..." In much the same spirit, East German spokesmen also boasted that their scientists had achieved cold fusion, thereby once again surpassing the West on an important concern.[12]

Foreign policy considerations

For the most part, throughout the latter part of the Honecker era, GDR foreign policy embraced the notion of East-West detente, thus strengthening the SED argument that sweeping reforms were not required. When Politburo member Herman Axen visited the United States in 1988 he made a vigorous case that the US should award Most Favored Nation trade status to the GDR. Achievement of this goal would have helped East Germany meet economic demands through the import of more Western technology and would have improved its trade relationship with the non-Communist world. In addition to satisfying important economic objectives, such a development would have enabled the SED to strengthen its case against the reforms being implemented elsewhere in East Europe by demonstrating the utility of a non-reformist approach to economic advancement. The East German commitment to detente was most vividly illustrated by the SED's dispute with the USSR in 1984 over the question of retaliation for NATO's deployment of new missiles in Europe. Honecker's opposition to the Kremlin on this vital security issue was later vindicated by Gorbachev's active pursuit of detente with the West and the USSR's abandonment of the more hard-line positions of the early 1980's. During this period, Honecker established the GDR as a nation whose policies were firmly grounded on a need for good relations with the West in general and with the FRG in particular.[13]

Yet, in some respects, the GDR's foreign policy during Honecker's last years took a turn that was not consistent with post-Ulbricht foreign affairs. As pressures for reforms intensified and the radical nature of Gorbachev's program became more evident, that crucial icon of East Europe's reformist era, detente with the West, began to wear thin. A clear expression of this tendency was the increasing number of critical statements on the foreign policies of the West. Debates in the US Congress over the Bush Administration defence budget prompted a *Neues Deutschland* commentary denouncing the United States' determination to develop large-scale weapons systems instead of providing "social benefits for three million homeless".[14] A

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12 *Suddeutsche Zeitung*, April 1-2, 1989, p. 10 and *Neue Zeit*, April 7, 1989, p. 5

13 RFE, RAD Background Report/77, May 5, 1988, pp. 1-3 and RAD Background Report/142, July 26, 1988, pp. 1-2

14 *Neues Deutschland*, July 29-30, 1989, p. 2

similar critical view was apparent in comments about the Federal Republic of Germany. When West German specialists on the GDR offered a sceptical analysis of East German economic performance, Neues Deutschland responded by warning about those in the FRG who are only interested in the "elimination of socialism, as well as the integration of the GDR, parts of the Polish People's Republic and the USSR into the FRG". The SED's increasingly defensive posture also led to cancellation of the planned visit by senior West German Social Democratic Party leaders that had been scheduled for September, 1989. By this time East German officials were denouncing what they saw as West German "economic aggression" and increasingly active West German "revanchist" tendencies that threatened the GDR's security.[15]

The weakening of detente was not consistent with East German interests in an era of East European reforms. The GDR's economy profited from the climate of international cooperation and that economic profit bolstered the SED's anti-reformist arguments. Yet, the resurgence of limited East-West hostility supported the SED's need for an enemy as a supplement to the regime's legitimacy. A return to some elements of the old "front-line" rhetoric of the 1960s enabled the SED to enlist support for its anti-reformist policies by attempting to rouse the spectre of West German "revanchism", an appeal that is doubtless effective with East Germans who might harbour a bitterness and resentment toward their more prosperous Western relatives. The size of this group among the GDR elite, while difficult to determine, was probably declining by the end of the decade and, at the popular level, hardly constituted the basis for development of a sense of national identity. The rapid collapse of this position in late 1989 and early 1990 indicates that Honecker's efforts to utilize the "front-line" rhetoric of an earlier era were a mistake.

While Gorbachev's enthusiastic search for a deeper working relationship with the West threatened to undermine some East German policies, the GDR did benefit from one especially important element of Gorbachev's "new thinking", the changed Soviet-East European relationship. This new posture was spelled out in Gorbachev's book, *Perestroika*, and indicated a Soviet willingness to broaden the limits of diversity in East Europe. The end result of current Soviet pronouncements was the final repudiation of the Brezhnev Doctrine and its replacement by what one Soviet spokesman jokingly referred to as the "Sinatra doctrine", a more flexible and tolerant attitude that invites East European allies to adopt — within certain very broad limits — whatever policies that may be required by their special circumstances. The East European states were, in effect, encouraged to "do it their way" as long as they stayed within the loose framework of what was left of the Soviet bloc in the Gorbachev era.

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15 IBID., August 3, 1989, p. 3 and *The Washington Post*, September 16, 1989, pA18

The most obvious consequence of the new Soviet-GDR relationship was that the SED became more or less free to adopt fully independent policies, as discussed above. In practical terms, this meant that Gorbachev was defending the East German right to disagree with his reform initiatives. Another result of Gorbachev's policy was a reduction of Soviet forces in East Germany. By May, 1989, Soviet troops began withdrawing from the GDR as part of the disarmament initiative announced by Gorbachev in December, 1988. Under this plan, the 25th Tank Division, the 32nd Tank Division, two independent tank training regiments, and eight independent battalions which together had 4,000 tanks, were to return to the USSR by the end of the year.[16] Given the often difficult relationship between East German citizens and Soviet soldiers, this move should have enhanced the popular status of the SED by diminishing popular perceptions that the country is simply a Kremlin outpost. Yet, there was a negative consequence in that reduction of the Soviet military contingent fostered the notion that the GDR had become less important in Soviet thinking and that the Soviet commitment to the regime was being reduced. In spite of the accomplishments of the GDR under Honecker, it is important to note that direct Soviet military support was one of the pillars of the regime's stability. A reduction in the Soviet military presence, coupled with a divergence of Soviet and East German policies, was certain to undermine the foundations of the regime.

The achievements of the Honecker era, including the newfound independence of the government, were predicated on the assumption that it enjoyed full Soviet support and was a firm member of a secure alliance system. The close East German–Soviet relationship was long regarded as essential to the viability of the GDR and it was generally recognized that the regime had a clear need for membership in a cohesive and supportive East European bloc. The deterioration in East Germany's relations with those bloc nations that had embarked on a course of radical reforms — Poland and Hungary — weakened the overall East German position by isolating it from its support system. The eventual perception that the SED had also lost Soviet support proved destructive to the foundations of a system that Honecker had strengthened with Soviet suport in the eras of Brezhnev, Andropov, and Chernenko and paved the way for a general public debate on the merits of German reunification.

A basic assumption of Honecker's anti-reformist position was that the reform measures of WTO nations such as Hungary were a dangerous precedent. The ceremonial reburial of Imry Nagy, in the SED's view, allowed the foes of socialism to demonstrate their hostility to that system and was a reminder of the continuing threat to socialist society. Hungarian discussions about legal actions against those responsible for Nagy's death

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16 FBIS-EEU-89-087, May 8, 1989, p. 18

underscored East German concerns about retributions against ageing Stalinists. Suggestions in November, 1989 that both Honecker and Bulgaria's recently deposed Todor Zhivkov faced disciplinary actions, coupled with the execution of Romania's Nicolae Ceausescu in December, emphasized the legitimacy of these concerns. A direct implication of Hungarian reforms for the GDR could be seen in the summer of 1989 as thousands of East German citizens, vacationing in Hungary, took advantage of the almost completely open Hungarian-Austrian frontier as a safe escape route to the Federal Republic. By August of 1989, East German efforts to prevent flight from the GDR by way of Hungary resulted in the imprisonment of an estimated 2,500 citizens who had attempted to escape.[17] On the anniversary of the construction of the Berlin Wall, about 50 would-be emigrants demonstrated in front of the Brandenburg Gate, chanting "We want to get out". As this crisis grew, East German authorities, in an effort to provide a more reliable vacation spot for their citizens, were forced to journey to Tirana for a discussion of the prospects of developing a tourist infrastructure in Albania that could accommodate groups of East German vacationers. The failure of these efforts eventually led not only to Honecker's political collapse but also to the collapse of the Wall that he helped construct in 1961.[18]

Fraud in the 1989 election

East German efforts to deal with the democratic spirit sweeping Eastern Europe in 1989 demonstrated that while the regime enjoyed greater institutional maturity than in the past, there were clear limits to the viability of the GDR as a state and that the GDR could not isolate itself from events taking place elsewhere in Eastern Europe. The elections in the spring of 1989 were a dramatic reminder of the continuing threats to the stability of the GDR. While authorities endeavoured to present the elections as a resounding endorsement of the regime, the reality appeared to be very different.

Independent observers reported that "no" votes in the elections were significantly higher than authorities had acknowledged, running from a low of 3% to a high of 20% at various polling stations. Election officials acknowledged no more than 2% to 3% "no" votes. In addition, a much higher than normal percentage of eligible voters evidently chose not to vote. While there are no reliable national figures, unofficial returns reveal a turnout that did not reach 90% or even 80% in some electoral districts. When

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17 Bild, August 8, 1989, p. 1

18 FBIS-EEU-89-155, August 14, 1989 p. 24 and The Washington *Times*, August 25, 1989, p. A9

independent observers were denied the right to monitor the election count in Leipzig, security forces arrested those who chose to protest openly against the violation of procedures. Opposition groups charged that election results throughout the nation were altered in the official government counts and called on elected candidates to refuse to accept their mandates until the electoral procedures could be independently investigated.[19]

In response to widespread charges of electoral fraud, 21 leading church figures issued an appeal for a new election law that would prevent future frauds. According to the group's statement, there was "large-scale and doubtlessly centrally ordered election fraud" in the May elections and when Honecker stresses that these "forged election results demonstrated the political-moral unity of our people", many East German citizens must ask "what kind of unity is this?" The authors of the appeal declared that without changes, East German society would face increasing "confrontation and polarization" that would further undermine the already weakened stability of the regime. By 1990, many East German officials acknowledged that the May elections had been rigged and that, as a result, there was no legitimate government in the GDR.[20] This electoral experience was hardly reassuring as the restructured SED faced the prospect of genuinely free elections. According to projections in the fall of 1989, a politically bankrupt but renamed SED could expect somewhere between a low of 15% of the vote to a high of 34%, according to an optimistic survey in Berliner Zeitung. With reunification accepted as inevitable, East German spokesmen were increasingly resigned to facing political obscurity in the new order of a greater Germany.[21]

Conclusions

Following Gorbachev's rise to prominence in the USSR, the German Democratic Republic under Erich Honecker's leadership increasingly found itself in opposition to the reforms associated with the new Soviet leadership. For a regime that was created as an expression of Soviet policy and little more, this might seem to have been an extremely awkward position. Yet, during his last decade, Honecker's SED assumed this position with an increasing confidence and Honecker himself won recognition as a leader in Eastern Europe, not simply a German-language spokesman for the Kremlin.

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19 FBIS-EEU-89-087, May 8, 1989, p. 20

20 *Die Welt*, August 2, 1989, p. 4 and Interview, GDR Embassy, Washington, DC, February 20, 1990

21 *Eastern Europe Newsletter*, Vol. 3, No. 22, November 6, 1989, p.2 and *Berliner Zeitung*, January 4, 1990, p. 6

Several observations are prompted by this development and the turbulent events of 1989. First, it was apparent that the SED had the confidence to resist Soviet initiatives. That confidence was at least in part the result of East German accomplishments. By 1989 — before its massive population loss and the economic losses associated with Krenz's opening of the Berlin Wall — the GDR could boast what was, by East European standards, a strong economy in spite of the existence of some shortcomings. As so many have noted, the East German economy was and still is the envy of most East Europeans. The SED's confidence was also a product of a new Soviet position regarding East Europe. In Gorbachev's view, the USSR's allies enjoyed not only the right but had an obligation to adopt policies most suited to their special circumstances, especially when those policies might enrich East European economies that can expect limited Soviet assistance. With the USSR increasingly occupied by its own domestic problems, it was clear that the East European leaders were, with some qualifications, largely being left to their own devices. This decision placed most of East Europe's ruling parties, including that of the GDR, in an awkward position since they lacked the legitimacy enjoyed by the Soviet Communist Party.

Second, necessity more than simple confidence in its own accomplishments prompted Honecker's SED to retain policies that were, in the context of the 1980s, fundamentally dogmatic. Of all the East European regimes, only the GDR has a frontier with another state that shares its language, elements of its culture and history, and offers its citizens an attractive alternative lifestyle. The flight of thousands East Germans in 1989 was a dramatic reminder of just how great the West German appeal remains for thousands, if not millions, of East Germans. The development of a reform program like that of Hungary, Honecker reasoned, would seriously undermine the raison d'être of the GDR by raising the obvious question of why there should be two Germanies if their social, political, and economic systems were similar. Widespread speculation about German reunification following Honecker's departure in October confirm the validity of the East German hardliners' concerns about the possible consequences of rapid political change.

Third, the GDR's growing alienation from so many of its allies over the issue of reforms, coupled with its allies' assistance to escaping East Germans, was a grim reminder of the continuing instability of the GDR. It is estimated that in the summer of 1989, at least 50,000 East Germans were able to flee the GDR by way of Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. This number continued to swell throughout the autumn and eventually disrupted the East German economy. The disruptive popular demonstrations in the wake of Gorbachev's visit in October, 1989 were another dramatic indication of the GDR's uneasy situation. It has long been taken for granted by both the SED and scholars of this system that a GDR apart from the Warsaw Pact would not be a viable international actor. The current crisis of East European

reforms tested that important assumption, first, by forcing the GDR into an anti-reformist sub-bloc consisting of itself, Czechoslovakia, and Romania and, second, by propelling the SED regime down an uncontrolled reformist route that will apparently end the existence of East Germany as a separate political entity.

In spite of revelations about his government's involvement in international drug trafficking and illegal arms sales, Erich Honecker must be remembered as the leader who advanced political and economic policies that ensured the GDR's consistent, stable political development while also solidifying East Germany's position as the "second German economic miracle."[22] At the same time, he oversaw an international trend toward diplomatic acceptance of this second German state not only in the capitals of Eastern Europe and the Third World, but throughout the powerful non-Communist Western nations. While the GDR may never have become truly important in the eyes of leading Western powers, it was accepted and recognized for its economic accomplishments and its rise from Soviet "puppet" to full partner in the Soviet alliance system. The key qualification in this Marxist-Leninist "success story" is that the GDR's position continued to be dependent on the full support of the USSR. By the GDR's 40th anniversary, it was clear to many among the SED political elite as well as much of the East German population that Honecker no longer enjoyed unqualified Soviet support. According to an account by a West German official, Gorbachev took advantage of unrest in the GDR to undermine Honecker and secretly manoeuvred within the SED leadership to propel Egon Krenz and Hans Modrow into positions from which they could oust Honecker.[23] Through the subsequent war of nerves, Gorbachev was able to engineer Honecker's removal and set the stage for creation of a new East German regime that would initiate sweeping domestic changes and, for as long as it endured, give enthusiastic support to the Soviet Union's reform model.

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22 *Die Welt*, January 27-28, 1990, p. 1

23 *The Washington Post*, November 11, 1989, p. Al