

THE COLLAPSE OF THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC
AS A CRISIS OF LEGITIMACY

by

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Approved: _____

Arthur Hanhardt

In the Fall of 1989 the government of East Germany experienced a legitimacy crisis. The ruling Socialist Unity Party (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands) SED took power forty years earlier not through popular revolution but through the workings of the Soviet occupation forces in the eastern part of Germany. The SED came to power without popular mandate and was unable to create popular support during its tenure. Instead, the SED relied on artificial sources of legitimacy, both internal and external. The mechanisms that the SED relied on stopped working in 1989 and without support from within the country, or the SED's benefactor the Soviet Union, the party fell from power.

January 1, 1955

The following is a copy of the letterhead memorandum
dated January 1, 1955, from the Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation,
Washington, D. C., to the Director, New York Office.
The memorandum is captioned "Matter of [redacted]".

APPROVED:

[redacted]

Arthur Hanhardt

AUTHOR'S NOTE

All quotes from *Der Spiegel*, as well as those from the books by Bahrmann and Links, Marlies Menge, Dietrich Staritz and Herman Weber are my own translation. I take responsibility for any errors committed in translating them.

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INTRODUCTION

The SED was not a legitimate government in the popular sense. The party relied on artificial sources of legitimacy to remain in power. Historically, the SED came to power not on its own merits, but because of Soviet efforts to place the party in power. The SED ruled without popular mandate, relying on the power of an informal social contract, internal coercion, satisfaction of consumer wants and implicit Soviet support.

In 1989 the SED suffered a legitimacy crisis. All mechanisms that the SED relied on to keep it in power stopped working. The work force was fleeing the country, the citizenry calling for reform and the Soviets withdrew their support. In addition to these factors, a declining economy forced the SED to break their end of the social contract with the East German people. When faced with this crisis no one in the SED or the opposition was able to present a workable alternative for the future of the GDR. This then led to the collapse of the GDR and unification with the Federal Republic of Germany.

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND

CREATION OF THE GDR

The roots of the East German legitimacy crisis can be seen in the founding of the GDR itself. A brief look at the history of the GDR shows that the SED had no historical claim to power and from the beginning had to resort to artificial means of attaining legitimacy. At every step of the way the Soviet Union worked with the German communists (first with the Communist Party of Germany, KPD, and then the SED) to set up a government that lacked popular support. This historical lack of popular legitimacy was in part responsible for the crisis that occurred in 1989.

ZONES OF OCCUPATION

The German Democratic Republic came into being not so much due to Soviet aspirations for a separate German state, but out of circumstance. Most important to this was the Potsdam Conference of July 1945. Here it was decided that Germany would be treated as a whole economically, but each of the Four Powers (U.S., France, Great Britain, Soviet Union) would be otherwise sovereign in its zone of occupation.

Each power was then free to transplant its own social and political system into its zone. Because of differences in ideology between East and West this fact proved to be very significant. Dietrich Staritz writes:

Both sides had, in their zones of occupation, forced or tolerated structural decisions that reduced very early on the chances of a uniform development of postwar Germany. (Staritz 1985:17)

To this effect the Soviets established eleven "Central Administrations" within their zone by the end of 1945. These administrations later became government ministries.

Sovereign in its zone, the occupying power could fill administration posts with people it trusted. In the Soviet Zone of Occupation (SBZ) this role was taken by the KPD. Members of the KPD had opposed the Nazis during the war and had some popular support. In addition to this they were the best organized and had been schooled in the Soviet Union.

No political group in the SBZ was as well equipped to assume power as was the KPD. Walter Ulbricht summed it up, saying:

'Our advantage consisted of the fact that we were well prepared. We had worked out all the details, including organization of the administrations down to questions of organization of cultural life.'
(quoted in Weber 1988:14)

The Soviets then worked to put the KPD into power. When a city magistrate was set up in Berlin, for example, eight of the sixteen posts were filled by KPD members (Weber 1988:16). This trend continued throughout the entire SBZ.

To allay allied fears of communist take over, the Soviets did give political posts to non-communists. They at least wanted the appearance of political pluralism.

Wolfgang Leonhard, of the "*Gruppe Ulbricht*", recalls:

'We were supposed to set up precinct administrations in Berlin and pick the proper anti-fascists to fill them...The communists weren't supposed to fill more than one third of the posts, so that when the Western Allies came to Berlin our administrations would be approved. It had to look democratic, but we had to have everything in our hands.'

(quoted in Weber 1988:15)

Under a veil of pluralism then, the Soviets, working with the communists, formed the basic structure of the SBZ; a structure quite different from and incompatible with the three Western zones.

PARTIES

In June of 1945 the Soviets allowed political parties to re-organize. In this respect the Soviets beat out the allies, which were rebuilding the system from the bottom up. The Soviet Military Administration in Germany (SMAD) allowed parties to form that had as their goals the:

destruction of the last remnants of fascism and the strengthening of the basis for democracy and civil freedoms in Germany and the development of the initiative and involvement of the masses in this direction. (Weber 1988:16-17)

Under this directive the SMAD licensed four parties. The Communist Party of Germany (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*), the Christian Democratic Union (*Christliche Demokratische Union*), the Social Democratic Party (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*), and the Liberal

Democratic Party of Germany (Liberaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands).

The parties did not stay independent for very long. In July 1945 the four parties united in the "United Front of Anti-fascist Democratic Parties." Again, with the help of the Soviets, the KPD assumed primacy within the Front.

THE SED

The largest threat to communist power in the SBZ was the other socialist party, the SPD. To get rid of this threat the KPD set out on a campaign to unite the SPD with the KPD, and in this manner gain control of it. SPD members who spoke out against this forced marriage were arrested or otherwise silenced by the SMAD.

Most of the SPD rank and file was against uniting with the KPD. A March 1946 vote in the three Western zones (the Soviets had not allowed the vote in the SBZ) showed 82% of the SPD membership voting against the merger, with almost a quarter voting against any kind of cooperation with the communists (Weber 1988:27). Despite this rejection in the West, an SPD party congress meeting in Berlin that April voted unanimously for the merger, to form the SED. The joining of SPD and KPD greatly strengthened the communists by eliminating their strongest competitor. The SED was now the largest party in the SBZ, with about 2 million members by 1948 (Staritz 1985:63).

PEOPLES' CONGRESS MOVEMENT

With the SPD out of the way the newly formed SED set out to consolidate its hold on power. A "Peoples' Congress" movement was initiated by the Front parties to gain an air of legitimacy through mass participation in the political process. The real goal of this "movement" was not political cooperation among the parties, but the creation of an SED-led mass movement (Staritz 1985:14). The "Peoples' Congress" movement was not allowed in the Western zones; another sign of the growing political divisions.

In October 1946 elections were held for the provincial parliaments of the SBZ. The SED garnered only 47.5% of the vote and in Greater Berlin, where the SPD was also allowed to run, only 19.8% (Weber 1988:10). Despite its lack of national mandate the SED set out to control the state apparatus. Four of the five provincial governors were SED members and in all five provinces the Ministers of Culture and Education were from the SED (Weber 1988:36). By 1948 44% of those involved in the administration of the SBZ were SED members (Staritz 1985:55). Thus even before the establishment of an East German state the SED was firmly in control of political life (through its leadership of the "Democratic Front") and controlled the bureaucracy as well.

With the elections for the Third Peoples' Congress, held on the 15th and 16th of May, 1949, the SED completed its lock on power. By emphasizing a "national emergency" (currency reform in the Western zones) as an excuse for

strict political unity, only a single list of candidates was drawn up. The SED received 25% of the candidates, the CDU and LDPD each 15%. Two new parties, the National Democratic Party of Germany (Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands) NDPD, and the German Farmers' Party (Deutsche Bauern Partei) DBP, received together 15%, Unions 10% and other "mass organizations" 20% (Staritz 1985:23). Because the SED effectively controlled the NPD and the DBP, in addition to the fact that most union members also belonged to the SED, the LDP and the CDU could do little with their 30%. They were blocked from power..

The voting itself was very simple. On the ballot was a simple statement: "I am for the unity of Germany and a just peace treaty. For this reason I vote for the following list of candidates for the Third German Peoples' Congress." There were two circles, one for "yes" and one for "no." Still only 66% voted yes, with over a third voting against the unified bloc (Staritz 1985:23-24). With this as their mandate, the SED set up the Congress.

THE GDR

The Congress selected an SED-led peoples' council as the ruling body and first met on 29 May 1949. In October the council proclaimed the German Democratic Republic and named itself the provisional government. The Congress was re-named the parliament, the highest organ of the state. The constitution was one the SED had been working on since 1946 and was based largely on the Weimar constitution.

The "Central Administrations" were turned into ministries, and powers previously held by the provinces were transferred to the new central government. For itself the SED reserved the ministries of Interior, Planning, Industry, Education and Justice (Staritz 1985:34). Out of the Interior Ministry, was created the Ministry for State Security (Stasi), which was designed to watch and control political activity. The Stasi was responsible to the politburo of the SED and not the government.

Under the SED the GDR ran on the principle of "Democratic Centralism." It:

required of all subordinate party bodies, those of the provinces (later districts), counties, cities, communities, ministries, administrations or work places to recognize as binding all orders from their immediate superior body; it bound every party member to strict party discipline, required of any possible minorities subordination to the majority and banned the formation of factions within the party that might want to present alternative political ideas. (Staritz 1985:53)

On the surface the GDR appeared to be a multi-party democracy. However, "Democratic Centralism" ruled out any true political discourse.

PURGES

To assure the loyalty of party membership a series of purges was carried out in early 1951. Every party member was required to appear before a board and prove his or her loyalty to the GDR and the Soviet Union. Those who could not had their party books taken from them. In this manner

the SED was able to remove 151,000 people from its ranks, with another 30,000 leaving on their own (Staritz 1985:62).

By mid-1951 party membership had dropped from about 2 million (1948) to about 1.2 million. But it was a different party. All questionable or passive members had been weeded out and what was left was a disciplined, loyal core.

At the same time, the SED cleaned house in the CDU and LDPD as well. Membership in both of these parties dropped dramatically. The SED was left as the dominant political force in the GDR. The other parties had been purged of all independent thinkers and the last remnants of social democracy had been removed from the SED.

LEGITIMACY

After looking at the establishment of the German Democratic Republic a look at the legitimacy of the government is needed.

First, the concept of legitimacy itself needs to be defined. Political legitimacy can be seen as the right to issue and enforce commands that cannot be countermanded, and a monopoly on the power to do so. There is another aspect to legitimacy as well. This second aspect has to do with the consent of the governed, and will be used as a criterion for judging the legitimacy of the SED. Popular legitimacy is based on an interactive relationship between state and people. This interaction, where citizens are able to influence governmental decisions, is what lends legitimacy to a regime. People obey a legitimate government because

they feel that the government has a right to rule, not out of fear. Coercion does not legitimate a government, but makes the populace obey out of fear of reprisal.

In the GDR, the SED ruled unopposed. SED members comprised only 12% of the population, yet the party controlled all government ministries, unions, youth organizations and the media, as well as the armed forces. The best career and educational opportunities were open first to SED members. The party was not accountable to the public will and was guaranteed power in the 1968 constitution. Did the SED constitute a legitimate government? For a time, yes. During the 1950's and 1960's the SED's promises of employment and housing held, and the party enjoyed some level of popular support. Economic problems however, made it impossible for the SED to honor its part of the bargain past the late 1970's. After this point popular support (and for the purposes of this paper, legitimacy) began to wane. When mechanisms designed to create artificial legitimacy (that is, legitimacy without consent) failed, the government collapsed.

The SED sought to legitimate itself with several different mechanisms. Internally, the party emphasized the history of communist activity in Germany, controlled the presentation of history itself, encouraged mass participation in the electoral process and promised satisfaction of consumer wants. Externally, the SED sought

legitimacy through the relationship between GDR and the Soviet Union and East German activity in the Warsaw Pact.

From the very outset, the SED was on shaky ground. After all, no popular communist revolution had swept them into power. Martin McCauley writes:

Since the SED had not come to power as a result of a successful socialist revolution but had been handed power by the victorious Red Army it thereby acquired little legitimacy in the eyes of the population. (McCauley in Lewis 1984:50)

In an effort to justify their rule, the SED emphasized the continuity of the German nation and the place of the SED as the nation's legitimate heir. Special importance was placed on the long history of a German workers' movement. GDR ideologue Kurt Hager queried in a speech:

'Is there a higher historical legitimation than the free decision of the working people...to create their own state?' (quoted in Lewis 1984:44)

What Hager failed to note was the fact that it was not the German workers who defeated the Nazis, but the Soviets. The German workers had not created their own state, but had it handed to them by the Soviet Union.

History was also used as a legitimating mechanism by the SED. The party could write history as it saw fit; and write history to show that the SED belonged in power. The presentation of history was not static, it could be rewritten to reflect changes in SED policy. In this way "when the present changes, the past changes as well" (McCauley in Lewis 1984:55). Whatever the SED chose to do

it could "cook up" a history to show the correctness and continuity of the new policy.

To make up for the lack of political accountability of the SED, the party encouraged mass participation in the political process. The East German electoral system was composed of some 200,000 deputies, 268 electoral commissions with about 2,800 members, and over 24,000 electoral groups with some 250,000 participants (Krisch 1985:39). All this in a country of 17 million people! This system amounted to participation without representation however, as the electorate could still only vote yes or no on a single list of candidates, all of whom were elected.

Without popular legitimacy (interaction between subject and state) the SED tried to legitimate itself. The SED leadership wrote itself into the 1968 Constitution as the leader of the "developed socialist state." This position was derived from the SED interpretation of Marx. Ideological purity was needed within the party to assure stability. A stable, unified government would then appear more legitimate to the people. SED ideological purity was assured through "Democratic Centralism" which prevented any factionalism.

Externally, the German Democratic Republic sought legitimation through its relationship with the Soviet Union and membership in the Warsaw Pact. The Soviet Union was the first country to recognize the GDR, followed by the other East European "peoples' democracies." Not until the early

1970's did the GDR receive recognition from the Western world.

The Soviet Union brought the GDR into being and conferred sovereignty on it. Erich Honecker was referring to this when he said:

'Friendship (with the Soviet Union) is not only the decisive foundation of our life but also in equal measure our vital necessity.' (quoted in Croan 1976:18)

Soviet support of the GDR was twofold. It protected the GDR from external threats by means of the Warsaw Pact and from internal threats through the 20 divisions it had stationed on East German soil.

The Soviet troops "serve to check domestic developments within East Germany by reminding the East German population of the potential costs...of any significant challenge to Soviet policy" (Stent in Terry 1984:47). The SED relied heavily on this deterrent and interpreted it also as a sign of Soviet support for the SED.

CHAPTER TWO

INTERNAL FACTORS

BREAKDOWN OF LEGITIMATING MECHANISMS

Without a popular base for power, the SED relied on artificial means of acquiring legitimacy. In the late 1980's these mechanisms began to break down. During the course of the fall of 1989 the SED experienced a legitimacy crisis, where all mechanisms failed and the peoples' passive support of the regime turned into open hostility. This crisis of legitimacy not only led to the SED's fall from power, but due to the inability of any other political force to fill the ensuing power vacuum, opened the way for unification with the Federal Republic.

One of the most important measures taken by the SED to assure passive support for the party was a form of social contract between SED and people. The people would forgo such things as political freedom and luxury goods in exchange for employment and educational opportunities, along with affordable food and housing. This plan worked for about thirty years, with the GDR having a high standard of living by Eastern Bloc standards. Economic problems starting in the late 1970's made it increasingly difficult for the SED to fulfill its part of the bargain.

ECONOMIC FAILURE

East Germany was losing its place in the global market. This was due largely to the decline in quality of most East German industrial products. The East German share of total

industrial exports to the OECD countries fell from 3.9% in 1973 to only 0.9% in 1986 (*Der Spiegel* 41/1989:27). The only way the country could maintain a balance of trade surplus would be to cut imports; which were reduced between 1981 and 1987 by about \$1.25 billion dollars (*Der Spiegel* 41/1989:27).

As the unhappiness rose, even workers, who had been quiet since the 1953 uprising, started to ask questions of their government. In 1988, for example, the entire shift of a coal-fired power plant sent an open letter to the government questioning the rosy picture portrayed in the SED daily paper *Neues Deutschland*. They noticed that stores were frequently out of such basics as meat, dairy products, fruits and vegetables, even as the media praised the successful completion of social and economic plans.

The workers went on to question the government's pricing policy. If, as the government claimed, new products were being produced with higher productivity than old ones, why were the prices going up, not down, the workers wanted to know. In the end they answered their own question by noting that the economic system did not reward increased worker productivity and fostered waste and inefficiency (*Der Spiegel* 51/1988:26-27). The government's efforts at buying the loyalty, or at least complacency, of the population were failing as the economy declined.

FAILURE OF SOCIALIZATION

The SED's cultural and educational policies were failing as well. The party had tried to construct a positive identification between the East German people and their state. An example of this policy is the SED-instituted secular confirmation, or *Jugendweihe*. It was designed to replace religious confirmation and evoke strong loyalty to party and state at a young age. But SED efforts failed. Nearly half a century after the founding of the East German state the SED still was unable to establish a strong relationship between the East German citizenry and their state.

The problem of identification could be seen more than ten years prior to the breakdown of SED legitimacy. To coincide with the thirtieth anniversary of the GDR, the West German news magazine *Der Spiegel* conducted an informal poll of East Germans. Of those polled 75% considered themselves German rather than East German. Furthermore, the data showed 50% of the people outright opposed to the SED regime, with only 20% backing the party (cited in Terry 1984:51).

To coincide with the official state celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the GDR, Baerbel Bohley and other members of the East German opposition presented their own retrospective, entitled "*Urkunde-Vierzig Jahre*." In it they documented the thoughts and feelings of alienation expressed by many East German citizens. The authors asked people what the anniversary meant to them.

To eighteen year old Matthias the celebration meant "nothing, because I've had nothing to do with it. I've thought to myself that nothing can be changed because the same people carry on the same old ideas" (*Der Spiegel* 41/1989:34).

When asked about conditions in the East German state forty-four year old Anna said:

'What bothers me most is that one accomplishes nothing at work, that a person only does what he is told to do from above. There's no responsibility at all. One goes to work and does what one is told; regardless if it's good or bad. You know that it's garbage, but you do it.' (*Der Spiegel* 41/1989:37)

Lastly twenty-five year old Michael was asked if he had any expectations left of the GDR. His response was:

"No, for myself I no longer have any. But the bars are full of people looking" (*Der Spiegel* 41/1989:37).

In her book, Ohne uns laeuft nichts mehr, West German author Marlies Menge documented many conversations she had with East Germans in 1989. Many of those she spoke with voiced feelings of alienation concerning the GDR. One man in particular had a list of twenty-four reasons he was ashamed to be a citizen of the GDR. Several of his reasons had to do with the "sell out" of the GDR to the West. He cited the luxury hotels for travelers with hard currency (closed to East Germans), the *Intershops* (stores with western goods to be bought with western currency) for East Germans with western money, and the export of high quality East German goods while the people themselves had to make do

with inferior products. The man also listed the hypocrisy of the East German media, which accused Hungary of trading in human lives, while East Germany had a long standing policy of selling its political prisoners to West Germany (Menge 1990:127).

EXODUS

Two things serve to illustrate the frustration felt by many in the GDR. The first is the flight of nearly 100,000 people from the country during the course of the Summer and Fall of 1989. Several thousand fled through Czechoslovakia and Poland, but the majority of those leaving went through Hungary.

Hungary was a popular vacation spot for East Germans, with about 1.5 million of them visiting every year. Here they could buy things unavailable or in short supply at home and mix with Germans from the Federal Republic. After Hungary made its decision to allow East Germans to cross into Austria without exit visas in September 1989, they started streaming out by the thousands. Most of them were young, skilled workers; exactly the people needed most to help the failing East German economy. East German author Stefan Heym called the exodus a "phenomenon that threatens to destroy the GDR" (*Der Spiegel* 33/1989:20).

The second sign of frustration with the government was the huge number of East German citizens applying to emigrate legally. Estimates ran as high as 1.5 million out of a population of 16.5 million people (Wilson-Smith 1989:35).

They felt that nothing could be changed in the GDR and the only hope for a better life was to renounce their citizenship and head West. The very old joke about Erich Honecker turning the light out as the last one to leave was threatening to come true.

SED UNWILLING TO CHANGE

Adding to popular frustration was the SED itself. The government under Honecker rejected popular calls for *perestroika* style reform, even though this had support among many in the population. The SED view was that reform was neither applicable nor necessary in the GDR. After election reforms were announced in the Soviet Union allowing more than one candidate to compete for a seat, the SED moved to censor news coming out of the Soviet Union. The SED went even further in 1988, banning the Soviet magazine, *Sputnik*, in the GDR.

East Germany continued on its path of orthodoxy. As one scholar noted:

East German communist ideology has always faithfully mirrored orthodox Soviet interpretations, sometimes to the point of seeming to carry them to uncalled-for lengths. (Croan 1976:45)

Except now the Soviets were adopting a more liberal stance. The SED was not. When protesters hit the streets with signs reading "Learning from the Soviet Union, means learning victory", this old slogan took on an entirely new meaning.

After forty years of absolute power the SED was out of touch. In 1988 West German politician Johannes Rau visited

Erich Honecker and asked him why the mood of the East German people was so "rotten." Honecker's reply:

'Mr. Rau, you are confused. The unity between the masses and the party was never so strong as today. The people stand behind the party.'

(*Der Spiegel* 40/1989:28)

Even as thousands were streaming out of the country and the protest movement was gaining strength every week, Chairman Honecker remained unaware. At his speech for the fortieth anniversary of the republic he proclaimed:

'The GDR celebrates its fortieth anniversary as a state with a functioning, effective socialist system that, with the human rights realized within it, will stand up to the tests of the 90's.'

(*Der Spiegel* 40/1989:29)

The refusal on the part of the SED to see the gravity of the situation made any "third way" impossible. The party had simply waited too long.

OPPOSITION IN THE GDR

In 1985 Roger Woods wrote:

It is argued that the majority of the East German population rejects the existing regime, and that the absence of larger-scale protest in the GDR is not a sign of social harmony but of political resignation. (Woods 1985:43)

As SED legitimating mechanisms broke down, this "resignation" was overcome.

This is not to say that there was no alternative political activity in the GDR prior to 1989. Before 1989 there was a peace movement in existence under the auspices of the Evangelical Church. The Church had a unique place in East German society. It alone had freedom of assembly,

along with access to the media and its own press. For these reasons the opposition came to be centered within the Church. Its history of "critical distance" from the regime lent it legitimacy that governmental organizations lacked.

Throughout the 1980's the peace movement continued under the wing of the Church. Peace conferences and special educational synods were held, drawing thousands of people from the entire country. Still the government turned a blind eye, calling those involved such as Pastor Rainer Eppelmann or artist Baerbel Bohley a "tiny group of individuals who represent nothing and nobody" (Woods 1985:42). As the movement evolved it began to address environmental and human rights concerns as well. In 1989, opposition groups took the step out from under the Church's wing.

FALL 1989

In response to the drama of people fleeing through Hungary and climbing embassy walls in Prague, weekly "Peace Services" were initiated in the *Nikolaikirche* of Leipzig and other East German cities. People who were attending these services had chosen to stay in the GDR and wanted to effect change from within. After conclusion of the services, those attending in Leipzig would then march around the inner city.

The number of people marching in Leipzig grew rapidly. On 16 October it was 120,000. A week later on the 23rd it was 300,000 people marching (Hanhardt 1990:14). The movement spread rapidly throughout the entire German

Democratic Republic. A list of demonstrations from 30 October shows how many people were taking to the streets in protest of continued SED rule. In Leipzig there were 200,000 people, in Halle 50,000, in Schwerin 40,000, in Karl-Marx-Stadt 20,000, in Poessneck 5,000, and lastly in Cottbus there were 2,000 people marching through the streets (Bahrmann and Links 1990:65-66). The movement peaked with the largest protest in East German history on 4 November with over 500,000 people demonstrating in the East German capital, Berlin.

The cry of the protest movement was "Wir sind das Volk" (We are the people). The SED claimed to rule in the name of the people, but the size of the demonstrations showed that many felt otherwise. The time for passive loyalty and complacency was gone. This large, vocal movement showed that the SED did not enjoy popular support, and that other means of attaining legitimacy were not working.

During the Fall, new political groups formed outside of the Church. At the fore of the protest movement was the group *Neues Forum*. Rolf Heinrich, a co-founder of *Neues Forum*, described its work as being under the level of political parties. The goal of *Neues Forum* was to open up a dialogue where all could participate and voice their thoughts on the remaking of the GDR (Bahrmann and Links 1990:56).

The SPD re-formed after a 43-year absence in October of 1989. It listed as its goals de-monopolization of power,

democratization of the state, separation of state and society, and the construction of an "ecologically oriented social democracy" (Bahrmann and Links 1990:11). Tying these and other newly formed groups together was the desire to remain in the GDR and to work toward a common future. The people involved had made a conscious decision to remain in the GDR and did not want unification.

This feeling was expressed by *Neues Forum* co-founder Baerbel Bohley in an October 1989 interview with *Der Spiegel*. When asked about the aims of *Neues Forum*, she replied:

'We want...to open up a dialog between people of all social strata.
We want the situation in the GDR to change: open borders, yes; freedom to travel, yes; but unification, no.' (*Der Spiegel* 40/1989:26-27)

She added that their goal was to provide a structure where all could meaningfully participate in the political process. This would be the cornerstone of a new legitimate government.

In a country known for its brutal retaliation against vocal protesters why was this movement allowed to grow so large? Essentially two things happened. First, Soviet President Gorbachev let it be known at the fortieth anniversary celebration that Soviet troops would not back the SED. Secondly, after NVA (National Peoples' Army) and Stasi troops backed down from a potential confrontation on 9 October, it was clear to the people that neither the Red Army nor their own security forces would move against them.

The fear was gone and the government powerless to stop the movement from gaining momentum.

SED: TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE

The SED, in a move to save its "leading role" as well as quiet the masses, sent Erich Honecker into an unplanned retirement on 18 October. He was replaced by the Central Committee Secretary for State Security, Egon Krenz. Krenz's record showed him to be not too much different from his predecessor.

As Party Secretary for State Security, Krenz had endorsed China's suppression of their democracy movement in June of 1989. He had also seen to it that four East Berlin youths were expelled from school for questioning the need for a military parade to commemorate the republic's birthday the previous year. Adding insult to injury, it was Egon Krenz who had validated the heavily contested election results of the May 1989 local elections (These fraudulent election results were one of the main reasons the people had taken to the streets in the first place!).

Speaking in Krenz's favor was the rumor that he had countermanded Honecker's order to use force on 9 October. Krenz's leadership was still viewed as illegitimate. Krenz's succession was seen as "politics as usual." After all, he had not been elected by anyone but the politburo of the SED.

The numbers show that few were impressed by the "shake up" in the SED hierarchy. The week after Krenz took power

on 18 October 1989, 300,000 people marched in Leipzig and the very next day over 1000 people left the country through Hungary (*Der Spiegel* 43/1989:23). Krenz's offers to talk did little to affect the masses:

The SED campaign for dialog has yet to bring one citizen from the streets. Exactly opposite: The number of demonstrators and marches is climbing despite all claims of government willingness to talk and openness. (*Der Spiegel* 44/1989:23)

The protestors wanted actions, not words. Despite SED offers to talk, nothing had yet to come about.

From the SED perspective Krenz could only remain in power if he brought the masses in off of the streets. Those demonstrating however, would only go home if they felt that their efforts had not been in vain. But what could Krenz do? His field of actions was limited by the fact that if he moved too hard and too fast against party authority, the party would remove him from power. As far as the masses were concerned, Krenz had only a little room to manoeuvre. One East German economist noted "that Krenz cannot even pledge to improve the supply of consumer goods. There is no material base for it" (*Der Spiegel* 43/1989:21).

In a last ditch effort to save party and power Egon Krenz opened the inter-German border and Berlin Wall on 9 November. This move did not have the desired effect. People were still demonstrating, and now a new element was added. By the end of November signs at demonstrations began reading "Wir sind ein Volk" (We are one people). The political landscape in the GDR had changed. It was filled

with numerous, small groups trying to reform the system, but no group had a clear program. *Neues Forum*, for example, could not decide if it wanted to be a party or remain in opposition. The only party with the apparatus to run the country was the SED, but with no support they would be unable to do so.

The first week of December saw the SED fighting no longer for its "leading role" but for political survival. Membership had dropped by one half over the course of the fall, declining from 2 million to about 1.15 million members (*Der Spiegel* 50/1989:25). The loyalty of the remaining members was questionable. A *Spiegel/ZDF* poll in East Germany showed 43% of SED members indicating that they would no longer vote SED (*Der Spiegel* 52/1989:72).^{note}

When the party met for its emergency conference in early December, Egon Krenz stepped down. The leading role of the SED was dropped from the constitution and the party was renamed the SED - Party of Democratic Socialism. Free elections were announced for the coming spring (1990). The elections were set at a 7 December *Runder Tisch* (Round Table) meeting between representatives of the SED, LDPD, CDU, SPD, *Neues Forum* and other opposition groups.

^{note} This poll needs to be viewed critically. A greater percentage of those polled were SED members than in the population as a whole (23% of those polled were party members as opposed to only 13% in the population). Also the research methods themselves need to be questioned. Regardless, the trend is still evident. The SED was losing support even among party members.

The SED-PDS no longer had absolute power. It now was part of a genuine coalition. Reform groups such as *Neues Forum* and *Demokratie Jetzt* enjoyed the popular support that the SED never was able to gain. Despite a breakdown of legitimating mechanisms, the party tried to hang on and lost all credibility. The *Spiegel* poll cited above showed over 90% of the people believing that the officials were corrupt (*Der Spiegel* 52/1989:72).

Lacking legitimacy, popular or artificial, the SED-PDS could no longer remain in power. After forty years of absolute power the people wanted nothing more to do with the party - under any name.

CHAPTER THREE

EXTERNAL FACTORS

During the late 1980's the GDR's external means of acquiring legitimacy began to break down as well. The SED relied on Soviet economic, political and military support as an external source of legitimacy. After Mikhail Gorbachev took power in 1985, Soviet policy toward the Eastern Bloc and the GDR changed. This change in Soviet foreign policy amounted to a removal of support, and hence legitimacy, from the SED.

SOVIET POLICY IN EASTERN EUROPE

After the end of the second World War, Stalin went about setting up a series of buffer states on the Soviet Union's western border. The aim was to seal the region off both politically and militarily from western influence. The Soviets worked with Eastern European communists to set up "peoples' democracies" loyal to the Soviet Union. It was clear from the outset that the Soviet Union saw the maintenance of this Bloc as vital to its national security. The territory had been paid for with over twenty million Soviet war dead and would be protected from outside as well as indigenous threats.

The Soviets' commitment to this could be seen in their interventions in 1953 in East Berlin, 1956 in Budapest and 1968 in Prague. The justification for such incursions was the concept of socialist internationalism, which after 1968 came to be known as the "Brezhnev Doctrine." Within the

Eastern Bloc, nations had "limited sovereignty." International socialism was placed above the nation. If developments in a country gave any indication that that country was adopting non-socialist reforms, Warsaw Pact military intervention was justified to bring them back into the fold.

The GDR had a special place in Eastern Europe. It served as a base for forward Soviet forces. The GDR had an important economic role as well. The Soviets were dependent on high quality, high technology East German goods they could not produce themselves.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SOVIET UNION

How reliant was the SED on this external source of legitimacy and support? The relationship between the Soviet Union and the GDR was crucial to the very survival of the GDR:

The GDR as a state could probably not survive without the USSR...Its relationship with the Soviet Union is its central relationship and its key source of stability is the maintenance of its position in the Soviet alliance system. (Stent in Terry 1984:34)

The GDR was an artificial creation, owing its existence to the Soviet Union. The SED held power without popular support and relied heavily on the USSR to keep it there.

The GDR was not only dependent on the Soviet Union politically, but economically as well. From the Soviet Union it received 89% of its oil, 100% of its natural gas, 66% of its coal and 80% of its sheet metal (Stent in Terry 1984:48). All of these vital imports were bought at low,

subsidized prices. If the GDR had had to pay fair market prices for these goods, the GDR would not have been able to survive as an economically viable state. It needed the cheap materials to function. Because of the fact that the SED tried to "buy" complacency from its populace, maintaining trade ties to its "bigger brother" was of the utmost importance. This again goes to show the vulnerability of the GDR to changes in the Soviet Union's Eastern European policy.

CHANGES...

In March 1985 Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union. With him came a radical departure from post-war Soviet policy. At the 27th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party held in Moscow in February of 1986, Gorbachev hinted at this by stating that "radical reform is necessary" (Dawisha 1988:163). By admitting to flaws in the Soviet system he not only opened the door for debate in the USSR, but throughout the entire Eastern Bloc.

One area where reform was needed was military spending. A long, expensive arms race with the United States combined with Soviet Warsaw Pact spending had taken a toll on the lagging Soviet economy. How large was the burden? In 1989 Gorbachev made public the Soviet defense budget. It accounted for about 16% of all domestic spending (Dean 1989:128). It was dragging down the entire Soviet economy. Already scarce resources were being deployed in military, not civilian sectors. About 40% of machine building and

metal working as well as 40% of all research and development funding in the Soviet Union was going for military purposes (Maddock 1987:382).

Soviet spending policies which gave higher priority to military funding than to civilian needs threatened to ruin the Soviet Union:

...the military priority system, which allowed the USSR to match the US military power...has constituted such a drain on overall economic performance as to undermine the economic base on which future Soviet power must depend. (Bova 1988:402)

The recognition of this fact brought about a shift in Soviet policy (or at least in Soviet rhetoric). This could be seen in Gorbachev's 1988 offer to unilaterally reduce the number of Soviet troops in Eastern Europe by 500,000.

In general the shift was toward diplomatic and away from military forms of conflict resolution. To this effect Soviet Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov stated:

'But in world today, it is possible to achieve security through diplomatic means. This makes it possible to cut military expenditure without any damage to the defense capability of the country.' (Dean 1989:128)

As one of the underlying reasons he noted that "shortages of consumer goods are causing legitimate public discontent" (Dean 1989:128). To rebuild their own country the Soviets needed the resources taken out of the military budget and applied to the production of consumer goods.

As President Gorbachev's tenure continued he stayed on his reformist path. Speaking in Prague in 1987 Gorbachev said:

'No one has the right to claim special status in the socialist world. We consider the independence of every party, its responsibility to the people of its own country, and its right to decide the questions of the country's development to be unconditional principles.' (Gati 1990:74)

and further in a 1987 Moscow speech:

'No one has the right to claim special status in the socialist world. We have become convinced of there being no 'model' of socialism to be emulated by everyone.' (Gati 1990:76)

The message being sent was not that the countries of Eastern Europe were being set free, but that the region's communist parties now had latitude to seek out their own paths to socialism.

In the Summer of 1989 President Gorbachev went even further. Speaking before the Council of Europe, he removed support from East European regimes by saying that change was inevitable and any interference (Eastern or Western) in a country's internal affairs would be "inadmissible" (Gati 1990:169). This statement was in effect a rejection of the "Brezhnev Doctrine." This time Soviet tanks would not insure the tenure of shaky communist governments - even if this meant that they fell from power.

REACTION FROM THE SED

The SED scoffed at Gorbachev's efforts at *perestroika* and *glasnost* and tried to insulate its people from reform movements. The East German view can be summed up by this

rhetorical question of SED ideologue Kurt Hager: "Just because one of our neighbors changes the wallpaper in his house, should we all follow his example?" (Gati 1990:91). While the SED leadership embraced the notion that the Soviets no longer had the "leading model" in the socialist world, they rejected the applicability of *perestroika* to the GDR. The East German view was that their own system provided a good model of socialist development. Unlike Gorbachev, Honecker did not recognize any problems in East Germany.

CONSEQUENCES

As part of the overall Soviet retrenchment, Eastern European regimes were left exposed to their own people. This applied directly to the German Democratic Republic. Two events illustrate this. The first was Gorbachev's silence over (and probable support of) Egon Krenz's move to prevent the use of force against East German demonstrators. The second was the fact that Gorbachev again did nothing when Krenz opened the Berlin Wall. Furthermore, when Gorbachev spoke at the fortieth anniversary of the GDR he praised not Honecker, but *perestroika*. Clearly, as the ultimate guarantor of East German sovereignty, the Soviet Union was not going to intervene to save Honecker or the SED's hold on power. The SED's final source of legitimacy was thus removed.

CONCLUSION

The SED came to power not by means of popular mandate, but with the help of the Soviets. Lacking popular legitimacy from the outset, the party tried to create loyalty to the newly created German Democratic Republic using artificial means, such as the *Jugendweihe*. In order to keep the populace complacent, a social contract between people and state was relied upon.

By 1989 it was clear that the SED's attempts to gain the loyalty and support of the populace had failed. Many were alienated from their state and economic difficulties forced the SED to break the social contract. Complacency turned into frustration and when given the chance to leave the country thousands did. East Germany's economy was slipping and the flight of so many workers over the Hungarian border threatened to make matters worse.

Compounding the SED's internal problems, was the Soviet retreat from Eastern Europe. With all internal legitimating mechanisms breaking down, the SED needed the Soviets to remain in power. Soviet President Gorbachev had denounced the "Brezhnev Doctrine" however and had spoken out against any foreign involvement in a nation's domestic affairs. This included Soviet involvement in East Germany's predicament.

What all of this amounted to was a complete loss of legitimacy for the SED. An illegitimate government needs artificial supports to keep it in place, and the SED was bankrupt. Without any internal or external support the SED could no longer remain in power. As the SED fell, no other force in the GDR was able to step in to take the party's place. Opposition groups had popular support, but no political program or apparatus. West German parties were then able to step into the political vacuum and clear the way for unification with the Federal Republic.

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