

Fall of the GDR

David Childs

history *hist'ər-i*, *n* an account of an event; a systematic account of the origin and progress of the world, a nation, an institution, a science, etc; the knowledge of past events; the academic discipline of understanding of past events; a course of events; a life-story; an eventful life, a past of more than common interest; a drama representing historical events. — *vt* to record (*shakesp*). — *n* **historian** (*his-tō'ri-an*) a writer of history (*usu* in the sense of an expert or an authority on).

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The Fall of the GDR

Germany's Road to Unity

David Childs

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2001 by Pearson Education Limited

Published 2014 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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ISBN 13: 978-0-582-31569-3 (pbk)

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book can be obtained from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Childs, David, 1933–

The fall of the GDR : Germany's road to unity / David Childs.

p. cm. — (Themes in modern German history series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-582-31568-9 (alk. paper) — ISBN 0-582-31569-7 (ppr : alk. paper)

1. Germany (East)—Politics and government—1989–1990. 2. Socialism—Germany (East) 3. Protest movements—Germany (East) 4. Opposition (Political science) 5. Germany—History—Unification, 1990. I. Title. II. Series.

DD289 .C45 2000

943'.10878—dc21

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List of abbreviations

AVL	<i>Aktionsbündnis Vereinigte Linke</i> [Action Alliance United Left]
BFD	<i>Bund Freier Demokraten</i> [League of Free Democrats]
CDU	<i>Christlich-Demokratische Union</i> [Christian Democratic Union, the name for the Christian Democrats in both parts of Germany]
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CSU	Christlich Soziale Union [Christian Social Union]
DA	<i>Demokratischer Aufbruch</i> [Democratic Awakening]
DBD	<i>Demokratische Bauernpartei Deutschlands</i> [Democratic Farmers/Peasants Party of Germany]
DFD	<i>Demokratischer Frauenbund Deutschlands</i> [Democratic Women's Federation of Germany]
DFP	<i>Deutsche Forumpartei</i> [German Forum Party]
DGB	<i>Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund</i> [German Trade Union Federation, the main West German trade union body]
DJ	<i>Demokratie Jetzt</i> [Democracy Now]
DSF	Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische FreundSchaft [Society for German Soviet Friendship]
DSU	<i>Deutsche Soziale Union</i> [German Social Union]
DTSB	Deutscher Turn- und Sportsbund [the official sports; body of the GDR]
FDGB	<i>Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund</i> [Free German Trade Union Federation, the GDR trade unions]
FDJ	<i>Freie Deutsche Jugend</i> [Free German Youth]
FDP	<i>Freie Demokratische Partei</i> [German Democratic Party]
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany
GDR	German Democratic Republic
GST	<i>Gesellschaft für Sport und Technik</i> [Society for Sports and Technology]
HVA	Hauptverwaltung Aufklärung [Main Administralian Intelligence, the foreign intelligence branch of the MfS]
IFM	<i>Initiative Frieden und Menschenrechte</i> [Initiative for Peace and Human Rights]
IM	<i>Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter</i> [unofficial collaborator, informer working for the MfS]
KGB	<i>Komitet gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti</i> [Committee for State Security of Soviet Union]
KPD	<i>Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands</i> [Communist Party of Germany]
LDPD	<i>Liberal-Demokratische Partei Deutschlands</i> [Liberal Democratic Party of Germany]
MfS	<i>Ministerium für Staatssicherheit</i> [Ministry for State Security]
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

NDPD	Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands [National Democratic Party of Germany]
NF	Neues Forum [New Forum]
NVA	Nationale Volksarmee [National People's Army, the GDR's armed forces]
PDS	Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus [Party of Democratic Socialism, successor to the SED]
SDP	Sozialdemokratische Partei [Social Democratic Party, initial name of this party in the GDR in 1989]
SED	Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands [Socialist Unity Party of Germany]
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands [Social Democratic Party of Germany]
Stasi	Short for Staatssicherheitsdienst [State Security Service, Operated by the MfS]
UFV	Unabhängiger Frauenverband [Independent Women's Association]
ZK	Zentralkomitee [Central Committee of the SED]

Preface

Just before starting my degree course at the London School of Economic and Political Science, and just after the crushing of the East German revolt of June 1953, I made one of my first trips to Berlin. It was for entirely personal reasons. On a previous occasion I met, at the World Youth Festival, the son of the Blumenthal-Barby family, who lived in Treptow, East Berlin. The kind and intelligent Blumenthal-Barby invited me back. The head of the family, a medical practitioner and member of the SED, had turned to Communism as a result of his experiences in the German Army medical corps in the 1914–18 war. He had suffered at the hands of the Nazis and lost his older son to them. He hoped the new Germany would be different from the old. During my 1953 visit he gave me a book to read. It was Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Over a few weeks hearing the eyewitness accounts of his family members and of other Berliners, I came to the conclusion that the German Democratic Republic was not very German and was certainly not democratic. Disillusioned though he was with Ulbricht's Reich, the doctor stayed in East Berlin and remained a Marxist idealist to the end of his life in the 1960s. I retained my interest in Berlin and Germany and was urged to keep up my contacts with the East by the SPD Member of the Bundestag and later Federal Ambassador to Yugoslavia, Peter Blachstein, with whom I became friends, after meeting him when I was a student in Hamburg. Blachstein introduced me to Luxemburg's critique of Lenin, and I remain grateful to him for that and much else.¹ Equally important for me was Wolfgang Leonhard's fascinating *Die Revolution Entlässt Ihre Kinder* (1955). Later, from the British Labour Party, the MPs Konni Zilliacus, Anthony Greenwood and Richard Crossman also urged me to study developments in 'the other Germany'.

With a few breaks and under a variety of different auspices, I visited the GDR on many occasions until its final demise in 1990. Despite the Wall, trips in the 1960s produced a somewhat more optimistic picture than in the 1950s. The SED appeared at last to be introducing economic reforms, and cultural policy was slightly more relaxed. This was of course in keeping with trends in the Soviet Union. When one visited the GDR on official visits the hosts were often victims of the Third Reich, like the woman who had been a child prisoner in Auschwitz, or the former *Kriegsmarine* NCO who deserted to the French resistance movement.² There was Professor Franz Loeser, son of a Rabbi, who had served as a sergeant in the British Royal Army Medical Corps.³ There was also Kurt Goldstein, who had survived the International Brigades, Auschwitz and Buchenwald, who became head of the radio station Voice of the GDR. Individuals like these were very often the public face of the GDR to the Western journalist, academic, politician or 'peace friend'. Among many others, I also encountered Walter Ulbricht and the British journalist John Peet,⁵ who was one of the few 'defectors' from West to East, and Margarete Wittkowsky, President of the State Bank, who had spent years of exile in Finchley. My first book on the GDR, called by the publisher simply *East Germany*,⁶ was the product of this period. Its positive reception in West

Germany, the USA, Britain and elsewhere encouraged me to remain wedded to GDR studies.

In 1978 I spent five weeks in Rostock, East Berlin, Jena and Weimar on a visit arranged by the British Council. It was both interesting and depressing. On arrival at Schönefeld airport a veteran Communist from the Foreign Ministry took me through customs and we were driven at speed to the *Hauptbahnhof*. My host gave me repeated warnings at the station to watch my baggage as it could easily be stolen. In the first-class compartment from Berlin to Rostock no one spoke. I was shocked by the very poor conditions I found at GDR universities. The student accommodation, the scarcity of writing materials, the overcrowding and the poor food were worse than expected. I, like many others, had believed that, to an extent, the Communists had sacrificed private consumption for public services. The trip convinced me that everything was equally bad: trains, schools, universities and hospitals. Far worse however, was the atmosphere of fear. Support for the regime appeared to be minimal. Even official hosts when entirely alone with you, and some appeared afraid of being alone with this strange person from Britain, expressed their disillusionment with the regime. On the other hand, one or two SED professors went out of their way to attack Britain. This period led to the publication of my highly successful *GDR: Moscow's German Ally* (1983, 1988) and my edited *Honecker's Germany* (1985). In the GDR I was placed in the category of 'imperialist ideologue'.⁷ Meanwhile Professor Loeser had sought political asylum in the USA.

During the 1980s I travelled to the GDR any number of times and found the situation changed little. I also attended conferences of the Aspen Institute (West Berlin, 1987, 1989), attended by top SED members, the *Gesellschaft für Deutschland Forschung* (West Berlin) and other bodies in the GDR, West Germany, Britain and the USA. I became convinced the end was not far off. The East Germans simply needed the green light from Moscow. In Bonn, on the other hand, the great majority, irrespective of political persuasion, accepted the division of Germany certainly for as far as they could see. It was regarded as almost obscene, or certainly out of touch or off-message, to mention German re-unification. My work of that period, *East Germany to the 1990s: Can It Resist Glasnost?* (1987), for the Economist Intelligence Unit, reflected these experiences. I did, however, manage to infiltrate the following message into that slim volume:

An event in Moscow, another severe winter, a sudden breakdown of supplies, an over reaction by the security police, an East German Chernobyl, a historical anniversary, any of these could provide the spark for strikes and/or demonstrations. They would be suppressed immediately but that might not prevent long-term consequences.⁸

During *Die Wende* I made many journeys to the GDR as I was writing the pamphlet *Germany on the Road to Unity* (1990) for the Economist Intelligence Unit. I attended the special conference of the SED-PDS in December 1989 and the CDU special conference. I was present at the last demonstration in 1989 in Leipzig. As the end of the GDR came in sight I attended a conference organised by the *Institut für Internationale Politik und Wirtschaft der DDR* (February 1990), at which I met Professor Christof Luft, and shook hands with West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher and Egon Bahner. Subsequently I observed the elections of March and December 1990. It was an exhilarating period and I was delighted with the results, that is, the restoration of German unity by peaceful and democratic means. I did feel sorry for those idealists who believed in what they were doing, however, including a few Gorbachev supporters who wanted the GDR to develop 'socialism with a human face'.

It was Richard Popplewell, then my colleague at Nottingham University, who suggested we do a book

on the GDR's Ministry for State Security (MfS or Stasi). In the course of the research for that book, *The Stasi: The East German Intelligence and Security Service* (1997), the idea for the present volume formed, and I interviewed many individuals with both volumes in mind. They are acknowledged below. The German Academic Exchange Service gave me some financial help on that occasion, for which I remain grateful. Although I had expected some Stasi interest in me, I was still shocked when I saw the documents which survived, including those indicating that the Stasi had its agents watching my activities in Britain. Of course, in the GDR itself you expected to be watched. Hotels where foreigners were quartered were usually bugged. In the modern hotels you were on video as well even when going to the bathroom! All letters were read routinely. Some East Germans who corresponded with Westerners always put in each letter at least one sentence praising the SED. One point often forgotten by those not involved in such research was the consideration one had to have for contacts and friends behind the Iron Curtain. You could leave and need not return. They could not. Occasionally, your phone call was received with 'You've got the wrong number.' The person you had called feared someone else could be listening. Occasionally, your friend, colleague or acquaintance did not turn up for a meeting. It was just not worth the risk! Occasionally, you rang someone you had spent a very pleasant evening with in East Berlin, just to say you had reached West Berlin safely. Your call was unexpected and you were dismayed to hear a Stasi man on the other end. All this did have some influence on what was written. For instance, especially in my early days I attempted to criticise the SED-regime by reference to its own Marxist-Leninist aims and its own publications. Some of us, including Blachstein, hoped the GDR would develop a 'third way'. Such naïve hopes were dashed by the time Honecker took over in 1971. I think my *Marx and the Marxists: An Outline of Practice and Theory* (1973) reflects this.

Another consideration was that many people found it difficult to believe that the Soviet bloc was as bad as it was in both material and political terms. You could easily be accused of presenting horror stories or Cold War propaganda! As one reviewer of my *East Germany to the 1990s* put it in the respected journal *International Affairs* (Chatham House), Childs 'sometimes allows his evident dislike of the Honecker regime to cloud his evaluation of the factors shaping contemporary East German politics'.⁹ I wonder what he thought a year later! I did not discover what Madeleine Albright and the CIA operatives thought about my message 'GDR kaputt' when I spoke in Washington, DC, in September 1986. When I put the same case in California in April 1989 I was met with a hostile response from a considerable minority of my largely academic audience.

In this volume, as in the past, I use the terms 'socialist', 'socialism', 'Communist', and so on, for convenience, simply as they were used by the SED and in the Western media. I do not, however, believe that the SED or Soviet regimes had much to do with pre-1914 German, or other West European, socialist movements, or even with the ideals and ideas of Marx and Engels, Bebel, Luxemburg or Mehring.

David Childs
Nottingham, July 2000

Notes

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Acknowledgements

André Andrich, *Neues Forum*, Dresden; Dr Sabine Bergmann-Pohl, MdB, formerly President of the Volkskammer; Dr Sc. med. Kay Blumenthal-Barby, Berlin/Göttingen; Dr Heinrich Bortfeldt, former *Akademie für Gesellschaftswissenschaften beim ZK der SED* ; Dr Manfred Braune, CDU, Leipzig; Ingrid Eberhard Brecht, MdB; Elfriede Brüning, writer, Berlin; Wolfgang Dehnel, MdB; Colonel Prof. Dr Helmut Eck, formerly of the *Hochschule des MfS*, Potsdam-Eiche; Colonel Klaus Eichner, formerly head of *Bereich 'C'* of Department IX of the HV A; Dr Helmut Ettinger, formerly diplomatie service of the GDR; PDS, Berlin; Joachim Fiegel, PDS, Bonn/Chemnitz; Bernt Förster, Leipzig University; Monika Friedrich, formerly of the *Gauck-Behörde*, Berlin; Dipl.-Psych. Svetla Friedrich, Leipzig; Prof. Dr Walter Friedrich, former Director of the *Institut für Jugendforschung*, Leipzig; Horst Giltner, MdB, formerly Minister of Transport of the GDR; Dr Wolfgang Gudenschwager, CDU, Berlin; Dr Karlheinz Guttmacher, MdB; Adolf Haidegger, CDU, *Bürgermeister*, Colditz; Hildegard Hannan, *Stadtmuseum*, Oranienburg; Dieter Herberg, FDJ, Leipzig; Prof. Dr Uwe-Jens Heuer, MdB; Matthias Hinkel, Leipzig; Prof. Dr Hartmut Jäckel, Freie Universität, Berlin; Dr Dietmar Keller, MdB, former Minister of Culture of the GDR; Egon Krenz, formerly General Secretary of the SED and Chairman of the Council of State of the GDR; Vera Krenn (Wollenberger) Lengsfeld, MdB; Dr Ekkehard Lieberran, PDS, Bonn; Roger Loewig, painter, Berlin; Heidemarie Lüth, MdB; Dr Michael Luther, MdB; Friedrich Magirius, *Stadtpräsident* Leipzig and *Superintendent der Nikolaikirche*, Leipzig; Lothar de Maizière, formerly Minister-President of the GDR; Captain Wilfried Mannewitz, formerly of the MfS; Roland May, SPD, Leipzig; Rudolf Meinl, MdB; Dr Hans Modrow, MdB, formerly Minister-President of the DDR; Uwe Müller, formerly SPD, Leipzig; Ingrid Hermann Pohler, MdB; Gerd Poppe, MdB; George Pumfrey, PDS, Bonn; Klaus Reichenbach, MdB, formerly Minister in the Office of the Minister-President of the GDR; Hans Jürgen Richter, MdL, SPD, Chemnitz; Colonel Dr Klaus Rosier, formerly head of Department XII of HV A; Christina Schenk, MdB; Dr Gerald Schmidt, CDU, Berlin; Richard Schröder, formerly Chairman of the SPD group in the Volkskammer; Dr Sigrid Semper, MdB; Werner H. Skowron, MdB; Dr Gerald Thalheim, MdB; Rolf Thieme, CDU, Dresden; Cenzi Troike-Loewig, Berlin; Dr Wolfgang Ullmann, MdB; Joachim Walther, writer, formerly *Gauck-Behörde*, Berlin; Konrad Weiss, MdB; Wolfgang Wiemer, SPD, Bonn; and many others who did not wish to be identified.

Chapter 1

The GDR in 1988 – a stable state?

Geriatrics lead the SED

As the military band goose-stepped its way past the East Berlin reviewing stand followed by other military units, and delegations of the Free German Youth and mass organisations, the East German leaders smiled confidently at their followers below. The date was 7 October 1988 and the occasion was the 39th anniversary of the founding of their state, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), in 1949. Most of them remembered that first celebration. Certainly Erich Honecker, General-Secretary of the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) and head of state, Willi Stoph, head of government, Kurt Hager, SED secretary responsible for ideology, and Erich Mielke, Minister for State Security, had been there in 1949 celebrating the new state amid the ruins of the old. They had grown old in the service of the GDR. Honecker was 76, Stoph 74, Hager 76 and Mielke already 81. The other 22 members and candidate members of the Politburo of the SED were nearly all as old. The man widely tipped to succeed Honecker, Egon Krenz, was regarded as a youngster at 51. The age factor did mar the image of the GDR. The leaders of the two countries most important for the GDR, the Soviet Union and the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany), Mikhail Gorbachev and Helmut Kohl, were 56 and 58 respectively. In practical terms, age mattered in that the SED leaders found it difficult to adapt to the changing situation. It mattered too in that they appeared determined to cling to power at all costs. Many citizens of the GDR could not see why their leaders should go on and on when they were classified as pensioners at 65 and forced to retire.

The SED leaders lived since 1960 in a forest settlement on the outskirts of Berlin known as Wandlitz. On 31 May 1960 they had decided that in future all full and candidate members of the Politburo who worked in Berlin should live there.¹ Started in the 1950s, it was justified on the grounds of security. The settlement was surrounded by a high wall and patrolled by members of the guards regiment Feliks Dzershinski of the Ministry for State Security (MfS). In it was a restaurant, a medical complex, a fitness centre and, naturally, a supermarket. Krenz later wrote that the conditions in the settlement were not as luxurious as many outsiders thought. Nevertheless, he conceded that many East Germans would have found the housing luxurious given the very bad conditions which still existed in the GDR.² As a result of the SED leaders living in Wandlitz, they were even more cut off from the people they claimed to represent than they would otherwise have been. Krenz later freely admitted this. Not only that, they were cut off from each other. If they were known to be socialising with each other, this could lead to suspicions that they were 'forming a faction', one of the greatest crimes in the Communist political world. For that reason they rarely visited each other socially.³ Only Honecker was allowed to have friends among his Politburo colleagues.

Who were the 'prisoners' of Wandlitz?

Erich Honecker was born in the Saar, the son of a coal miner, in 1912. He took up an apprenticeship as a roofer, but his interest was politics from childhood. He joined the German Communist Party (KPD) youth organisation in 1926 and the KPD in 1929. In 1930–31 he studied at the Lenin School in Moscow. After the Nazi seizure of power in 1933 he worked in the KPD underground. Arrested in 1935, he was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment in 1937. In 1945 he was charged with building up a youth movement which became the Free German Youth (FDJ) in 1946. He served as its Chairman until 1950. Honecker was rewarded for his suffering and loyalty by being elected to the Executive Committee of the SED in 1946. In 1950 he was elected candidate member of the Politburo, becoming a full member in 1951. Walter Ulbricht, SED chieftain, 1950–71, treated him almost as a son, but this did not stop Honecker seizing his chance to overthrow Ulbricht in 1971. He then attempted to secure his position by promoting his own men to the ruling Politburo. His wife, Margot, was his eyes and ears in the government as Minister for People's Education and the only woman minister. She also served as a member of the Central Committee (ZK), first as a candidate, 1950–63, and then as a full-member from 1963 to 1989. The couple met in the FDJ.

Honecker's colleagues in the Politburo, ranked according to the year they became full members of the body, were, in 1988, as follows.

Willi Stoph served as a Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers (deputy head of government) 1954–62, First Deputy Chairman, 1962–64, Chairman, 1964–73, Chairman of the Council of State, 1973–76, and then Chairman of the Council of Ministers again until 1989. He was born in Berlin in 1914 and completed his apprenticeship in the building trade. He joined the Communist youth movement in 1928 and the KPD itself in 1931. He served in the artillery in the war as an NCO. He turned again to the building industry and Communism after 1945 and was soon on his way up the ladder! In 1953 he was already a member of the Politburo. He proved flexible enough to be moved from building to military matters. He held office as the GDR's first Defence Minister, 1956–60, after helping to create disguised military units when he was Minister of Interior, 1952–55. He was given the GDR's highest military rank, *Armeegeneral* in 1959. In 1973 Honecker moved him to be Chairman of the Council of State, titular head of state. This was a setback. He recovered his position as Chairman of the Council of Ministers in 1976 after Honecker's nominee, Horst Sindermann, stepped down.

Born in the industrial town of Chemnitz in 1910, **Erich Mückenberger** grew up in a Social Democratic Party (SPD) milieu. He completed his apprenticeship as a machine-fitter and enrolled in the SPD youth movement in 1924. Three years later he joined the SPD itself and worked as a functionary of the Reichsbanner, the party's para-military wing. His anti-Nazi activities after 1933 brought him several months in Sachsenburg concentration camp in 1935 and a ten-month jail sentence in 1938. After service in the wartime Wehrmacht, he re-joined the SPD in 1945, supporting merger with the Communists the following year. He rose speedily through the ranks of the new SED, joining the ZK in 1950. In the same year he joined the Politburo as a candidate, becoming a full member in 1958. As ZK Secretary for Agriculture, 1953–60, he played a decisive part in the forced collectivisation of farming in the GDR. Various other positions followed, including chairmanship of the SED group in the Volkskammer, 1980–83.

Born 1909 in Berlin, **Alfred Neumann** had been active in the workers' sports movement. He had fl

to Moscow and took part in the Spanish Civil War. Interned by the French and handed over to the Gestapo, he was sentenced to a term of imprisonment in the same jail as Honecker at Brandenburg. He served briefly in a penal battalion before the war's end in 1945. He built his career in Berlin, holding office as deputy mayor in the crucial years 1951–53. Between 1953 and 1957 he was First Secretary of the SED Berlin organisation. He was a member of the ZK from 1954, joining the Politburo at the same time as a candidate member. He was elected to full membership in 1957. From the 1960s his main responsibilities were in the government, and for many years he was a First Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers.

Born in 1921, **Kurt Hager** was regarded as one of the most influential members of the Politburo. An old KPD member, he had spent the war years in the sanctuary of England. From 1952 he headed the department responsible for science and universities, having been appointed Professor of Philosophy at the Humboldt University, East Berlin, in 1949. His rise under Walter Ulbricht, SED leader until 1971, was swift. He was 'elected' to full membership of the ZK of the SED in 1954 after serving as a candidate from 1950. In 1955 he was appointed a Secretary of the ZK responsible for science, education and culture. After being promoted to candidate membership of the Politburo in 1959, he was 'elected' to full membership in 1963. He also headed the Politburo's ideological commission. Thus Hager wielded enormous power over every aspect of the GDR's cultural life. He could prevent writers being published, could arrange for good or hostile reviews to appear praising or denouncing works by particular writers, artists or directors. He could prevent artists or academics going abroad. He had final say over university appointments and much more. His main rival for power in these areas was General Erich Mielke, head of State Security.

Günter Mittag was Honecker's only friend in Wandlitz. Born in Stettin in 1926, he worked on the Reich railways before taking up full-time political work. He served as SED Secretary with responsibility for the economy, 1962–73 and 1976–89. He had been an economic reformer under Ulbricht in the 1960s but threw out his reforming zeal when he joined Honecker's inner circle in the 1970s. A candidate member of the Politburo from 1963, he became a full member in 1966. He was a sick man for many years and died in 1994.

Like Honecker, Hermann Axen (see below) and Neumann, **Horst Sindermann** had seen the inside of Nazi jails and, unlike Honecker, concentration camps. He spent six years in Waldheim prison and Sachsenhausen and Mauthausen concentration camps. Born in Dresden in 1915, he attended grammar school and was soon involved in Communist activities. He started his post-war career as editor of various Communist newspapers. He was a candidate member of the ZK in 1958, a full member after 1963, and a member of the Politburo from 1967. From 1976 he was President of the Volkskammer.

Born in Leipzig in 1916, **Hermann Axen** was another grammar school boy who joined the Communist youth movement and served a prison sentence for his political activities, 1934–37. He fled to France, and after being interned there in 1940 was handed over to the Gestapo. He was deported to Auschwitz and, as a Jew, was very lucky to survive. He knew Honecker as a co-founder of the FDJ and worked with him in this movement. However, he was elevated to the Politburo under Ulbricht, first as a candidate in 1963 and then as a full member from 1970. A Secretary of the ZK from 1966, he was responsible for the relations between the SED and other Communist parties.

Werner Krolkowski was born in Silesia in 1928. Although his father was a worker, he was trained as a white-collar administrator. He joined the SED in 1946. His big chance came in 1960 when he was

appointed First Secretary of the SED Dresden district organisation. Elected to the ZK in 1963, his elevation to the Politburo followed in 1971. Honecker gave him Mittag's job as ZK Secretary for the Economy in 1973, but in 1976 he was moved to the Council of Ministers as First Deputy Chairman.

Erich Mielke was born in Berlin into a working-class family in 1907. After education with a scholarship at the *Köllnisches Gymnasium*, Berlin, he took up an apprenticeship with a road haulage firm. He soon followed his parents into the KPD and was active in the para-military and sports organisations of the party. He was known as a strict vegetarian, non-smoker and total abstainer from alcohol. He fled to the Soviet Union in 1931 to avoid arrest for his part in the shooting of two policemen. He received training at the Comintern's military school and was sent to Spain, where he served as a lieutenant officer in the Communist secret police during the Civil War, 1936–39. For a time he was interned in France, but he was back in Berlin soon after the end of the war in 1945. He immediately took up security work and played a key role in building up the state security system of the Soviet Zone/GDR. After a variety of top security jobs, he was finally appointed Minister for State Security in November 1957. He reached the Politburo in 1971. He was given the GDR's highest military rank, *Armeegeneral* in 1980.

Born in 1927, **Harry Tisch**, like Stoph, served in the Wehrmacht. He joined the Communist Party in 1945 and made his way first in the trade union movement and then in the SED apparatus. Between 1950 and 1975 he headed the SED organisation in Rostock. He joined the Politburo in 1975 after being a candidate member, 1971–75. From 1975 he was Chairman of the GDR trade union federation, the FDGB.

Seen for some time as the white hope of SED reformers, **Werner Felfe** was born near Dresden in 1922, the son of a worker. He completed his apprenticeship in commerce. At the war's end he joined the KPD and FDJ. By 1946 he was working full-time for the SED. He switched to FDJ work, and, owing to his association with Honecker, climbed the ladder of that organisation. He was deputy head of the FDJ, 1954–57, serving as Honecker's deputy, 1954–55. His career then suffered a setback during the limited and abortive de-Stalinisation drive after the XX Congress of the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU). The FDJ was accused of 'sectarianism' and he was moved to a lesser post outside the youth movement. Felfe proved himself flexible and orthodox enough to work his passage to position of second secretary of the SED's Halle district organisation in 1968. Ulbricht was on the look-out for comrades not suspected of being in sympathy with the Prague Spring of that year. Honecker promoted him to first secretary in 1970. In 1973 he was elected candidate member of the Politburo and in 1976 a full member. He was given responsibility for agriculture in 1981. Under Felfe there was a certain relaxation of the tight collectivisation in agriculture. Peasant farmers were allowed a little more scope to sell the produce of their private plots. Allotment holders, hobby cultivators, were also encouraged in this direction. Felfe died in 1988, thus enhancing Krenz's claim as heir apparent.

Berlin-born (1928) **Joachim Herrmann** was a close associate of Honecker in his capacity as ZK Secretary, since 1978, for Agitation and Propaganda. This meant he had responsibility, subject to Honecker's veto, for the media. He served as editor-in-chief for the lifeless *Neues Deutschland* between 1971 and 1978, and before that, *Junge Welt*, the organ of the Free German Youth. A candidate member of the Politburo from 1973, Herrmann became a full member in 1976.

Horst Dohls, born in Plauen in 1925, completed his apprenticeship as a hairdresser in Plauen before being called up in the Wehrmacht. In 1946 he joined the SED and worked in the Wismut uranium mine, but by 1949 he had been appointed a full-time SED functionary in the mines. After a course at the CPSU

university in Moscow, he was moved to the brown coal industry. Elected to the ZK as a candidate in 1950, he was promoted to full membership in 1963 and to the Politburo in 1980.

Egon Krenz was born in Kolberg (now in Poland) in 1937. His mother was a working woman and he did not know his father, a tailor. It would be true to say that the SED became his father. He was a loyal child of the GDR and was rewarded for it. He made his career in the youth movement. Between 1954 and 1967 he studied at the university of the CPSU in Moscow. He was put in charge of the Young Pioneers in 1971, serving until 1974, and as Chairman of the FDJ until 1983. From 1983 he was a member of the Politburo with responsibility for security and youth. He also a member of the Council of State in 1981–84, and a Deputy Chairman, 1984–89. For years Krenz was regarded as heir apparent to Honecker.

Werner Jarowinsky had a remarkable childhood in that he was born in Leningrad (1927). His father, a worker, repatriated the family to Germany in the 1930s. After training as a sales representative, Jarowinsky served in the Wehrmacht, 1943–45. He joined the KPD/SED in 1945 and went on to study economics at the Humboldt University in Berlin. After working as a university lecturer and gaining his doctorate, he went on to work at the Ministry of Trade and Supplies. Elected to the ZK in 1963, he joined the Politburo in 1984.

Günther Kleiber was one of the post-war FDJ generation. He was born in 1931 in Eula, the son of a worker. He worked as an electrician in the brown coal industry before taking a mature student access course in Dresden. From there he went on to study electrotechnology in Rostock and Dresden. After working as secretary of the SED organisation at the Technical University in Dresden, 1962–63, he joined the state apparatus. Elected to the ZK and candidate membership of the Politburo in 1967, he became a full member in 1984. He served as a Deputy Chairman of the council of Ministers, 1971–89.

Günter Schabowski, born in Anklam in 1929, had risen at speed through the SED's ranks, which caused some to have their doubts about him. He had trained as a journalist working for *Tribüne*, the trade union paper, in the 1950s. He joined the SED in 1952 and worked on *Neues Deutschland*, serving as its editor-in-chief, 1975–84. In that capacity he promoted the personality cult around Honecker. Honecker promoted him to candidate membership of the Politburo in 1981 and then full membership in 1984. He was a ZK Secretary from 1986 and head of the Berlin SED organisation from 1985. He was regarded as a Honecker loyalist.

Werner Eberlein was born in West Berlin in 1919, the son of a KPD functionary. In 1934 his family emigrated to the Soviet Union, where his father was subsequently imprisoned under Stalin. In Siberia he trained as an electrician. On his return to Germany in 1948 he was immediately given work by the SED. After completion of studies at the CPSU university in 1954, he worked as a journalist for *Neues Deutschland*. Various SED posts followed, including that of First Secretary in Magdeburg, 1983–89. In 1981 he reached the ZK and in 1986 the Politburo.

Heinz Keßler took over in 1985 as Minister for Defence on the death of Heinz Hoffmann. Born into a Communist working-class family in Lauban, Silesia, in 1920, he served his apprenticeship as a metal turner before being called up in the Wehrmacht in 1940. He defected to the Soviets in 1941 and was a co-founder of the National Committee for a Free Germany. After the war he rose rapidly in the military wing of the People's Police. In 1950 he was put in charge of building up an airforce, with the rank of major general. After training at the Soviet Air Force academy, 1955–56, he was appointed Deputy Minister for Defence in 1956. Other senior military posts followed. Although he was elected to the SED

executive in 1946, which became the Central Committee, he did not reach the Politburo until 1986.

Only a member of the Politburo from 1986 to 1989, **Hans-Joachim Böhme** was born in Bernburg (Saale) in 1929. After a working-class childhood, he joined the SPD in 1945 and went into the SED a year later. He made his way via the FDJ and the SED, becoming the First Secretary of the SED Halle in 1984. In that year he was elected to the Central Committee.

Siegfried Lorenz was born in Annaberg in 1930 and took a similar path to Kleiber, taking his accelerated course at Leipzig University. He climbed the FDJ ladder, serving on Central Council, 1961–76. He was head of the Youth Department of the ZK, 1967–76. A candidate member of the ZK from 1967, full membership was achieved in 1971. Full membership of the Politburo came in 1986 after only one year as a candidate. Lorenz was First Secretary of the SED Karl-Marx-Stadt district, 1976–89.

[Lenin: ‘not deceived by ... slogans like freedom’](#)

It is difficult to be certain to what extent the Politburo members believed their own propaganda. They were not great intellects and made no contribution to furthering the theory of socialism. It is doubtful that many of them had ever read much of the literature of Marxism. Of the Soviet Union, most of them knew little. Even those of the pre-war generation, like Honecker and Hager, probably only read Lenin and Stalin as interpreted by the CPSU. Lenin was presented not only as the great revolutionary leader but also as a great theorist of Marxist science. Lenin, as well as Stalin, offered them the ammunition to justify their dictatorship and even the dictatorship of one person.

The Soviet Socialist Democracy is in no way inconsistent with the rule and dictatorship of one person: that the will of a class is at times best realised by a dictator who sometimes will accomplish more by himself and is frequently more needed ...

And,

we are not going to let ourselves be deceived by such high-sounding slogans like freedom, equality, and the will of the majority, and those who call themselves democrats ...⁴

Lenin had proved he could win against the odds in 1917 and in the civil war, and Stalin proved he could do the same by smashing the Nazi Wehrmacht between 1941 and 1945. This must have made an enormous impression on the veterans of the inter-war period and on the generation which followed. Many of the difficulties and much of the unpleasantness in the Soviet Zone could be explained away by the historical backwardness of Russia, the losses of the Second World War, and the corruption and confusion wrought by Nazism. In private older communists could admit that ‘mistakes had been made’ but such mistakes had to be seen against the broader historical picture. They followed Lenin in believing

If we are not anarchists, we must admit that the state, i.e., **coercion**, is necessary for the transition from capitalism to socialism. The form of coercion is determined by the degree of development of the given revolutionary class, and also by special circumstances, such as for example, the heritage of a long and reactionary war and the forms of resistance put up by the bourgeoisie or the petty bourgeoisie.

Their own individual survival and success was enough proof for them that Lenin was right and that they had history on their side! The victory of Mao in China, decolonisation, Soviet space successes in the 1950s

and 1960s and the victory of Ho Chi Minh's forces in the Vietnam War all pointed in the same direction. The international recognition of the GDR in the 1970s had been forced on the Imperialist Camp and was a further proof of the correctness of the policies of the CPSU and the SED. The early mastery of nuclear weaponry by the Soviet Union had prevented a third world war and saved Castro's Cuba. Waverers and doubters wanted to leave the GDR and the security of the Socialist Camp to go to West Germany for bananas, Volkswagens and holidays in Spain. These opportunists and defeatists were just the same sort of people who had been bribed by Hitler's 'good times' in the 1930s, and look where that led – Warsaw, Coventry and Auschwitz, followed by Stalingrad, Hamburg, Dresden and the fall of Berlin! By holding firm, victory would go ultimately to the peace forces led by the Soviet Union.

[The Politburo](#)

Of the 22 full members of the Politburo in 1988, only 9 were born in what was or was to become the GDR, another 4 were Berliners, 4 were from the lost territories beyond the Oder-Neisse line, 2 were from West Germany, and 1 was born in Russia. Only two appeared to be from middle-class backgrounds. Of the 14 who were old enough, 6 had been imprisoned by the Nazis and 6 had served in the Wehrmacht while 3 had served in the Spanish Civil War. Neumann was in all three groups. They were men of limited experience and limited intellectual horizons. By 1988, 14 of the 22 had reached the Politburo under Honecker. Honecker looked impregnable. Like his predecessors, the real threat to him came from Moscow.

The Politburo met once a week, but, its deliberations were often of a purely formal kind. Various members would give reports on their particular areas and would not expect colleagues to interfere. Honecker often did his main wheeling and dealing either before or after the meetings with Mittag and Mielke and Herrmann. The General Secretary drew up the agenda and usually no one sought to change it. Reports were circulated during the week, like those of Mielke on the security situation, but this did not mean they were discussed. Honecker was very powerful, but he could not escape the fact that several of his colleagues had direct links with their counterparts in Moscow. This was true of Mielke with the KGB, Axen with the CPSU's foreign relations department, Stoph with the Soviet state apparatus (and defence contacts), and Kessler with the Soviet defence establishment.

The Central Committee (ZK) officially elected the Politburo, but the ZK was much like the Volkskammer (to which most Politburo members belonged) in that it had formal power but not real power. Its members rarely met outside its official deliberations unless it was in the official meetings of a ministry or of other bodies of which they were members. The real power was exercised by Honecker and before him by Walter Ulbricht, through the

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