ERICH HONECKER: THE MAN AND HIS ERA

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Introduction: Erich Honecker has stepped down from the post of SED General Secretary. He will be succeeded by Egon Krenz, formerly CC Secretary for security affairs. With Honecker's removal an era in East Germany's history comes to an end.

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As party and state leader of the German Democratic Republic from 1971 to 1989, Erich Honecker was responsible for shaping the GDR as we know it today. With the help of the Berlin Wall, which was constructed in 1961, Honecker set the GDR on a political and economic course that was to ensure stable political development and that allowed the GDR to become one of the few relative economic success stories in the Eastern bloc. His foreign policy effected the transition of the GDR from an international outcast to a respected and sovereign member of the community of states. Five years ago, an assessment of the Honecker era would have rested with those facts and would have been favorable. In the meantime, very little has changed in the GDR, whereas the reforms undertaken by the Soviet Union and a number of East European states have dramatically altered the political environment in which the GDR has had to operate. As a result, Honecker's East Germany has come to be seen in a different light.

Honecker's Background. Erich Honecker was born on 25 August 1912 in Neunkirchen in the Saarland, one of six children in a miner's family. He was raised in neighboring Wiebelskirchen and as a boy was a drummer in the local communist marching band. He was trained as a roofer, but his true occupation quickly became politics: at the age of 17 he joined the German Communist Party (KPD); and one year later, in 1930, he was sent to Moscow for a year of schooling. After his return to Germany he headed local chapters of the KPD's youth organization, first in the Saarland and then, following Hitler's ascent to power and the banning of the KPD, in the Ruhrgebiet,
Hessen, Wuerttemberg, Baden, and Berlin. In 1935 Honecker was arrested and held by the Gestapo for two years, after which he was sentenced to ten years imprisonment, which he spent in Brandenburg.

Soon after the end of the war Honecker was made head of the youth organization of the newly founded Socialist Unity Party (SED), a post that he was to hold until 1955. In 1950 he became a candidate member of the Politburo. Following another year of schooling in Moscow, he achieved full Politburo membership in 1958 and became responsible for security affairs in the CC Secretariat. In this position SED Secretary-General Walter Ulbricht entrusted Honecker with supervising the construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961. Ulbricht also designated Honecker as his successor. In the spring of 1971 Honecker did, indeed, take over the reigns of power from Ulbricht; but only after Ulbricht had been forced to retire following friction with the Soviet leadership.

The Honecker Era: Domestic Policies. The new East German leader immediately began to revise the policies of his predecessor. Although motivated primarily by internal weaknesses, these changes were also prompted by external factors. The Ostpolitik of the West German government headed by Willy Brandt and the accompanying opening of diplomatic relations with Bonn had meant the end of the GDR's self-imposed isolation. No longer could the "imperialist" threat be used effectively to muster loyalty at home. Moreover, a phase of comparison and competition between the two German states had set in, in which domestic, and above all economic, performance would constitute the main criterion. The result was that the Honecker regime was forced to search for a new basis of communist rule or a new source of legitimacy for the GDR.

Much of East German domestic policy under Honecker in the 1970s can be seen as an attempt to construct some form of consensus between the regime and society. The primary pillar of this new approach was the redefined "main task" of the party. Starting in 1971 the main task became the raising of the standard of living. Economic planning reflected a greater emphasis on consumer goods; and stable, low prices, increases in wages and pensions, an extensive housing program, and expanded welfare and social policies combined to create a form of consumer communism. In return for a steady increase in the living standard, however, East Germans were expected to accept even stricter controls on contacts with Westerners as well as other explicit limits on their political behavior and travel.

This was complemented by attempts to co-opt or at least neutralize sources of potential dissent and opposition to the regime, such as critical writers and the Churches. An early attempt to reach a new modus vivendi in the cultural and literary realm failed, however; prolonged disputes with critics of the authorities led to the westward migration of many
talented East German intellectuals. In the case of the Churches, particularly the Federation of Evangelical Churches in the GDR, Honecker was more successful in establishing a limited rapprochement that has since become a hallmark of the Honecker era. Finally, the Honecker regime initiated an extensive rewriting of German history, in order to have it serve as a source of legitimacy for the existence of a separate "socialist" German nation in the GDR. The regime's historians launched an ambitious program of reworking Germany's historical traditions, rehabilitating previously reviled figures such as Frederick the Great and Bismarck, and turning others, such as Martin Luther, into "the greatest sons of the German people."

From Satellite to Junior Partner? In foreign affairs the Honecker era witnessed the emergence of the GDR from a pariah state to a recognized member of the international community. Honecker's policies in this regard reached their climax with his visit to Bonn in September 1987. He also oversaw the more gradual transformation of the GDR from perhaps Moscow's most loyal ally in the Warsaw Pact and a stubborn defender of Soviet bloc unity to an assertive defendant of its own national interests. For years, however, Honecker avoided the gestures of defiance and autonomy that had characterized Ulbricht's final years; instead he preferred to enhance the GDR's voice by portraying it as the Soviet leadership's most important and loyal ally in the bloc.

Starting with three East-West crises—the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the rise of Solidarity in Poland, and the dispute within NATO over intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF)—the context in which Honecker's regime had to pursue its foreign and domestic policies began to change dramatically. Despite its initial trepidation, it had learnt to appreciate the political and economic benefits that could be gleaned from its special relationship with the Federal Republic of Germany; and it subsequently viewed with considerable unease the prospect of a deterioration in relations with the West, specifically with the FRG. This became particularly clear in the case of the dispute over the INF issue, when the East German authorities, having earlier linked the future of inter-German relations with the FRG's position on the stationing of NATO missiles in Europe, now faced the prospect of having to bear the costs of any retaliatory measures imposed by Moscow.

This background set the stage for the well-publicized dispute between the USSR and the GDR over how to respond to the deployment of missiles in Western Europe; these differences culminated in the postponement of Honecker's planned visit to the FRG in late 1984. That Honecker was ready to defend his policies of "political dialogue" and "damage limitation" despite Soviet dissatisfaction demonstrated the extent to which the relationship between the USSR and the GDR had changed. While it must undoubtedly have been against Honecker's instincts to challenge the Soviet Union on important security issues, he
appeared thoroughly convinced that his approach to the West best served the GDR's interests as well as those of the Warsaw Pact. The GDR wanted to be viewed as a junior partner in the Eastern alliance and have its own voice taken into account on matters affecting its vital interests.

Honecker and Gorbachev. Honecker's policies toward the West were eventually vindicated by the foreign policy pursued by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Soon, however, another potential source of dispute with the USSR was presented by the new Soviet leadership's economic and political reform policies. In an effort to protect its own orthodox economic and political structures from reform, the GDR became an even more staunch defender of what it perceived to be its national interests. At the same time, Honecker's unrelenting opposition to domestic reforms gradually undermined the grudging respect he and the GDR had painstakingly begun to acquire at home and in the West.

The SED under Honecker had initially greeted Gorbachev's advent to power with something akin to relief; first of all, it marked the end of the drift in policy making that had marked the succession years in Moscow; secondly, an economically more efficient Soviet Union could only improve the image of socialism abroad. Soon after Gorbachev had expanded his program to include radical economic reform and political democratization, however, East German reservations began to emerge and then to turn into concrete objections. Reform as it was being propagated in the Soviet Union and elsewhere in Eastern Europe threatened to undermine much of what Honecker himself had spent his tenure as Secretary-General building up. To begin criticizing and dismantling the economic policies pursued since the early 1970s and with which he was closely identified would amount to undermining his regime's legitimacy.

Yet, Honecker's aversion to rapid change and reform was not merely a question just of his or his generation's political power; the political power of the communist party as a whole and the existence of the GDR were at stake. The SED's ideologists began to argue that because of the GDR's strategic geopolitical position, it could not afford to risk the economic crises or political unrest that might result from reform. Behind this argument lurked the more concrete fear that the communist system, or more precisely the GDR as a separate German socialist state, might not even survive the reform and democratization of the economic and political system. Honecker's resistance to reform was, in fact, little more than an implicit acknowledgment that the GDR's inherent weakness, its lack of a national identity, still had to be overcome.

An Assessment. Despite the GDR's economic performance, its extensive social welfare programs, and its increased weight in the international arena, Honecker failed to attain that modicum of legitimacy for and public acceptance of the East German regime that might have provided the basis of an East German
national identity and enabled him to witness the dismantling of the most vivid symbol of this insecurity, the Berlin Wall. Nowhere was this more evident than in the extraordinary exodus to the West of at least 50,000 East Germans via Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland during the summer and fall of 1989.

Honecker also failed in convincing his countrymen that his system was in no need of reform. The last days of his regime witnessed a crisis of unprecedented proportions as hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets demanding freedom and reform. In the end Honecker's compatriots in the ruling echelons of power decided that the man who had once managed to establish a tenuous credibility for the SED regime both at home and abroad was now too much of a liability. A new approach was needed in the communist party's enduring struggle to create and sustain legitimacy for the existence of a second German state.

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