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HONECKER IN GREECE

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*Summary: On 12 October 1985 SED Secretary General Erich Honecker completed a three-day visit to Greece. Following his visit to Rome last spring, this is his second visit to a NATO country and a further indication of the way in which East Berlin is continuing to expand its contacts with the West.*

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A "Second Wave" of Recognition? It was slightly more than a decade ago that East Berlin first made its breakthrough onto the international scene with an initial wave of diplomatic recognition. For years considered a pariah state in the West and, to quote the title of a popular West German book in the early 1960s, "a state that ought not to be," the GDR first achieved general recognition in the early 1970s following the signing of the so-called Eastern treaties with Bonn. The dropping by the FRG of its long-standing policy of nonrecognition of the GDR led to the establishment of official relations between East Berlin and almost all leading Western countries. Despite continuous efforts by the GDR to cultivate relations with a number of select countries in the West, East Berlin's ties with most West European countries, especially those belonging to NATO, remained minimal and often of marginal importance in practical terms.

In the past two or three years East Berlin has, however, significantly increased its diplomatic presence in what used to be considered the very hostile territory of Western Europe, including some of Bonn's key political allies. This expansion of diplomatic contacts has already led some observers to refer to this trend as the "second wave" of East Berlin's diplomatic recognition.<sup>1</sup> Since early 1984 a steady stream of Western officials, including foreign ministers and even heads of government, have traveled to East Berlin. Starting with former

Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, the list of Western officials visiting East Berlin last year included former US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Canadian Affairs Richard Burt, Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palme, Italian Premier Bettino Craxi, and Greek Prime Minister Andreas Papandreu. Although the planned crowning of East Berlin's diplomatic conquests--Honecker's visit to the FRG--was "postponed" in the fall of 1984, the list of prominent Western visitors to East Berlin has continued in 1985 with British Foreign Secretary Sir Geoffrey Howe and French Prime Minister Laurent Fabius.

Honecker's recent visit to Athens should be viewed against this background of increasing Western interest in the GDR. Following Honecker's trip to Rome in late April 1985, his recent visit to Greece is his second to a NATO country. While the practical results of the visit were modest, it was a classic example of East Berlin's attempt to cultivate and project a new image for itself in the West as a "European" and "peace-loving" state and an important partner in future East-West relations.

Bilateral and Multilateral Issues. Bilateral issues between East Berlin and Athens were, of course, high on the agenda for the visit. Honecker and Greek Prime Minister Papandreu signed a 10-year agreement on economic, industrial, and scientific cooperation as well as a cultural accord for the period 1986-1988. Their respective Foreign Ministers also signed a joint statement agreeing on the need for more regular diplomatic contacts and greater cooperation in other areas, including education, health, and sports.

The significance of these agreements, particularly the economic ones, will depend largely on their implementation. East German-Greek trade has been quite modest, although the GDR has been actively involved for years in several important Greek industries, such as the electricity and telephone industries. The lack of a balance in trade between the two countries is, however, a problem. Greece's trade balance with Eastern Europe in general has deteriorated since it joined the EEC in 1981; in the case of the GDR, last year Athens had a trade deficit with it of some DM 260,000,000 and its total trade deficit with the GDR since 1981 is some \$250,000,000. To help bridge this gap, the new economic accord sets as a target a minimum of \$40,000,000 of Greek exports to the GDR, as opposed to only \$19,000,000 in 1984.

In many ways more interesting, however, was the political rhetoric that surrounded the visit and the apparent convergence of views between the two states on several key arms control issues. Papandreu has been known for some time as a strong advocate of the "denuclearization" of the Balkans and of regional arms control agreements elsewhere in Europe. East Berlin has also been pushing for nuclear-free and chemical-weapons-free zones in Central Europe, and it was certainly no accident that the current Greek government was one

of the first Western supporters of the joint SPD-SED proposal on the creation of a chemical-weapons-free-zone.

In an interview with the East German news agency ADN, Papandreou went so far as to describe the creation of regional denuclearized zones from the Baltic to the Balkans as the "main point of interest" in bilateral Greek-East German relations, and expressed his hope that such schemes might serve as a catalyst for the denuclearization of the whole of Europe.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, Honecker also announced his country's full support for Papandreou's denuclearization schemes, his appeals for the removal of the NATO missiles currently being stationed in Western Europe, and his stand on the prevention of the "militarization" of space, all three propositions being part of the Warsaw Pact peace offensive. The same issues were covered in the joint communique released after the visit.<sup>3</sup>

Honecker: a "European" Statesman? The treatment of Honecker's visit to Greece in the East German media exemplified the SED's attempts to cultivate and exploit its recent diplomatic successes in Europe. The visit was preceded by extensive media coverage, including numerous interviews by Greek and East German journalists that stressed the deep significance of East German-Greek relations. To a certain extent the new approach pivots around the projection of Erich Honecker himself, whom the East German media increasingly portray as an international figure whose advice is sought and listened to even in Western capitals. One is tempted to view the media hype associated with Honecker's new Western forays as a new type of personality cult in the GDR, the cult of the international traveler in a country where Western travel remains the privilege of a very chosen few.

Until a few years ago Honecker gave the impression of being nervous and uncomfortable before the Western press during his visits outside the Soviet bloc. More recently he has become more relaxed and skilled at fielding difficult questions and is clearly enjoying the new attention that he and his country are attracting. While East Berlin's initiatives are undoubtedly coordinated with Soviet and bloc policy, there is little doubt that the authorities in the GDR recognize that it is in their own interests to expand relations with the West and that they are enjoying the gains in international prestige they have been harvesting. The new tone of self-confidence evident in the GDR's conduct of its relations with the West was even reflected in a recent article by Honecker published in *Pravda* on the occasion of the East German national day. While emphasizing his country's close bonds with Moscow, Honecker also managed to slip in a self-congratulatory note when he wrote:

The path of dialogue that I and other personalities of our country have been pursuing with Western statesmen has

contributed more than a little to representing the view of our [socialist] community on the question of securing peace and constructive proposals related to this issue.<sup>4</sup>

At home the SED agitprop apparatus has been molding a new image of the East German leader as a "German" (that is, not only East German) statesman who is endeavoring to do his part for his country at a difficult time in East-West relations, in short, a kind of East German Janos Kadar, aware of the wider ramifications of his efforts. Papandreou provided a welcome addition to this East German public relations exercise when addressing a group of East German journalists shortly before the start of Honecker's visit:

I should like to emphasize that neither I nor my colleagues have forgotten the impressions that we gathered during our visit to your country. At that time I had the opportunity to get to know Mr. Honecker personally. I established that he is a personality whose influence goes well beyond the borders of his country. He is, so to speak, a European personality of the first order. Erich Honecker is an individual with deep thoughts who incorporates a strategy that has led the GDR to significant accomplishments in the area of technology. For us the visit of Erich Honecker is currently of special significance, since this period must be viewed as critical for the future of mankind, which is threatened by the accumulation of nuclear weapons and the latest plans for Star Wars, in other words, the nuclearization of the heavens.<sup>5</sup>

The image of a new Honecker--once a lackluster diehard, now a benign European--has no doubt been launched.

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- 1 See Fred Oldenburg, "Die DDR-Partner in Europe," *DDR Report*, no. 8, 1985, pp. 434-437.
- 2 See *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 10 October 1985.
- 3 For the communique, see *Neues Deutschland*, 12/13 October 1985.
- 4 Honecker's article was reprinted in *ibid*, 18 October 1985.
- 5 As quoted in *Neues Deutschland*, 28/29 September 1985.

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