The Collapse of the GDR and the Reunification of Germany

Set up as a Soviet satellite after World War II, the German Democratic Republic was bound to follow the developments of her ‘big brother’, who controlled (or in Soviet terminology “defended”) the little state with approximately 380,000 troops and vital oil and gas supplies. Consequently, the disintegration of the USSR would have severe repercussions on Eastern Germany as well. But at first, the reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev were met by different reactions in the GDR. While glasnost* was taken up willingly by the majority of the population, the political leaders in East Berlin must be characterised as backward hardliners. Due to these domestic differences, the ultimate downfall of the socialist system in Eastern Germany turned into a series of dramatic events which make the peaceful reunification of the two German states look rather like a miracle than an inevitable process.

The Politburo and its vision of a “Frontier 2000”

The GDR was facing an economic crisis quite comparable to that of the USSR. However, the general secretary of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED)* and Chairman of the Council of State*, Erich Honecker*, was unwilling to introduce wide-ranging reforms in the manner of Gorbachev’s perestroika*. Even if the five year plan of 1986 turned away from heavy industry slightly and set higher quotas for modern technologies like automation and microelectronics, such products were mainly meant to be exported in order to curb the growing state deficit. To the same end, the Politburo* had raised the minimum obligatory exchange of currency for visitors to the GDR by 1982 already. But Gorbachev’s announcement that Socialist Brother States might have to pay world market prices for Soviet energy in the future made such measures look like a mere drop in the ocean. Moreover, it illustrates how old-fashioned Honecker’s approach to the structural problems of his state was – and how contradictory to that of Moscow. While Gorbachev was trying to open his country to the world, Honecker was fencing in his even more severely. This difference could not only be seen in the economy. It became even more obvious at the border, especially the Berlin Wall. In 1986 alone, the year that Gorbachev officially invited the exiled dissident Andrei Sakharov* to return to Moscow and held another summit talk with US president Reagan, three men died here by bullets of the East German border patrol. And in 1988 still, while Gorbachev revealed plans to pull out two tank divisions from Eastern Germany, the Politburo was discussing ways to modernize the death strip in a project called “Frontier 2000”. The up-to date equipment like infrared cameras was not only aimed at detaining refugees more successfully, but also at doing so more discreetly. Though minefields and automatic-fire installations had often proved deadly, their use was bound to draw unwanted attention from both sides of the border. Such incidents always highlighted the discontent with “real existing socialism”* not only to the class enemy in Western Germany but also to the own population and were therefore feared to cause larger public protests.

Trying to quell those ultimate expressions of misery simply with a more sophisticated version of the Iron Curtain reveals how much Honecker and his comrades misread the signs of the times. Firstly, the modernization of the frontier was to cost more than 300 million marks – money which the state had not got. This problem is vividly exemplified by the new, computer-aided checkpoint, which was presented to the Politburo for the state’s fortieth anniversary in late 1989 but which still lacked necessary details like the printer, due to the tight financial situation.¹ Secondly, and regardless of the budget available for such a programme like “Frontier 2000”, the GDR was not capable of producing the needed equipment or of acquiring it from other socialist states. Specialised knowledge might have been at the state’s disposal as the curriculum of the typical polytechnic schools focused on sciences much more than schools in West Germany and regularly included subjects like electrical engineering. However, the state had concentrated its production on heavy industry for too long and this could not be changed quickly in the inflexible system of the planned economy. Thirdly, any investment in the frontier would

be lost to more vital programmes like the solution of the housing problem. And any factories supplying the state with equipment for the computerized frontier would not supply the population with the desired consumer electronics like colour TV sets, for example. Thus, the standard of living would further deteriorate and might eventually rather drive people towards illegal emigration instead of scaring them off by a new frontier system. Fourthly and finally, this new frontier system was already undermined by the political developments in the neighbouring countries when it was still at its planning stage, for Hungary and the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic were following – and even overtaking – Gorbachev in his policy of “openness”.

The masses and their exodus via Hungary and the CSSR

Czechoslovakia and Hungary had not only been traditional holiday destinations for citizens of the GDR. They had also both been sites of wide-ranging upheavals against the Soviet regime before. In 1956, driven by student protests and probably misinterpreting Moscow’s lenience during the period of De-Stalinization*, Hungary’s General Secretary Imre Nagy* announced to withdraw his country from the Warsaw Pact* altogether and to take a new, national course towards socialism. However, while he was still negotiating neutrality for his country, Hungarian hardliners under Janos Kadar* called Moscow for assistance. Consequently, Soviet tanks were sent, brutally crushing the “rebellion”. In the Prague Spring* of 1968 the newly elected Czechoslovakian head of state, Alexander Dubcek*, actually anticipated the reforms which Gorbachev would eventually apply to the whole Soviet Union almost two decades later. Calling for less central planning in the economy and for more civil rights in fields like freedom of speech and travel, Dubcek was hailed by his people. Yet, Moscow probably feared Dubcek might go as far as Nagy, leaving and thus weakening the Warsaw Pact. Therefore Brezhnew* dispatched troops to end the reforms. But since Gorbachev had proclaimed in 1985 already that he would not forcefully intervene in domestic concerns of his brother states and since he promised to loosen the de-facto occupation of Hungary and Czechoslovakia by withdrawing the Soviet army until 1991 in his 1988 speech to the United Nations, the liberal feelings resurfaced. Contrary to the GDR, his reforms were taken up by the respective governments of these countries.

Especially in Hungary, this happened fast. Here, as a reward for his 1956 adherence to the Warsaw Pact, Janos Kadar had not only been made head of state but had also been allowed to carry on with a rather relaxed variety of communism. Though it was originally meant to soothe the Hungarians’ anger (along with the Russian tanks), this comparably permissive system was paving the way for Glasnost and Perestroika long before these policies had officially been proclaimed. At the tenth conference of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party in 1970 already, every citizen was granted the right to run for parliament – regardless of his party allegiance. At the same time, Communist officials could be voted out of office if they suppressed open criticism or abused their power. Prepared for democratic participation in this way, the Hungarian people made full use of their rights the very moment Soviet interference was not to be feared any longer. Their time had come in 1988 when Gorbachev not only proposed to remove Soviet units but also appeared bogged down in domestic crises like the shameful retreat from Afghanistan and the eruption of various ethnic conflicts within the USSR. His decision not to dispatch troops to beat down such disputes like the one in Karabagh* immediately certainly reassured the Hungarians to trust in the general secretary’s good intentions. Thus, a democratic forum was founded on 3rd September 1988 and many other parties sprang up soon afterwards. By that time, Janos Kadar had already relinquished his chair and the Socialist interim government under Miklós Németh* realized the necessity to cooperate with the new political forces up to the first free elections, scheduled for 1990.

Németh’s most wide ranging decision at that time was to dismantle the fortifications at the Hungaro-Austrian border. In the course of the state’s reforms, Hungarians themselves had been granted to travel freely since early 1988 anyway and therefore keeping up – or even renovating – antiquated border facilities seemed like wasting money and so deconstruction started on 2nd May 1989. On 27th June, the foreign ministers of the neigh-
bouring countries met to cut the first official hole into the barbed wire which had separated them for almost four decades, symbolically marking the end of the Iron Curtain. From that day on, Hungary was more than a huge resort to holiday-makers from East Germany. From now on it was an escape route and Hungarian officials did not intend to block it. Although Budapest had originally promised East Berlin to substitute more regular border patrols for the lacking surveillance installations, not much was done to this end. Quite the contrary, Németh’s government quietly tolerated the opposition’s planning of a “Pan-European Picnic”*. This meeting near the border town of Sobron would be used by approximately five hundred East Germans to emigrate to the FRG via Austria. In the wake of this event, many East German tourists stayed on in Hungary long after their residence permits had expired, hoping for a new chance to escape and on 11th September Hungary’s foreign minister finally announced that all remaining citizens of the GDR were allowed to leave for West Germany. Though the regime in East Berlin attempted to stop this mass exodus by not issuing any more exit visas for Hungary, less than three weeks later another hole opened in the Iron Curtain.

The political situation in the CSSR looked quite comparable to that in Hungary from the outside. Gustav Husak*, whom Moscow had installed as General Secretary after the Prague Spring, had been replaced as early as 1987 and his younger successor, Milos Jakes*, officially advocated Gorbachev’s perestroika. Thus, East Germans willing to leave took a short cut and fled to the West German embassy in Prague, filing for departure here. As the number of refugees rose and sanitation turned into a serious problem, the West German foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher* asked his Soviet colleague to solve the diplomatic incident. In accordance with Gorbachev’s policy of glasnost – but in contradiction to the staunch position of Honecker and his followers – Eduard Shvednadze* promised to help and behind closed doors GDR officials were ordered to let their people go in this particular case. So, on the night of 30th September Genscher could announce to the almost six thousand that their request for emigration would be granted. Oddly enough, the representatives of the GDR had insisted that the trains would take the emigrants to their destination at the West German city of Hof via East German territory. Of course, being carried back to East Germany horrified the refugees and was probably intended to do so. Officially, this procedure was chosen to guarantee the legal emigration proceedings, thus making the GDR appear an open state in the world which let its people go if they requested. Such sort of propaganda was important to the Democratic Republic with its 40th anniversary just days ahead. But as soon as the first wave of emigrants had taken West Germany’s embassy at Prague as a gateway to freedom, the GDR tried to plug this new gap by introducing compulsory visas for any travels to her brother state in the east. This attempt proved short-sighted, however, as the thickly-wooded border to the CSSR was barely guarded and consequently visa controls could hardly be imposed in practice. Therefore, another five thousand refugees had managed to flock to the embassy gardens about a month later. So, on 3rd November, weary of this situation and encouraged by Shewardnaze’s pragmatic reaction in late September, the Czechoslovakian government declared its territory to be open to unregulated transit to the west.

This decision might have been of historic dimension since it marked a point of no return in the fall of the Iron Curtain. From now on citizens of East Germany could have left via the CSSR any time. But neither was the decision intended to mark the disintegration of the Eastern bloc – for Jakes must be characterised as a stopgap rather than as a convinced reformer and he just felt obliged to swim with a current which he could not re-direct – nor was the chance taken by an extraordinary number of the East Germans. Of course, up to 20,000 people used the CSSR as an escape route in the following days, severely harming the image and the economy of the GDR. Interestingly, most citizens remained in the GDR, however. Undoubtedly, their decision to stay was often influenced by very down-to-earth worries, e. g. whether they should leave behind all their possessions, whether they would find decent jobs in the west, or whether they would cope with their homesickness. For a long time, people toying with the idea of flight had also been intimidated by the uncertainty whether their family members and
friends staying behind would be harassed by the Ministry for State Security*. But by November 1989, fear of this organisation had dwindled away as the many open demonstrations proved.

The people and their peaceful protests

The continuation of these demonstrations after 3rd November also illustrated that escaping the communist regime was not the protesters’ mutual goal. Surely, freedom of travel was one central objective. But it had long mixed with various political demands. Actually, the protests had been set off by the local government elections on May 7th. Here, after a supposedly high turnout of almost 99%, the list of the National Front* had won over 98% of the votes, according to the head of the electoral commission, Egon Krenz*. But for the first time in the history of the GDR, the elections had been observed by opponents of the regime. Probably spurred by Gorbachev’s policy of glasnost in general and his decision to allow competitive elections for the Congress of the People’s Deputies in 1988 in particular, an active citizens’ movement had come to life overnight virtually. This consisted of various circles and hence showed how widespread dissent was among the population. Well-known representatives were Bärbel Bohley’s* and Ulrike Poppe’s* “Women for Peace”*, the Protestant clergyman Rainer Eppelmann*, the reform-oriented communist Robert Havemann*, the biologist Jens Reich* and the organisation “Initiative for Peace and Human Rights”*, to name just a few. Although they certainly differed in their ideologies, such groups nevertheless networked in their effort to uncover the regular election fraud. This proved quite easy as voters could only opt between accepting candidates on the unified list and crossing out all the names given. As the latter took much longer, of course, it was possible to figure out how many people had not voted for the National Front. Originally designed by the Ministry of State Security to filter out dissidents this procedure made visible now that rejection of Honecker’s government was much larger than expected. From now on, the civil rights groups staged protests on the seventh day of each month to draw attention to the fraud in May.

Independent from this movement, demonstrations were also held each Monday in bigger cities like Leipzig since the traditional prayer meetings of Protestant pastors Christian Führer* and Christoph Wonneberger* had attracted a crowd of more than thousand people here on 4th September. The demonstrators were not only praying for an end of the arms race but also calling for democracy, freedom of the press and freedom of assembly. And soon the first posters could be spotted demanding the reunification of Germany. Though suspiciously observed by Stasi informers, such gatherings were not forcefully dispersed because the regime was aware that it was in the focus of international media with its 40th anniversary coming up on 7th October. At this occasion, the crowds showed a very reserved reaction to their own chairman Honecker while they cheered Gorbachev, the Soviet guest of honour, frantically. Some even went so far as to chant “Gorbi help us”. In the course of the celebrations, Gorbachev repeatedly warned that “Danger threatens only those who can’t react to life’s challenges” or that “[d]anger lies ahead only for those who are blind to what is happening.” However, Honecker let those warnings pass unheeded. Instead of introducing fundamental reforms, he chose to silence the growing number of critics once the party was over.

He suggested chasing away the participants of the next mass demonstration at Leipzig by sending tanks as this solution had proved successful repeatedly in the eastern bloc. Indeed, all protesters had on their minds how the Workers’ Uprising* had been crushed by Soviet tanks back in 1953. Even if the times had changed and the Soviet Union had declared not to intervene in domestic affairs of the GDR, the Chairman of the Council of State was still in charge of the National People’s Army*. And just four months ago East Berlin had publicly supported China’s communist party in its use of violence against peaceful demonstrations at Beijing’s Tiananmen Square*. Though the Soviet Central Committee later expressed its disappointment with the way things had gone in China, this was of little help to the protesters there. To the people in East Germany this was a sign that Gorbachev might not back Honecker’s government but that he would not actively support the protesters either. Therefore future

* http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/classes/133c/133cPrevYears/133C98/133c98.14.htm, 12.05.2013
demonstrations would happen under conditions far more unstable than they appear in retrospect. State organs had propagated not to tolerate disruptions of public order any longer. Armed members of the secret police had been ordered to arrest ringleaders by force if necessary and paramilitary combat groups had been put on full alert in the background. It amounts to a miracle that the situation did not spin out of control at the next Monday Demonstration on 9th October. In spite of the government’s threatening gestures, up to 70,000 people had come to Leipzig and it has been assumed that security forces were just overwhelmed by these masses.

Surely, the many protesters can only be praised for their courage to stand up against a repressive regime both unyieldingly and peacefully. But it was also the generally cool, calm and collected reaction of the police forces that helped prevent a German Tiananmen. Indirectly, their behaviour might have been guided by the fact that local party officials were among the speakers for the first time, campaigning for an open dialogue with the population.

With voices being raised against Honecker’s reactionary course even by party members now, his days were numbered. On 18th October he had to resign from his posts eventually and was substituted by Egon Krenz. Though much younger than Honecker, the man responsible for the forged elections was just another representative of the old regime in the eyes of the people. Krenz proclaimed a willingness to cooperate in his inauguration. But the queer compromises he offered proved that his government was lacking any real direction. Most notably, a general exit permit was promised but it should have been restricted to a stay of thirty days duration and would still have required specific reasons for the journey. This way, the wave of protests could not be stopped any longer. At any rate, Krenz’ decision to forbid security forces to bear firearms guaranteed that the demonstrations stayed peaceful. In a last-ditch attempt to relax travel regulations but still keep control, the chaos behind the scenes became apparent: In a press conference on 9th November party functionary Günter Schabowski* declared that unrestricted travels should be allowed. However, he had not been informed that the new decree should only come into force the next day. This historic mistake soon led to dramatic encounters at the border. As Schabowski’s version had been spread via radio and TV, East Germans immediately flocked to the wall. However, the border guards had not yet been informed and were caught completely unaware. Trained to force people back from the frontier they did not know how to react and it is surprising that no conflicts arose just by mistake. Luckily, the situation stayed peaceful once again and close to midnight the troops at “Bornholmer Brücke” gave in and opened their checkpoint without further authorization. The people had triumphed and had opened their country without being expelled from their home.

The west and its attraction

Along with the wall virtually the whole system of the GDR was broken down on 9th November 1989. Even if the Socialist Unity Party was still in power, this simply owed to the fact that an alternative had to be established first. The National Front, official winner of the last elections, dissolved on 13th November already as the smaller parties asked the Socialist Unity Party to abstain from its constitutional claim to leadership. Nevertheless, party secretary Hans Modrow* was made Chairman of the Council of State temporarily because of his participation in early talks with the protesters. Due to these contacts Modrow was thought to be a suitable mediator in negotiations with the New Forum*, the largest melting pot of demonstrators. Out of this initiative, the Round Table* developed where representatives of the government and the opposition prepared secret and free elections for March 1990. In the ensuing election campaigns the parties of the FRG supported their eastern counterparts immensely and the results already anticipated the reunification as Helmut Kohl’s* Alliance for Germany* gained 48% of the votes and was able to form a coalition with the SPD (22%) and the Liberals (5%) as junior partners. The outcome showed that Kohl’s 10-point plan appeared most pragmatic and promising to the majority of the East Germans because it included, among other things, quick connection to the infrastructure of the west, the integration into the thriving European Community and a monetary union. Together with his party member and
newly-elected counterpart, Eastern-German Prime Minister Lothar de Maizière*, Kohl quickly prepared the joining of the GDR to the FRG as he felt obliged to seize the opportunity. Both, the East and the West German Parliaments passed the reunification treaty on 20th September and on 3rd October 1990 the GDR officially ceased to exist and its territory was integrated into West Germany, constituting five new federal states.

Internationally, East Germany became integrated into the west as well. Germany recognized her eastern border with Poland to run along the Oder-Neisse line, thus officially renouncing any claims to East Prussian territories that Germans had been driven out of at the end of World War II. Moreover, the departure of Soviet troops from East German territory and East Germany’s withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact were defined in the Two-Plus-Four Treaty on Germany between the victorious powers of World War II and the two German republics. The reunified Germany would stay a member of the NATO, instead. In return Germany promised Moscow to limit her troops to 370,000, not to acquire any atomic, biological of chemical weapons and not to station any NATO-units on formerly East German territory. Additionally, Germany paid Moscow around 13 billion marks to finance the transfer of the Soviet troops. With these things settled, Germany had officially emerged as a Western European, sovereign state after more than four decades as a provisional post-war arrangement.

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