

# PART I



## NORMALISATION AS STABILISATION AND ROUTINISATION?

Systemic Parameters and  
the Roles of Functionaries



## Chapter 2

# ‘Aggression in Felt Slippers’: Normalisation and the Ideological Struggle in the Context of *Détente* and *Ostpolitik*

Merrilyn Thomas



The GDR existed in diplomatic isolation for much of the period that is the subject of this book. Although it was recognised by the Soviet Union and other members of the Soviet bloc together with a handful of non-aligned countries, it was not until 1973 that the East German state was given official recognition by Britain. The USA followed suit in 1974. Throughout the 1960s, the North American Treaty Organisation (NATO) allies, under pressure from West Germany, continued to practise their public policy of ostracising the GDR. At the same time, however, and contrary to appearances, the process of accepting the German communist state as a part of the international community was secretly being formulated by Western policymakers. The argument being put forward as early as 1960 was that a stable Europe required a stable GDR and that, in addition, the West could influence domestic processes within the GDR more effectively if it extended the hand of friendship. Consequently, the GDR did not function in a vacuum during its period of diplomatic isolation. In addition to the pressures exerted upon it by its Soviet masters, its domestic internal processes were also influenced by the major Western powers and by the government of its estranged sibling in West Germany.

The object of this chapter is to examine the 1960s and 1970s in the GDR within the context of Cold War international relations. The period of normalisation was a period during which the NATO allies and West Germany

adopted a policy of co-operation rather than confrontation towards the Soviet Union and its satellite states, including the GDR. In other words, at the same time as a process of internal normalisation was taking place within the GDR, a similar process was taking place in relation to external affairs. This chapter will argue that these policies were instrumental in enabling the GDR leaders, Walter Ulbricht, and later Erich Honecker, to pursue their goal of creating a strong and permanent socialist German state.

In the context of the Western powers and the Soviet bloc in general, the policy of co-operation became known as *détente*. In the context of relations between the two German states it was known as *Ostpolitik*. The adoption of these policies by the West in its dealings with the Soviet bloc was driven by two major judgements. Firstly, failed revolts in East Berlin, Poland and Hungary in the 1950s had persuaded the West that other ways needed to be found with which to defeat communism. In addition, the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 had concentrated minds on the dangers of brinkmanship and on the threat of nuclear annihilation. Secondly, the West believed that the future threat from the Soviet Union lay in the non-aligned world where Western influence was being undermined. It needed to be able to concentrate its political and military resources in Asia and Africa rather than Europe.<sup>1</sup> A reduction of tension in Europe, therefore, appeared to be in the West's interests. The idea of co-existence rather than confrontation with the Soviet bloc countries, and particularly with the GDR because of its position at the front line of the Cold War, was at the root of the policies that were officially adopted by West Germany and by the NATO allies during the latter years of the 1960s, the seeds having been sown at the beginning of the decade.

The chapter first examines the manner in which policies of *Ostpolitik* and *détente* assisted in creating the conditions in which a process of normalisation was able to take place in the GDR and, in addition, were designed to do so. Secondly, it raises the question of whether *Ostpolitik* and *détente* were

---

1. British foreign policy objectives in 1960 included the prevention of 'further areas of the world from falling under the influence or domination of the Sino-Soviet bloc'. It was envisaged that 'détente will allow a reduction of forces in Europe which is necessary if we are to achieve our "politico-military" policy elsewhere'. See Macmillan Cabinet Papers 1957–1963 Online, Adam Matthew Publications Ltd, National Archives reference CAB 134/1929, meeting of the Prime Minister, Ministers and Armed Forces chiefs to discuss Future Policy Study, 7 June 1959, final report and subsequent discussion and memoranda. The Future Policy Study 1960–1970 was a lengthy Top Secret document which was compiled at the request of the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in 1959/60. It examined the problems which Britain would face in the world over the next decade and made recommendations about the ways in which they should be handled; questions addressed included should the British try to reach a *modus vivendi* with the Russians in Europe; would *détente* be to British advantage and what sort of geo-political price would be paid for this policy. The document provides a useful insight not only into the mindset of British foreign policy makers during this period, but also of their allies and their opponents, chiefly the USA and the Soviet Union.

not so much a bridge between East and West as a boarding plank which the West used in order to undermine the ideological convictions on which communism was based. This, in turn, raises the question of the extent to which, in the context of international relations, the normalisation of the GDR was not an end in itself but a stage along the road to the end of the GDR. To what extent was normalisation an illusion, outside the control of Honecker and his regime?

The suggestion that the West secretly influenced events inside the GDR—and other Soviet bloc countries—is one that is, by definition, difficult to prove. These matters were largely secret at the time and remain so now. In this context, though, it is necessary to remember that during the Second World War, both Britain and the USA created impressive psychological warfare departments and acquired the expertise with which to undermine hostile states—in this instance chiefly the Third Reich.<sup>2</sup> They were able to draw on this legacy of experience during the Cold War. Probably the two most important skills acquired during the Second World War were the ability to use psychological techniques in order to undermine the enemy, and to maintain and control resistance groups in occupied countries. Both these skills were secretly put to use during the Cold War, against a different enemy.

Some of these secret Cold War activities have begun to emerge into the public arena in various ways. A few years ago, the father of *Ostpolitik*, Egon Bahr, told a meeting of former Cold War players in Washington that GDR Foreign Minister Otto Winzer had been right to refer to *Ostpolitik* as 'aggression in felt slippers'.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Bahr himself had made this claim at the time in the 1960s when he referred to the fact that his and Brandt's goal was 'to liberate Eastern Europe from a disease called communism'. Subsequently, both men had agreed to keep silent about that aim. Likewise, in a discussion on the Future Policy Study, the British Foreign Secretary told his Cabinet colleagues that détente 'was not a policy of appeasement but a means of carrying the offensive into the Communist camp'.<sup>4</sup> This comment was made

---

2. See, for example, Michael Stenton, *Radio London and Resistance in Occupied Europe: British Political Warfare 1939–1943* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Ellic Howe, *The Black Game: British subversive operations against the Germans during the Second World War* (London: Michael Joseph, 1982); Paul Lashmar and James Oliver, *Britain's Secret Propaganda War* (Stroud: Sutton, 1998).

3. Egon Bahr, *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute*, American Détente and German *Ostpolitik*, 1969–1972, Supplement 1 2004: 138. Bahr was the right-hand man of West German Chancellor Willy Brandt for many years and has been credited with being the architect of *Ostpolitik*. He was Secretary and later Minister of State in the Brandt government. 'Under the title of state secretary, Bahr essentially functioned as Brandt's personal emissary to the Soviet Union and the GDR from 1969 onwards.' M.E. Sarotte, *Dealing with the Devil: East Germany, Détente and Ostpolitik* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), p. 28.

4. Macmillan Cabinet Papers, meeting of the Prime Minister and Ministers to discuss the Future Policy Study, 23 March 1960.

in 1960—ten years before East and West German leaders met for the first time in the East German city of Erfurt. These hidden agendas were a reflection of the manner in which international relations were conducted during the Cold War. Western foreign policy frequently consisted of two distinct strands—official policy and unofficial policy. Official policy was that which was aired publicly; unofficial policy was spoken of behind closed doors.<sup>5</sup>

## Cold War International Relations Before 1965

An examination of Western policy towards the Soviet bloc before 1965 demonstrates the way in which strategy changed in later years. During the earlier period, particularly during the 1950s, Western policy towards the Soviet bloc, including the GDR, focused initially on the idea of the containment of communism and subsequently on what was known optimistically as rollback. Rollback meant liberating the Soviet bloc countries from communism by encouraging, organising, and financing resistance groups along the lines of the resistance operations to the Nazis that had been supported covertly during the Second World War. The aim, in the words of the British, was to liberate Soviet bloc countries short of war. US and British backed operations of this type were carried out, for example, in Albania, Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic states.<sup>6</sup>

A detailed account of US policy in relation to the GDR during this period has been published by the German historian, Anjana Buckow. Her research in US archives has provided a mass of evidence to demonstrate that the USA actively supported opposition, and was prepared to use psy-

---

5. See Merrilyn Thomas, *Communing with the Enemy: Covert Operations, Christianity and Cold War Politics in Britain and the GDR* (Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), chap. 6 for more on unofficial Cold War policy. The secrecy and duplicity of the Cold War creates problems for historians, but a failure to address these issues because of the difficulties of ‘proving’ them results in an incomplete interpretation of events. To skirt around unofficial policy or intelligence activity places an artificial restriction upon the sum of knowledge. This chapter addresses some of the problems faced by historians examining the murky world of Cold War international relations. It is worth noting that during the last couple of decades many historians have found it necessary to revise their interpretations of this period with the passing of time. What may have appeared to have been ‘proved’ at one time, can cease to be ‘proved’ at another, whether one is basing one’s interpretation on official records, or not. It is ever thus.

6. W Scott Lucas and C.J. Morris, ‘A Very British Crusade: The Information Research Department and the Beginning of the Cold War’ in Richard Aldrich, *British Intelligence*. Quoted in Peter Grose, *Operation Rollback: America’s Secret War Behind the Iron Curtain*, (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), p. 155. An example of the rollback policy can be seen in Albania where, in the late 1940s, unsuccessful attempts were made by the British and the Americans to instigate a revolt, these plans being betrayed by Kim Philby. Also see Mike Sewell, *The Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 41.

chological warfare techniques in order to encourage anti-Soviet resistance.<sup>7</sup> This was true of the West in general. While not desiring an opposition that caused an explosion, it did want one which caused turmoil; one which threatened, weakened, and possibly overturned the communist regime. As with Hungary and Poland though, the West looked to the people of the GDR to accomplish this and was not prepared to become militarily involved in support of a revolt. In the words of an instruction from the US Department of State to Bonn and Berlin, dated 1953, on US policy towards the GDR:

We wish to emphasize that overt measures should be used only to nourish the spirit of resistance, not to advocate openly specific acts of resistance. The reasons for these limitations . . . are: 1) that we do not want to risk precipitating prematurely a mass, open rebellion or, if one does take place prematurely, to incur blame for the consequences; and 2) that we do not want to throw doubt on the spontaneous nature of the resistance.<sup>8</sup>

The GDR during this period was an abnormal state by virtue of its international isolation. This lack of normality was a state of affairs that the West fostered as part of its Cold War strategy. It was experienced by GDR citizens in a number of ways. One of these was their inability to travel to countries outside the Soviet bloc. This inability arose, not only because of restrictions imposed by their own government, but, more importantly, because the NATO countries frequently put obstacles in the way or refused to allow them to travel to the West. A closer examination of this NATO policy is useful to an understanding of Western foreign policy in that it provides an illustration of the sometimes devious ways in which the West used apparently overt methods with which to achieve covert aims. In this particular instance, the use of travel restrictions against GDR citizens was, on one level, a reinforcement of and an essential part of the policy of non-recognition. But, in addition, its rigid implementation had a demoralising effect upon GDR citizens, a fact of which there is evidence that the British Foreign Office was well aware. Later, it can be seen how policy changed in line with the shift towards recognition and stability.

### *Allied Travel Office*

One of the results of the policy of non-recognition was that the GDR passport was also not recognised by NATO countries. The psychological game

---

7. Anjana Buckow, *Zwischen Propaganda und Realpolitik: die USA und der sowjetisch besetzte Teil Deutschland 1945–1955* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2003), p. 9.

8. Quoted in Buckow, *Zwischen Propaganda und Realpolitik*, p. 578.

adopted by the West of creating a sense of abnormality went so far that, until 1962, the British entered the nationality of GDR citizens on travel documents as 'Presumed German'.<sup>9</sup> The process of granting permission for GDR citizens to travel to the West was conducted through an organisation known as the Allied Travel Office (ATO), based in West Berlin and run by NATO, which had been established at the end of the Second World War. Initially, the ATO was seen as a relief organisation since, in the post-war chaos, there was a need to facilitate travel by Germans from both East and West despite a lack of documents. As the years went by, and West Germany became a sovereign state with its own passport, the ATO dealt purely with GDR citizens. The British government was at pains to disguise the restrictive role of the ATO publicly, its aim being to create the impression that it was solely GDR-imposed restrictions that prevented its citizens from travelling to the West. For example, in 1965, in response to correspondence relating to a woman living in Britain who wanted her East German parents to visit her, a Foreign Office official advised in a handwritten note that Members of Parliament should blame the East German government for the inability to travel, especially when it concerned elderly people wishing to visit relatives, and to give no hint that it was any fault of NATO.<sup>10</sup> When a Labour MP made the claim in Parliament that 'people in the Eastern Zone were prevented from visiting the West, not by the East German Government, but by these . . . regulations', the response was that the 'main obstacle to pensioners or anyone else leaving East Germany consists in the nature of the East German regime and not in any regulations relating to visas'.<sup>11</sup>

The reality was, however, that East Germans who wished to travel to the West were obliged to obtain a document known as a Temporary Travel Document (TTD) issued by the ATO. The rules governing who was eligible for a TTD and the manner in which those rules were interpreted varied from time to time depending on political tensions. One

---

9. Bell, *Britain and East Germany: The Politics of Non-Recognition* (MPhil thesis, University of Nottingham, 1977), p. 133. Although the practice ceased in 1962, this designation was still in use on Temporary Travel Documents used by GDR citizens until 1967 since the documents were valid for five years. See National Archives, FCO 33/515, TTD Policy, 1969.

10. National Archives, FO 371/183140 RG1621/78, correspondence relating to a visit by the East German parents of a woman living in Britain, November 1965. 'Mr Thomson [George Thomson, Minister of State at the Foreign Office] has asked me firstly to make a general point that any letter to Members of Parliament should put the blame for the lack of travel facilities, especially for old folk, from East Germany squarely on the East German authorities and not give any hint that the NATO allies are at fault'.

11. Hansard, Oral Answers, Columns 897–898, question from Stan Newens to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 13 December 1965.

British official described the TTD weapon 'as a bludgeon, not a rapier'.<sup>12</sup> Fundamentally, the principle was to refuse a TTD to anyone who could be said to hold a political position or who claimed to be a member of an official delegation. However, innocent individuals were often caught up in these restrictions and found themselves unable to obtain the documents needed to be allowed into Britain. For example: during the three years between October 1961 and September 1964, 195 East Germans were refused permission by the ATO to travel to Britain. Of these, 135 were sportsmen and women, 19 musicians and actors, and 13 scientists.<sup>13</sup> There were two main reasons for this state of affairs. One was because the definition of 'political' could be stretched to include anyone who claimed to be a citizen of the GDR because, in Western eyes, the GDR did not exist and, therefore, claiming citizenship was a political statement. Indeed, when an MP asked the government what criteria governed the issue of TTDs, the response was that the criteria were 'confidential', being agreed to by NATO.<sup>14</sup> Since the criteria were unknown, it was therefore impossible to comply with them. When an MP asked what 'non-political' meant, suggesting that it meant East Germans had to divest themselves of all political ideas, the government responded that it was a 'general description', but applied to people who purported to represent the Soviet zone as a sovereign or national entity. This catchall could include football teams or children's choirs.<sup>15</sup>

The second reason why ordinary people were unable to visit the West was because the ATO required the GDR applicant to make two visits to its West Berlin office, the first to make the application and the second in order to pick up the documents. This was obviously impossible for most people to do from 1961 onwards after the building of the Berlin Wall and difficult even before that date. However, the situation was such that, when in 1966 a parliamentary question was put in Britain asking the government to lift this requirement, the government responded that it had 'no evidence' that the ATO requirements impeded travel by East Germans to Britain.<sup>16</sup> This assertion was made despite the fact that a Foreign Office document dated 1964 includes extracts from letters from around a dozen East German citizens, wishing to be reunited with relatives in Britain, who wrote personally

---

12. National Archives, FO 371/177988, RG 1622/27, handwritten note, 25 March 1964.

13. Hansard, Written Answers, Columns 202–203, 7 November 1966.

14. Hansard, Written Answers, Columns 7–8, question from Mrs Renée Short to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 26 July 1965.

15. Hansard, Oral Answers, Columns 11–13, 13 April 1964.

16. Hansard, Written Answers, Column 13, question from Mr Brooks to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 12 December 1966.

to the British government pleading with it to post their TTDs to them as they were unable to comply with the requirement to personally attend at the ATO.<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to note that the restrictions also affected leading East German clergy—people who were seen by the GDR itself as opponents of the regime. Foreign Office documents show that the leading GDR bishop, Frederick-Wilhelm Krummacher, found it difficult to visit Britain and succeeded in doing so only by obtaining documents ‘surreptitiously’ from an unknown American. When Paul Oestreicher, a British priest and long-standing GDR intermediary, contacted the Foreign Office in 1965 to ask if this method could be used again, the answer was no.<sup>18</sup> The issue of travel restrictions became increasingly live in Britain during the 1960s, with a number of parliamentary questions being asked about the role of the ATO. In 1963, the subject became a matter for Cabinet discussion in the wake of British refusal to allow the Berliner Ensemble to take part in the Edinburgh Festival, this decision resulting in strong protests from many British people.<sup>19</sup> One MP described the restrictions as treating GDR citizens like ‘Stateless persons’.<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, British government statistics do show that a number of East Germans were given permission to travel to Britain. Between October 1963 and May 1964, 399 East Germans applied to visit Britain, 298 travel documents were issued and seven were refused.<sup>21</sup> The government explained that the totals did not tally because many East Germans did not collect their documents after they were issued which, as we have seen, would have been impossible for many because they were required to collect them from West Berlin. If, usually for commercial reasons, both the British and the East German authorities were anxious for the visit to go ahead, a courier service was arranged, but this was not an option for ordinary travellers. The British gave two reasons for their insistence on applications being made in person. One was that they did not trust TTDs to the GDR postal service. The other was that the British intelligence service often used the opportunity to question applicants. As one Foreign

---

17. National Archives, FO 371/177988, RG 1622/12, TTDs policy 1964. In one instance, it is recorded that special arrangements were made for a Frau Missbach to receive her TTD when she arrived at the airport in London on 12 April 1964, but most applicants were not so fortunate.

18. National Archives, FO 371/183140 RG 1621/52, Krummacher travel arrangements, April 1965.

19. National Archives, FO 371/172194, papers relating to the refusal to allow the Berliner Ensemble to visit Britain, 1963.

20. Hansard, Written Answers, Column 78, question from Will Owen to George Thomson, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, 15 November 1966.

21. Hansard, Oral Answers, Columns 134–135, question from Will Griffiths to Walter Padley, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, 21 June 1965.

Office official explained: 'in addition our friends [a term used to describe the intelligence services] wish to vet the East Germans and try to squeeze some information out of them on the first visit.'<sup>22</sup>

NATO policy was amended in 1965, in keeping with the growing policy of NATO countries towards preserving the status quo in Central Europe and particularly in relation to the GDR. The office issued a statement in December 1965 which said that it had been decided to introduce a 'simplified procedure' to facilitate the entry of pensioners into NATO countries.<sup>23</sup> This in itself is an admittance of the fact that previously pensioners had fallen foul of NATO regulations.

## Cold War International Relations After 1965

The concept that was the main plank of Western policy towards the GDR during the latter part of the 1960s and first half of the 1970s was stability.<sup>24</sup> The West no longer wanted to promote revolt in Soviet bloc countries.<sup>25</sup> To quote the Future Policy Study: 'We do not wish to stimulate unrest which Russia would be certain to suppress.'<sup>26</sup> The British government, while publicly maintaining a belligerent stance, secretly talked in terms of maintaining the status quo. The strategy was to bring about a normalisation of conditions in relation to bilateral and multilateral relations with the communist state, and also within the state itself. This included support for Brandt's *Ostpolitik* ideas behind the scenes, even during the very early years.<sup>27</sup>

There were various ways in which this strategy was put into practice, one of the main steps being the recognition of the GDR in the early 1970s, which brought the state into the international community of nations. This was a lengthy and tortuous process with Western policymakers keeping a

---

22. National Archives, FO 371/177988, RG 1622/11, memo from D Beevor about the need for two personal visits to West Berlin, 14 February 1964.

23. Hansard, Oral Answers, Columns 897–898, question from Stan Newens to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 13 December 1965.

24. 'The revitalisation of Cold War tensions from 1979 ended a period of détente and heralded a return to rhetoric and actions reminiscent of the late 1940s and early 1950s.' Sewell, *The Cold War*, p. 112. The voices of opponents of détente in both the USA and the Soviet Union began to be heard more loudly from around 1975 onward.

25. Egon Bahr, *GHI Washington Bulletin*, *Détente and Ostpolitik*, p. 137. It had become clear that communist regimes could not be overthrown by internal revolt.

26. Macmillan Papers, Future Policy Study, February 1960.

27. National Archives, FO 953/2347, a briefing note for 'information talks' between British and West German diplomats notes with reference to a plan for Brandt to visit Karl Marx Stadt that 'we warmly approve of the SPD initiative but we must avoid giving the impression that we are more enthusiastic than the Federal Government', May 1966.

watchful eye on every small step taken by the GDR towards international recognition. For example, one British Foreign Office file for 1971 deals with GDR attempts to be represented in a variety of international organisations and the possible repercussions. The file ends with the Prime Minister writing to his Foreign Secretary to ask if a 'fresh look' at GDR policy is not now due because 'our policy now—with the Federal Republic in the van—is to recognise them as a state, and to accept their entry into the United Nations, when certain conditions are fulfilled'.<sup>28</sup>

The acceptance of the GDR as a member of various international organisations and the taking of steps to improve communications was an important part of the process leading to recognition and normalisation. For example:

- in 1971, the allies discussed (without reaching agreement) the possibility of commercial flights into Schönefeld airport in East Berlin;
- in 1971, the GDR applied for membership of the World Health Organisation. A decision was deferred until the following year;
- in the same year, the British discussed allowing the use of the GDR's flag and national anthem in NATO countries (by way of contrast, two years' earlier, the GDR hockey team had cancelled a visit to Britain because of a ban on the use of the flag and anthem);<sup>29</sup>
- in 1972, the GDR was given observer status at the UN and became a member of UNESCO.

All these developments and many more were significant in bringing about normalisation within the GDR. Another most important factor was trade. Moves were made to increase trade between the GDR and capitalist countries and credit arrangements were agreed upon which were to become a necessary part of the GDR economy.

Superficially, these developments appeared to be beneficial to the GDR and, in the short term, this was no doubt the case. GDR citizens experienced an improvement in economic conditions and were no longer made to feel like outcasts. They had become members of the international community and were increasingly able to travel to other countries in the interests of economic, cultural, and sporting activities. However, the long-term purpose behind the new strategy adopted by the Western allies and West Germany can be seen in views expressed in the Future Policy Study. Here, the argument was put forward that the best way of defeating communism was to expose it to

---

28. National Archives, FCO 33/1334, minute from Edward Heath to Sir Alec Douglas-Home, 29 October 1971.

29. Hansard, Written Answers, Columns 101–102, 26 April 1968.

Western capitalist influences. The best and probably only hope for a peaceful end to the East-West conflict, it stated, was that the East would 'mellow into a bourgeois prosperity' and thereby 'lose its urge to win the world for Communism. . . . we must do anything we can to assist the process.' Communist ideology, it went on, 'can best be eroded away by exposure to another system which is shown to be equally successful and more attractive'.<sup>30</sup> The report recommended that steps which could be taken in this direction included visits, meetings, and cultural and commercial exchanges.

A major plank of the *Ostpolitik*/détente strategy was to encourage the GDR to become more economically dependent on the West. The aim was 'to limit the further consolidation of Soviet domination by encouraging the development of economic independence in the Satellites.'<sup>31</sup> Economic independence of the Soviet Union, though, meant *dependence* on the West. The US Secretary of State Dean Rusk told Prime Minister Harold Macmillan as early as 1962 that the West Germans 'recognised the importance of making East Germany dependent economically on the West'.<sup>32</sup> Over the next 20 years or so, West Germany made unconditional loans amounting to billions of Deutsch Marks to the GDR. A senior Soviet diplomat, Juli Kvitzinsky, observed post-reunification that the West Germans only invested in the GDR in order to bring about the *Wandel durch Annäherung* (change through rapprochement) which Brandt and Bahr had conceived in 1963.<sup>33</sup> Honecker also recognised the threat as time went by, but was, according to Kvitzinsky, 'unable to escape the noose once he was in it'. The historian Manfred Görtemaker has observed that 'the GDR faced the dilemma of weighing up its desire for international recognition and co-operation against the danger of allowing the West to undermine its internal cohesion via the so-called "exchange of people, information and ideas"'.<sup>34</sup>

### *Ideological infiltration*

Ideological infiltration of the GDR was the political goal behind *Ostpolitik* and détente. The aim was to undermine the ideological beliefs on which the communist world was based so that eventually the countries concerned

---

30. Macmillan Papers, Future Policy Study, February 1960.

31. Ibid.

32. Macmillan Papers, meeting between Rusk, Macmillan and others, London, 24 June 1962.

33. Juli Kvitzinsky, *Vor dem Sturm: Erinnerungen eines Diplomaten* (Berlin: Siedler, 1993), p. 261.

34. Manfred Görtemaker, 'The Collapse of the German Democratic Republic and the Role of the Federal Republic', in the *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute London*, Vol; XXV, No. 2, November 2003: 49–70.

would collapse—or implode—as they eventually did in 1989. In this sense, ideological infiltration does not refer to paid up members of the intelligence services secretly penetrating the Iron Curtain in order to undertake subversive activities; rather, it refers to the ways in which Western ideas and values were spread to the Eastern bloc through the activities of non-state organisations and private individuals. As Egon Bahr told the Cold War seminar in Washington in 2002, the communist world was held together by a belief in a shared ideology—remove that belief and there would be nothing left to fight for. It was for this reason that the ‘ideological struggle was a central intellectual component of *Ostpolitik*’.<sup>35</sup>

Personal networks played a major part in the ideological infiltration of the East. One of the networks having the greatest impact on the outcome of the Cold War was the Christian network. Christianity was extraordinarily significant in the struggle between capitalism and communism. It was a faith that had the power to rival communism in the manner in which it gripped its believers. The Christian network was, and is, an international network. It did not have to be created in order to combat the atheist ideology of communism because it already existed. Its power and influence ranged from that exerted by the late Pope John Paul II, who some historians argue ‘instigated the public process leading to the end of the Cold War and the break-up of the Soviet Union’,<sup>36</sup> to the work of organisations such as the World Council of Churches, and individual Christians such as the British priest Paul Oestreicher and the American Quaker Robert Reuman.<sup>37</sup> The Church, as the Soviet diplomat Kvitzinsky noted, was an important secret channel used in order to find a way, firstly, to normalise relations with the East and, secondly, in order to infiltrate those countries.<sup>38</sup>

35. Egon Bahr, *GHI Washington Bulletin*, Détente and *Ostpolitik*, p. 140.

36. Peter C Kent, ‘The Lonely Cold War of Pope Pius XII’, in *Religion and the Cold War*, Dianne Kirby, ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), p. 67.

37. For an account of Paul Oestreicher’s activities in the GDR, see Thomas, *Communing with the Enemy*. A 10-page report by Robert Reuman on attitudes in the GDR is contained in the British Foreign Office archive. See National Archives, FO 371/183002 RG 1016/42A, report by Reuman dated 30 June 1965.

38. Juli Kvitzinsky, *Vor dem Sturm*, ‘They [representatives of the West German Protestant Church] were more prepared to talk to us than the worldly authorities and rejected possible doubts with the argument that clergymen should proclaim God’s word to everyone. Therefore they could foster contact with Soviet diplomats . . . Without doubt, the Church was not simply interested in bringing the word of God to the Soviet people. As preparers of the way for contact with the Soviet Union, the Church drew the attention of all those who themselves wanted this possibility. There were quite a few, for, among the Germans, efforts were growing to find a way to normalise relations with the people of the USSR. The Church was a channel for this.’ p. 207.

The words ‘ideological infiltration’ do not spring out from Western archives which are available to researchers (in contrast to the *Stasi* archives where such references proliferate). There are, however, other ways of expressing such things. One British Foreign Office document, for example, refers to ‘ideological contamination’ in relation to détente and the GDR.<sup>39</sup> The Future Policy Study refers to the ‘ideological struggle’ and the need to construct ‘an infrastructure of political and spiritual sympathies without which our economic and military effort cannot be fully effective’.<sup>40</sup> Here, the use of the word ‘spiritual’ is interesting in the context of the use of Christianity in this ideological struggle. A study of British Foreign Office archives shows that the British were extremely interested in what they referred to as ‘the attitudes’ of East German people. For example, in 1965, the Foreign Office circulated with approval a document written by Robert Reuman, a frequent visitor to the GDR, entitled *Attitudes in the DDR (East Germany)*. This was passed on to the department responsible for anti-communist propaganda and support of opposition groups, the Information Research Department.<sup>41</sup> The same year the British representative in West Berlin submitted a lengthy report on the ‘mood of the East German people’. Attitudes are the raw material of ideological infiltration. What the infiltrators need to know is what they are and how they are changing. In this context, Foreign Office files also reveal that the British went to the lengths of intercepting letters written by East Germans to friends and relatives abroad to find out what they were thinking.<sup>42</sup>

Ideological infiltration was both overt and covert—sometimes both at the same time. Activity could be overt in that it was not disguised, but the true purpose might be covert in that it was hidden. Overt ideological infiltration was achieved through increased contact between the East and West, between East Germany and West Germany. The movement of people and the opening up of communications chipped away at communist ideology in a manner that could not be suppressed. The material well-being of the capi-

---

39. National Archives, FCO 33/2068, annual review of the GDR, 1973. ‘It will be interesting to see whether, through fear of ideological contamination, the East German authorities will feel constrained to back track in 1973 . . . we all know that when the chips are down, internal repression and restrictions are likely to have the upper hand.’

40. Macmillan Papers, Future Policy Study, 1960.

41. National Archives, FO 371/183002, RG 1016/42A, *Attitudes in the DDR (East Germany)*, 30 June, 1965. The IRD drew up reports in 1960, for example, on the East German lie factory, the East German incitement campaign, and East German subversive organisations (FO 975/139, 140, 141).

42. National Archives, FO 371/183002 RG 1016/35, private letters from the GDR intercepted by British Secret Service revealed that people had no great pride in the GDR but they wanted reunification so that families could be united, not because the FRG was better, 1965. Also FO 371/183002 RG 1016/41, intercepts mentioned in a report on GDR youth rock culture, 8 November 1965.

talist world was held out to the people of the East with the aim of achieving the conditions described by the British Future Policy report; the replacement of socialist hardship by the aspirations of bourgeois prosperity. At the same time, covert activity took place designed to build up structures within Soviet bloc countries on which the movement towards a more relaxed reformed form of socialism could be built. The goal was long-term. The aim was to create the conditions within which a reform movement could become effective in a peaceful and stable manner. The process demanded extreme caution, as was demonstrated by the debacle in Czechoslovakia in 1968.

### *Covert Activities*

The nature of covert operations means that it is difficult to provide hard evidence of their existence. The archives of Western intelligence services are not open for inspection by researchers. An insight into Western activity, however, is provided by the *Stasi* archive. Although there is considerable, and sometimes, heated debate about the weight that should be attached to the contents of the *Stasi* archive, it can be argued that they are a useful source because they provide researchers with glimpses not only of the activities of GDR intelligence operations, but also those of other countries. While allegations of spying or subversive operations must always be treated with caution, from whichever side the allegation comes, these allegations are pointers to the complexity and duplicity of Cold War international relations.

During the Cold War, both sides tried to subvert the other. The West feared infiltration by Communist agents, not only seeking to obtain information, but, more importantly, seeking to influence events. The same was true for the Eastern bloc. It was constantly on guard against the subversive activities of the capitalist countries. Nowhere was this more the case than in the GDR. The extent to which the GDR feared ideological infiltration as a result of *Ostpolitik* can be seen in the huge growth of the *Stasi* as an organisation during this period.<sup>43</sup> Between 1969 and 1975, the number of IMs (unofficial informers) almost doubled from about 100,000 to 180,000. This type of action was something the West foresaw and hoped to be able to avert. As noted above, the question of whether the 'ideological contamination' created by détente and *Ostpolitik* would increase repression within the GDR was a matter of interest to the British Foreign Office.<sup>44</sup> The situation in the GDR

---

43. Manfred Görtemaker, 'The Collapse of the German Democratic Republic and the Role of the Federal Republic' in the *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute London*, Vol. XXV, No. 2, November 2003: 52. The *Stasi* grew to become an 'instrument of state-wide control'.

44. National Archives, FCO 33/2068, annual review of East Germany for 1972, note from James of FO to Major General Earl Cathcart in Berlin, 15 February 1973.

reflected that in the Soviet Union. Bryan Cartledge, Head of Chancery at the British Embassy in Moscow, drew up a report entitled *Détente and the 'Ideological Struggle'* in 1974 in which he described the ideological struggle from the Soviet perspective as being a 'struggle against' rather than a 'struggle for', prophylactic rather than missionary.<sup>45</sup> That is to say, the main aim was not the propagation of communist ideology in the West, but the prevention of the incursion of capitalist ideology into the Soviet bloc. In Soviet eyes, it was the period of détente rather than the period of conflict that presented the greatest ideological threat. Cartledge's paper on the ideological struggle was widely circulated within the Foreign Office, winning plaudits for its analysis, and thereby demonstrating the weight that the British attached to the concept of the ideological struggle. One diplomat, commenting on the report, wrote: 'I keep it next to my heart as a Bible!'<sup>46</sup> In reality, the West and the GDR were actually facing the same problem, namely keeping control of the destabilising effects of *Ostpolitik* and détente. Neither side wanted the boat to be rocked—or at least not until the boarding plank had been placed firmly in position.

### *Aktion Sühnezeichen*

If it is accepted that efforts made by the West to subvert the Soviet bloc were comparable with communist attempts to undermine the West, the major question which presents itself is in what manner and by what means did the West subvert the Soviet Union, the GDR, and the other members of the Soviet bloc, and how did it undertake this task while at the same time preserving the stability of these countries. A partial answer to this question is provided by the use that countries such as Britain and West Germany made of private individuals and non-state institutions behind the Iron Curtain in helping to build up hidden networks within the Soviet bloc countries linking those who had, or in the future would have, influence. These were not people who were going to take to the streets and confront Soviet tanks, but people who, it was hoped, could steer the Soviet bloc countries in a

---

45. National Archives, FCO 28/2564, *Détente and the Ideological Struggle* by Bryan Cartledge, 29 January 1974. 'Just as those responsible for the direction of the ideological offensive see in détente a period of special opportunity, so those entrusted with the more crucial defensive campaign profess to see in it a period of special danger. . . . it is precisely during the period of détente [according to Soviet counter-intelligence] that the hostile forces of imperialism and counter-revolution can be expected to be at their most dangerous . . . in the employment of subversive and underhand techniques for the dissemination of lies and slander.' The report was sent to the Foreign Secretary, Sir Alec Douglas-Home. Cartledge went on to become British Ambassador to the Soviet Union during the Gorbachev period, retiring to become an Oxford academic in 1988.

46. National Archives, FCO 28/2564, comment on Cartledge paper, 8 April 1974.

direction that was amenable to the West. It is in this area that the Church and Christian groups played a major role.<sup>47</sup>

One such all-German Christian organisation was called *Aktion Sühnezeichen* (action as a sign of atonement). It was founded in 1958 with the stated aim of making atonement for Nazi atrocities in those countries which had suffered most and carried out this work by arranging for groups of young volunteers from both East and West Germany to take part in construction projects. The countries which were particularly targeted by *Aktion Sühnezeichen* were Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union.<sup>48</sup> The organisation was inter-denominational with both Protestants and Catholics taking part. The activities of *Aktion Sühnezeichen* were closely monitored by the *Stasi*. Many reports on the organisation and its leaders are contained within the *Stasi* archive.<sup>49</sup> Particular attention was paid to its founder, Lothar Kreyssig, a leading Church figure in the GDR, and his friend and colleague in West Berlin, Erich Müller-Gangloff, a member of the West Berlin *Aktion Sühnezeichen* leadership circle and the head of the West Berlin *Evangelische Akademie*. Both men were politically well-connected. Müller-Gangloff's contacts included Egon Bahr and the West German Foreign Minister, Gerhard Schröder. The *Stasi* suspected that he worked for the CIA, though, of course, this cannot be proved. Müller-Gangloff confided in a senior *Stasi* agent, Hans-Joachim Seidowsky, who worked behind the scenes in the international field and in particular with operations related to the Churches, up until the demise of the GDR.<sup>50</sup> This relationship began at the end of the 1950s, at which time Seidowsky was posing as a disaffected young Marxist and Müller-Gangloff was attempting to recruit him into the network of reform-minded socialists that he had established in the GDR. Seidowsky's true identity became known to Müller-Gangloff in the mid 1960s. *Aktion Sühnezeichen* also had close British links, in particular with Coventry Cathedral.<sup>51</sup>

The *Stasi* saw *Aktion Sühnezeichen* as a subversive and ideologically hostile organisation. It placed its activities within the global strategy of the West, in particular *Ostpolitik*. It linked the founding of the organisation in 1958 to the start of a 'reorientation' by the West towards the use of what

---

47. For information about the activities of Church organisations and Church leaders in the GDR see Thomas, *Communing with the Enemy*.

48. With the lifting of travel restrictions in 1963, young East Germans were able to take part in work camps in these countries and did so in great numbers.

49. See, for example, MfS AP 20985/92, 20983/92, 7632/79 and 279/57 on Lothar Kreyssig; and MfS HA XX/4 1477, 2278 and 2303 on *Aktion Sühnezeichen* in the Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik.

50. See Thomas, *Communing with the Enemy*, chap. 2.

51. See Thomas, *Communing with the Enemy*, chaps. 8 and 9.

the *Stasi* described as 'more flexible methods' in the fight against the Soviet bloc.<sup>52</sup> The *Stasi* perception was that *Aktion Sühnezeichen*'s 'ultimate goal [was] to penetrate the GDR and other socialist states in order to create a hostile ideology there through the creation and exploitation of contacts and connections with the Church and other people'.<sup>53</sup> The two other countries most threatened, in the eyes of the *Stasi*, were Czechoslovakia and Poland. *Aktion Sühnezeichen* did indeed run work camps manned by idealistic young volunteers. By doing so, it also assisted in lifting the Soviet bloc countries out of the isolation in which they had existed hitherto. In addition, using the work camps as its *raison d'être*, it was able to build up networks, not just among young people, but among Church leaders, intellectuals, and others of influence—people who were dissatisfied with the rigid communist system. The *Stasi*'s view was that, in this way, *Aktion Sühnezeichen* operated as a systematic part of the West's psychological warfare and ideological infiltration programme.

There are those who argue that the *Stasi* as an organisation was paranoid and saw conspiracy where none existed. However, it cannot be disputed that *Aktion Sühnezeichen* was a politically important organisation of far greater significance than its low profile would suggest. Probably the greatest evidence of this is the meeting which two *Aktion Sühnezeichen* leaders, one of them Müller-Gangloff, had in East Berlin with Khrushchev in 1963 during the very early days of *Ostpolitik*. This had been planned as a secret meeting between Brandt and the Soviet leader, but Brandt was forced to cancel at the last minute because of political pressure. The two *Aktion Sühnezeichen* leaders took his place. The message that Müller-Gangloff gave to Khrushchev was that people such as Brandt were moving towards a less confrontational attitude towards the Soviet Union and the other socialist countries. Egon Bahr's 'Wandel durch Annäherung speech' was made a few months later at a West German *Evangelische Akademie*.

In Czechoslovakia, Müller-Gangloff founded an organisation called the Comenius Club (named after the medieval Czech philosopher), which operated in concert with *Aktion Sühnezeichen* and which was aimed specifically at promoting the idea of co-existence through private networks rather than official channels. In Müller-Gangloff's own words, the reason for founding this organisation was to reach out to Germans in East and West as well as the CSSR, Poland, Hungary, and the USSR. 'We want to use our freedom, our private initiative, to open up in the public area that which cannot be

52. BStU, MfS HA XX/4 1477, report on *Aktion Sühnezeichen*, circa 1969, p. 18.

53. BStU, MfS HA XX/4 1477, report on *Aktion Sühnezeichen*, circa 1969.

done officially,' he said, and close the 'abyss' between East and West.<sup>54</sup> The abyss must be actively overcome with a new policy with concrete objectives. 'Governments which are entrenched in Cold War positions cannot solve this problem', he said. The GDR was included in the plans from the start, although, according to Müller-Gangloff, it was 'clear to us that the abyss between the two Germanies is the hardest to bridge and will remain so for the foreseeable future'.<sup>55</sup> In the event, the Club was most active in Czechoslovakia, but lost its importance after the events of 1968.

Following the suppression of the Czech reform movement in 1968, Poland became the main target of *Aktion Sühnezeichen*. In Poland, for example, the *Stasi* recorded that *Aktion Sühnezeichen* worked closely with the Clubs of the Catholic Intelligentsia (KIK) and publications such as *Tygodnik Powszechny*, dissident organisations which were also associated with the late Pope John Paul II.<sup>56</sup> One of the aims was to counteract the feelings of resignation that had resulted following the crushing of the reform movement in Czechoslovakia. Activities were stepped up post-1968 with the *Stasi* reporting that *Aktion Sühnezeichen* had opened a bank account in Warsaw in 1969 and allocated the sum of 43,000 Deutsch Marks for activities in Poland that year, more than double the previous year.

## Conclusion

The greatest period of domestic stability in the GDR, as discussed in other chapters in this book, was also a period during which the Western world adopted a policy of co-operation rather than confrontation with the Soviet bloc. The aim was to achieve stability in Europe. As the GDR emerged from the turbulence of the post-war years and the systems of the socialist regime began to bed in, the governments of the NATO allies and West Germany gradually edged away from their hard-line rejection of the GDR as a legitimate state. Western post-war policy, which had envisaged the rollback of communism with the GDR being the most vulnerable of the socialist states, was transformed into a policy that not only accepted the GDR as a sovereign state, but positively encouraged it to achieve a sense of identity. Thus, the GDR was accepted into the international community, provided with economic assistance, and allowed to participate in the cultural, academic,

---

54. Evangelische Zentralarchiv, 97/639, Müller-Gangloff's description of the Comenius Club, 13 August 1967.

55. Ibid.

56. See George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: the Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1999), pp. 110 and 231.

and sporting world. In terms of international relations, the GDR during this period could almost be described as a normal state, although the presence of West Berlin within GDR territory and the existence of the Berlin Wall were constant reminders of the ease with which normality could turn to crisis.

During this period of 'normalisation', the West rejected the idea of isolating the GDR and moved instead towards a policy of changing it. Through increased contact, it was anticipated that slowly, over a period of many years, the GDR together with other Soviet bloc countries could be transformed. One of the main reasons why Brandt and Bahr committed themselves to *Ostpolitik* and therefore to the acceptance of the GDR was because they believed that this slow incursion into the GDR and other Soviet bloc countries would lead to their ultimate defeat. The archives of both the East and the West refer to similar strategies during this period of normalisation, although the terminology may differ. The *Stasi* feared Western subversion. The West talked in terms of undermining communism through closer contact. Importantly, neither side appeared to be referring to violent revolutions, as had been the case in the early days of the Cold War. *Détente* and *Ostpolitik* allowed and encouraged the GDR to function as a relatively normal state, but also enabled Western influences to permeate GDR society much more effectively than had been the case when the communist state existed in isolation. These policies were thus a contributory cause both of the period of stability that the GDR enjoyed during the 1960s and 1970s and of the country's eventual downfall.