

## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

# 1 The Official East German View

Officially there is 'no objective political or social basis for opposition' in the GDR since the working class is the main productive force in society and exercises political power with the aim of improving the material and cultural quality of life for the whole population. Opposition is thus only meaningful in bourgeois states, and here it comes typically from communist and workers' parties (1).

This basic premise permeates every aspect of political life in East Germany and provides the standard justification for the one-dimensional organisation of its political institutions under the leadership of the SED (Socialist Unity Party). Although the constitution guarantees freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and freedom of the press (but not the right to strike or the right to emigrate), these freedoms may only be exercised 'in accordance with the basic principles' of the constitution. These basic principles are that the GDR has taken the path of socialism and communism, and that the working class and its Marxist-Leninist party are the leading forces in East German society (2). East German commentators on the constitution thus make it clear that there can be no freedom to indulge in anti-socialist agitation or to express 'counter-revolutionary' views, since these would be 'against the rule of the people, against the leading role of the working class and its party, against the socialist foundations of the social and political order, and hence against social progress'.<sup>1</sup>

In practice these provisos ensure that the SED has the option of condemning as unconstitutional any individual or group activity of which it disapproves, and taking legal action against East German citizens who group together to demand that their 'constitutional rights' be observed.



Within the general constitutional framework for dealing with opposition, the SED has developed a wide range of specific mechanisms to ensure that it retains its leading role in East German society. Elections to the East German parliament, the *Volkskammer*, are so designed as to limit the voter's choice basically to accepting or rejecting a single list of candidates drawn up by the National Front, a body which embraces all political parties and the mass organisations and which has acknowledged the leading role of the SED. The close attention paid to who does and does not turn out to vote ensures a high poll, and the right to cast one's assenting vote openly effectively inhibits those wishing to make use of the right to cast their vote in the privacy of a booth, the assumption being that a secret vote is a vote against the list. Thus, in the elections of 1976 the poll was 98.58 per cent, and 99.86 per cent of votes cast were in favour of the list.<sup>2</sup>

Seats in the 500 strong *Volkskammer* are allocated according to a formula which is unaffected by the election results. Although the SED has just 127 seats, the fact that many members of the *Volkskammer* who represent mass organisations such as the trade unions and the FDJ (Free German Youth) are also SED members, guarantees the SED an indirect majority (at the start of the seventies, 292 votes).<sup>3</sup> Obtaining a majority, however, is not essential for the SED, since the statutes of the mass organisations and the four non-communist parties expressly acknowledge the leading role of the SED. The *Volkskammer* is not regarded by delegates as a forum for airing dissenting views, and a glance at the reports on the proceedings of the Twelfth Party Congress of the NDPD (National Democratic Party of Germany) in April 1982 confirms that its loyalty to the SED line is beyond question, with Erich Honecker's speech to the Congress on the need to strengthen and protect the socialist state being paraphrased back to him by the NDPD delegates in their speech of welcome.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, despite the involvement of the Evangelical Church in the unofficial peace movement in the GDR, the party for Christians, the CDU (Christian Democratic Union), has been at pains to express its disapproval of the movement and thus to remain in step with the SED.<sup>5</sup>

The one-dimensional organisation of political institutions also means that party resolutions are binding on all other political groups in the GDR. In order to ensure that these resolutions

are adhered to the SED has established the principle that party members should occupy senior posts in the state apparatus and the economy, and that the Central Committee of the SED 'steers the work of the elected central organs and organisations of the state and society through the party groups established within them'. Hence the chairmen of the Council of State and the Council of Ministers as well as the Minister of National Defence and the President of the *Volkskammer* are all members of the Politburo. The parallel structure of the state and the party and the presence of party groups as watchdogs at all levels in the state and mass organisations also help to ensure that party resolutions are put into practice (3). Although there is evidence that in the past these resolutions were not always acted upon with the zeal expected by the party,<sup>6</sup> there is at present no sign of any serious challenge to the authority of the party emerging from within the state apparatus or mass organisations. Essentially they are instruments in the hands of the SED.

The dominant principle of political life in the GDR is democratic centralism. In theory this involves regular elections of all party organs and free discussion of party policy on the one hand, and decisions which are absolutely binding for all lower level party organs on the other. Western observers of the GDR generally portray the practice as a system of 'consultative authoritarianism' in which the democratic element takes second place to the centralist principle and is focused on how best to achieve predetermined goals.<sup>7</sup> Democratic centralism is not restricted to the SED, however, for it is also the principle which determines how the state is run and, just as importantly, how it relates to the party. A hierarchy thus emerges which embraces the SED, the other parties and mass organisations, as well as the entire state apparatus. And at the head of this hierarchy stands the SED leadership.

The SED also ensures its supremacy by means of its cadre policy. Cadres are highly qualified and politically reliable individuals, selected and trained to take on key posts not just within the party but in all spheres of public life (4). An essential element of this policy is the system based on nomenclature – an index of those posts which may only be filled by candidates who have been scrutinised by the party. Examples from within the party range from members of the Central Committee down to the secretaries of the basic organisations. In the state apparatus the party moni-



tors and controls appointments from the level of ministers down to that of bank managers, and in the economy directors of the largest combines and directors of small-scale enterprises alike have to be confirmed in office by the party.<sup>8</sup>

Within the considerable limitations imposed on its members, the SED allows, indeed officially encourages, 'criticism and self-criticism'. It is the right of every party member to criticise the actions of party functionaries, and anyone suppressing such criticism may be called to account (3, 5). Whenever the party feels that internal criticism is becoming excessive, however, it reminds the membership that although the SED is a party of revolutionaries and therefore indulges in criticism and self-criticism, it is not a 'party of mere critics'. Moreover, one must distinguish between criticism and anti-socialist criticism.

Ultimately, it is argued, criticism must be judged not according to its severity or quantity, but according to whether or not it is loyal to the party and strengthens the socialist order.<sup>9</sup> Yet the Honecker era began with an ideological shift at the highest level in apparent recognition of the tensions and conflicts in East German society: at the Eighth Party Congress of June 1971 the official concept of a socialist human community (*Menschengemeinschaft*) was abandoned because, as Politburo member Kurt Hager later explained, it overestimated the closeness of the various social classes and strata. This shift inevitably tended to erode the complementary concept of an identity of interests between the individual and society as a whole, a concept which in turn was a key element in the argument that there could be no justifiable opposition in the GDR. With the apparent blessing of the Soviet Union the idea of a non-harmonious dialectic under socialism also became respectable.<sup>10</sup>

These ideological adjustments seemed to be the green light for a more frank discussion of East Germany's problems, yet they also had a part to play in reaffirming the leading role of the party in the post-Ulbricht period. Under Ulbricht, it was suggested, Marxism-Leninism (and, by extension, the party itself) had tended to take second place to disciplines which projected society as a self-regulating mechanism.<sup>11</sup> Reasserting the primacy of Marxism-Leninism and of the party thus meant 'repoliticising' society, with party and state emerging more clearly as in charge of social development. This in turn posed potential problems for

the SED, since the party became more readily identifiable as responsible for any shortcomings of the system.<sup>12</sup>

Such was the ambiguous ideological backdrop against which opposition was to unfold during the Honecker era.