

Assess the role of the opposition in the GDR in the 1980s. Illustrate with examples from at least one oppositional group/movement.

The history of GDR was, outwardly at least, one of apparent political stability compared to its former Warsaw Pact neighbours [Fulbrook 1993:265-266]. This superficial quiescence was not due to any absence of mass discontent with the 'political constraints and material shortcomings of life in the GDR' [Fulbrook 1993:266] or because of a lack of political insubordination, but due to the power and ruthless efficiency of the state repression apparatus [Opp & Gern 1993:659], which tended to prevent popular dissent from being galvanised, formalised or mobilised.

All voluntary associations were controlled by the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) and heavily infiltrated by the Stasi (State Security Service). The SED recognised no 'objective political or social basis for opposition' [Woods 1986:3] and groups which opposed party ideology or indulged in 'anti-socialist activity' were deemed '*staatsfeindlich*' ('hostile to the state') and simply banned [Opp & Gern 1993:661; Woods 1986:17]. A workers' uprising in June 1953 had been quashed by Soviet intervention and followed by a wave of sackings, arrests and party purges of '*feindlich-negative Kräfte*' ('hostile-negative forces') [Rock 2000:9-10; Fulbrook 1995:201] until 'an atmosphere of intimidation and passive resignation eventually prevailed' [Rock 2000:9].

Mary Fulbrook contends that, while the history of dissent in the GDR had been largely oppositional in nature (that is, directed *against* the political regime), paradoxically, the dissent of the 1980s was directed at policy reform from within [1993:266]. 'Abolition of

the GDR did not seem to be part of their aims' [Childs 2001:81]. The spontaneous spread of non-violent demonstrations across East Germany in the autumn of 1989, which led to the collapse of the GDR, was not the culmination of growing and well-organised opposition directed *against* the state. Instead, the protests spread organically among a growing minority of grassroots reformist political activists who sought instead 'to improve it from within' [Fulbrook 1995:201].

Conversely, Pedro Ramet contends that opposition to the system itself played the leading role in its downfall. He argues that results of SED policies – poor economic performance, environmental pollution, militarization of East German society, tight political controls and human rights violations – increased the sources of disaffection (which he characterises as latent opposition to the system itself), while a growing sense of political efficacy among oppositionist networks helped to convert latent disaffection into active dissent [Ramet 1984: 86,110].

Whichever observer is closer to the truth, **in order to assess the role of Ramet's opposition groups or Fulbrook's reformist activists, it is important also to evaluate the role of domestic and international political contexts, and the regime's responses to them**, which not only facilitated the development of opposition and reformist groups, but also contributed directly to the disintegration of the GDR. Political discontent in the GDR remained a constant, but what was different about the 1980s was a combination of the changing domestic political and international contexts, which in turn shaped 'the goals and forms of organisation of that discontent' [Fulbrook 1995:201].

Domestic Political Context

From the late 1970s, a number of specific policy issues, including poor economic performance, the militarization of East German education and society, increased repression and environmental degradation, drew the concern of a growing minority of young adults, the so-called 'GDR generation' who had grown up 'in the shadow of the Berlin Wall' [Dennis 2003:157; Fulbrook 1995:203].

East German economic expectations had been inflated during the economic boom of the 1960s, only to be frustrated by the economic slowdown of the mid-1970s [Ramet 1984:107]. The GDR's response caused its trade deficits and debt to escalate to the largest in the Eastern bloc by the early 1980s, industrial and agricultural output to slump and unemployment to soar. GDR planners drastically reduced investments and imports, which impacted food supplies, drove down living standards and, since many East Germans held the regime responsible, prompted factory workers to strike in a number of cities [Ramet 1984:107-109].

Despite widespread objections to the demonization of West Germany as a pretext for the militarisation of East German society, the conscription of women, discrimination against those of pacifist conviction and the introduction of pre-military training in schools, the SED insisted that 'peace must be armed' [Woods 1986:47], which only amplified East German anti-militarist and pacifist sentiments and provided the impetus for the unofficial peace initiatives of the 1980s [Fulbrook 1993:277].

When Erich Honecker succeeded Walter Ulbricht as party leader in May 1971, his ‘no taboos’ speech promised a degree of cultural liberalization, and the GDR’s nominal commitment to the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 raised public expectations and increased public pressure for the regime to meet its official commitments. The Helsinki agreements in particular inspired various single-issue civil rights campaigns and contributed to the emergence of an admittedly fragmented political counter-culture [Rock 2000:9-10].

On 6 March 1978, an agreement between Church and State permitted a “controlled ventilation of dissent” in which open debate was tolerated in the context of prayer gatherings on church premises. From the mid-1980s, protest groups gradually proliferated, organised, strategized and networked under the church umbrella and finally coalesced in 1989 to destabilise the political regime [Fulbrook 1993:279; 1995:206-207; Rock 2000:12;].

Environmental degradation was another major concern in a number of East German cities – air pollution in Leipzig was more than twice that in Chicago or Tokyo [Ramet 1984:99] – and disaffection with environmental policy was translated into activism [Ramet 1984:99].

International Political Context

The International political context also played an important role in the implosion of the GDR. Indeed, some commentators find it difficult to imagine that the East German revolution might have taken place at all had it not been prompted by events outside East

Germany [Minnerup 1994:69]. The US rapprochements with the USSR and China drove the GDR towards détente and increased contact with the West. Since 1972, West Germans were allowed to visit East Germany and West German journalists were permitted to establish offices in East Berlin [Woods 1986:8]. East German citizens increasingly tuned in to West German broadcasts. Western ideas seeped across the border and comparisons in living standards and political freedoms were inevitably drawn, which fostered both dissatisfaction and hopes of systemic change [Woods 1986:9].

The accession of Mikhail Gorbachev to the Soviet Premiership and his embrace of *glasnost* (openness to popular and media scrutiny) and *perestroika* (restructuring of the Soviet political and economic system) amplified hopes for socialist reform [Fulbrook 1993:278], while the ageing Honecker's resistance to such notions, exemplified by his public endorsement of the Chinese leadership's violent suppression of the Tiananmen democracy protests, heightened East German frustrations and bolstered grass-roots movements for reform [Opp & Gern 1993:675]. The withdrawal of Soviet military support underpinning repressive Eastern Bloc regimes also inspired new confidence in political activists in East Germany.

While Fulbrook attributes the destabilisation of the GDR to the growth (alongside opposition groups) of reformist activist movements [1993:266], other commentators regard both opposition and reformist activists, courageous as they were, as less significant to the collapse of the East German regime than the émigré movement, which set in motion the Politburo crisis, resulting in the overthrow of Honecker [Torpey 1992:24]. The numbers who applied to leave the GDR represented by far the largest

group of dissatisfied citizens [Woods 1986:42]. Over one-third of a million East Germans exited in 1989 alone [Torpey 1992:25-26], while opposition groups could count only 15,000 members at most [Opp & Gern 1993:670]. In the same year, the first demonstrators to take to the streets were not reformist or opposition campaigners, but *Antragsteller* (emigrant applicants), demanding the freedom to leave East Germany [Torpey 1992:32-33].

Role of opposition groups

Within this destabilising international and domestic context, activist groups also played their role in the 'gentle revolution' in a number of ways. Although they represented a small fraction of the population – probably fewer than 15,000 members from among a population of about 16 million [Opp & Gern 1993:670] – such groups played a modest mobilising and co-ordinating role in demonstrations and other collective political activities.

The protected space created for dissent by the 'uneasy' Church-State coalition allowed a civic culture to emerge in the GDR [Rock 2000:17]. Dissidents were able to develop an alternative political culture, formulate political initiatives and articulate views outside such official channels as the state-sanctioned peace and ecology movements [Woods 2003:157].

Conversely, the 'safe haven' of the protestant churches also facilitated state overview and control through infiltration and surveillance. As many as half of the members of the unofficial peace movement were Stasi collaborators (*inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*, or Stasi

IMs), who infiltrated to incite dissent and undermine opposition groups from within [Dennis 2003:158-159].

Throughout the 1980s, dissident initiatives such as the unofficial peace movement's annual 'peace week' (*Friedensekaden*) allowed activists from across the GDR to make contacts and build informal networks. Until late 1989, when disparate groups united under the banners of such opposition organisations as *Neues Forum* and *Demokratischer Aufbruch* [Rock 2000:13], they remained intentionally leaderless, regional and autonomous, which made them harder for state security to subdue but which also hampered their mobilisation efforts [Opp & Gern 1993:670].

As dissident groups grew in prominence and confidence, the Stasi changed its focus from infiltration and intimidation to mass arrests, which in turn provoked mass protests [Fulbrook 1993:281] – the 'final political fireworks' – including spontaneous mass demonstrations on Leipzig's Karl Marx Platz in October 1989 and on Berlin's Alexanderplatz in November [Rock 2000:13].

From the early 1980s, the regime had recognised the potential of activist initiatives to foment public unrest and responded with increased surveillance [Woods 1986:47].

Nevertheless, the extent to which state decisions and processes were actually *influenced* by these opposition movements remained modest, as illustrated by the SED's insistence on the expansion of pre-military training in schools despite vocal opposition from dissidents and activists. Only in October 1989 did local authorities finally initiate dialogues with citizens' movements to discuss political change [Rock 2000:18].

Examples

Central to the emergence of East Germany's alternative political culture was the unofficial peace movement. In fact, there was no centralized 'movement', but a number of separate initiatives which became increasingly politicized throughout the 1980s [Fulbrook 1995:210]. The first, most influential and most audacious of such groups to operate independently of church was the *Initiative für Freiden und Menschenrechte* (IFM), which met in private homes [Kamenitsa 1998:332]. IFM membership was small and intentionally informal, 'anyone who signed a petition or joined in an activity was deemed to belong' [Fulbrook 1995: 219]. The group openly articulated political opposition [Dale 2005:128-128], published open letters, petitions and appeals demanding greater freedom of expression, assembly and travel and improved East-West contacts [Fulbrook 1995:218].

The IFM published a regular pamphlet called *Grenzfall*. With the help of IM Infiltrators, the Stasi organised a raid on the IFM's print-run in Leipzig and arrested a number of leading IFM figures. The arrests led to public demonstrations for their release, which embarrassed the SED and the Stasi, galvanised opposition efforts and stimulated wider public protests [Dale 2005: 132; Fulbrook 1995:236-237].

The IFM also forged links with other dissident movements in Eastern Europe as well as West German political parties [Dale 2005:127] and several IFM activists went on to play key roles in organisations such as *Neues Forum* and *Demokratie Jetzt* [Dale 2005:128; Fulbrook 1995:219].

The first of these, *Neues Forum*, was constituted in September 1989, to provide a political platform for citizens from any and all dissident groups to debate the problems of East German society, and to propose reforms, but not to overthrow the regime. It was immediately classified as *staatsfeindlich* [Rock 2000:13]. Two days after *Neues Forum's* appeal for legal status was denied, *Demokratie Jetzt* published its own programme of oppositional demands for democratic transformation of the GDR, which went beyond *Neues Forum* in its criticism [Childs 2001:77].

With the exception of the IFM, 'none of the groups that rose to prominence in the autumn of [1989] existed before September other than on paper' [Torpey 1992:21]. The first independent, organised and genuinely 'oppositional' groups were not formed until August 1989 but, by this time, grass-roots citizens' movements, spontaneous protests and emigration were already gathering unstoppable momentum and the SED and its security apparatus were already disintegrating [Childs 2001:81].

Conclusion

It is difficult to disentangle the confluence of international and domestic political events, and the activities of reformist activists and other opposition groups (including emigration campaigners), in steadily undermining SED control and bringing about the demise of the GDR, but there is little doubt that each played a substantive role.

Activist reformists, even more than outright opponents of the regime itself, were instrumental in the emergence of an alternative political and civic culture in East Germany. Dissident initiatives facilitated contacts and informal networks among activists

from across the country. Forced by the state organs of surveillance and repression to remain largely leaderless and informal in structure, the profile of these groups was perhaps lower in the GDR itself than it was in the Western media, which undoubtedly hampered their efforts to mobilise the population [Opp & Gern 1993:671].

Unlike Polish *Solidarność*, there is little evidence that East German opposition groups were 'widely accepted reference groups,' or that they led the largely spontaneous demonstrations of 1989, or significantly shaped the incentives of East Germans to protest [Opp & Gern 1963:671]. It was not the mobilization activities of these opposition groups which triggered mass demonstrations on East German streets in 1989 [Opp & Gern 1993:671], nevertheless among the demonstrators, few of whom were affiliated with any opposition group, these organisations received the most media attention which enabled them to shape the narrative of events [Torpey 1992:31].

The East German transformation process did not result from organised opposition to Communist rule; instead, the regime finally collapsed when the Berlin Wall, the 'last remaining support' of the SED, was swept away by the 1989 emigration crisis [Torpey 1992:24]. Opposition groups were ultimately 'catapulted willy-nilly into the forefront of a movement they neither created nor led' [Torpey 1992:38].

[2,300 words]

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