Downfall

Erich Honecker, the Political Crisis of 1989, and the Fall of the Berlin Wall

Ryan Heeb
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Nineteen eighty-nine was a year of dramatic change. Communist regimes that had long embraced restrictions on the rights of citizens began the process of liberalization. "Revolutions" swept through Eastern Europe as reform-minded leaders gained power and people took to the streets demanding greater freedoms. The Cold War was thawing as talk of peace and freedom spread. Yet, change in German Democratic Republic (GDR or East Germany) manifested itself quite differently than in other counties such as Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and even the Soviet Union. The GDR lacked a well-organized and active opposition movement until late in 1989. Additionally, as reforms swept through communist countries of Eastern Europe, the leader of the GDR and Socialist Unity Party of German (SED), Erich Honecker, dug his heels in and refused to acknowledge any problems and, consequently, the need for reform in his beloved communist Germany.

The beginnings of the political crisis for Honecker in the GDR can be traced to the May 1989 elections. With many suspecting fraud, East German citizens started to raise questions about the need for reforms. The GDR's economy had become stagnant and political corruption more evident. With a heavy-handed Honecker still in power, it was unlikely any reform would happen. Dramatic changes in other countries, however, began to put pressure on Honecker and the GDR regime. Reformers had taken power in Hungary and on May 2, 1989, they began opening the border with Austria. Eventually, East Germans poured into the country trying to escape to freedom in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG or West Germany) via the opening in the Austrian-Hungarian border. This "emigration crisis," that ensued would strain the GDR and test the leadership capabilities of Honecker as well as the stability of East Germany.

As East German citizens continued to spill into Hungary hoping to have a chance to leave for the west, Honecker ordered the German border with Czechoslovakia closed. In response to

this latest attempt to maintain control of the citizens, the East German people slowly took to the streets, calling for substantial reforms. During the 40th anniversary celebration of the GDR, crowds turned on Honecker and chanted for Mikhail Gorbachev (the reform-minded Secretary General of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) to save them. Public opposition grew considerably after this as what were once street protests with a few thousand people turned into mass demonstration marches with hundreds of thousands of participants. Still, Honecker refused to budge, only acknowledging that a dialogue with reform groups may be necessary, but never acting on this.

As it became more apparent the SED and the GDR could not survive without addressing possible reforms, Egon Krenz (Chairman of the State Council of the GDR) and several other reformers within the SED took matters into their own hands. During a meeting with the East German Politburo Krenz introduced a resolution sought to remove Honecker from power. The resolution was, of course, resisted by Honecker who had declared in the days before the mid-October meeting, "If Comrade Krenz introduced the resolution in the Politburo, he [Honecker] would consider this a move against him personally."[1] Honecker also pledged to "try to prevent the resolution from being adopted."[2] Yet, "After a long discussion all other members of the Politburo, with the exception of one comrade, spoke out in favor of the declaration," thus removing Honecker from power.[3] Krenz and the other reformers began a desperate attempt to salvage the legitimacy of the SED and GDR, pushing to reform the economy and ease travel restrictions. It was this push that would ultimately, although accidentally, open the Berlin Wall.

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[1] "Memorandum of Conversation Between Egon Krenz and Mikhail Gorbachev," November 1, 1989, *Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive.* Accessed February 2014.
[2] "Memorandum of Conversation Between Egon Krenz and Mikhail Gorbachev."
[3] "Memorandum of Conversation Between Egon Krenz and Mikhail Gorbachev."

In a press conference on November 9th, Günter Schabowski, a spokesperson for the SED, announced a new travel policy saying, "Permanent exit can take place via all border crossing from the GDR to the FRG and West Berlin respectively."[4] This policy allowed citizens to apply for temporary and permanent exit visas without presenting a need for travel. The change was only to ease the harsh travel policies of the Honecker regime. The resolution stated, "Applications by private individuals for travel abroad can now be made without the previously existing requirements (of demonstrating a need to travel or providing familial relationships). The travel authorizations will be issued within a short period of time. Grounds for denial will only be applied in particularly exceptional cases."[5] Journalists in the room, and even Schabowski himself, misinterpreted the meaning of the new policy, thinking it had announced the opening of the Berlin Wall.

As word spread with the help of the media, a trickle of East German citizens cautiously approached the wall to test the new travel policy. Shortly a stream of hundreds of people walked toward the gate that had separated Germans for 28 years. Tension mounted as the guards, who were not told of the sudden policy change, tried to find out what had happened and what they should do. Soon, they gave in to the demands of the increasing crowds, opening the barriers and letting the people cross into freedom in West Berlin. Within a year of this border opening the communist regime in the GDR dissolved as the two Germanys were reunified on October 3, 1990.

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[4] "Günter Schabowski's Press Conference in the GDR International Press Center," November 9, 1989, *Wilson Center Digital Archive,* http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113049, Accessed March 2014.

[5] " Material for the Meeting/For Circulation in the Council of ministers: Temporary Transition Rules for Travel and Permanent Exit from the GDR," November 9, 1989, *Wilson Center Digital Archive,* http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113046, Accessed March 2014.

While the events leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall seem to be straightforward, there is a great deal of variance between scholars on how to interpret these events. Each scholar points to his or her own combination of factors that contributed to the fall. Stephen Kotkin argues in *Uncivil Society* that the "collapse" of the Eastern European regimes (including the GDR) was largely the result of the "incompetent, blinkered, and ultimately bankrupt Communist establishments," which he terms the "uncivil society."[6] As such, much of Kotkin's analysis focuses on the failures of the leadership of the Communist regimes as well as their economic shortcomings. When it comes to the GDR, Kotkin puts forward a compelling, yet largely incomplete argument, as to why the Berlin Wall fell and the state collapsed. He claims, "The GDR collapsed because the Soviet Union let it. More fundamentally, though, East Germany was crushed by its West German counterpart, before being abandoned by its Soviet backstop as well as by fellow bloc members."[7] Kotkin clearly places importance on outside factors acting on the "bankrupt" GDR regime. What he does get right is the importance of the economic failures of the GDR regime. Without increased debt and its inherent economic problems, the people of the GDR may not have been as quick to leave the country.

Mary Elise Sarotte takes an alternative approach to explain the fall of the wall in her eminent study, *1989*. Central to this work is the question "what changes in 1989 to yield the sudden opening of the Berlin Wall?"[8] To answer this she points to five "significant developments." The first "development" is the failure of European countries to use violence

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[6] Stephen Kotkin, *Uncivil Society* (New York: The Modern Library, 2010), *xiv.*
[7] Stephen Kotkin, *Uncivil Society*, 40.
[8] Mary Elise Sarotte, *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 15.

against protestors, which she terms the "Tiananmen example."[9] The second is that Americans "stepped back" from Europe, allowing Gorbachev and the USSR to do so as well. The third is the East German opposition movement began to challenge the status quo. Fourth, the opposition movements gained confidence. Finally, Sarotte points to the fact that "television transforms reality at a crucial moment," referring to the role of the media in spreading the news about the opening of the wall.[10] While these "developments" are important and insightful, the real value of Sarotte's work comes when she argues that the opening of the Hungarian border to GDR citizens and others "was one of the single most important events leading to the breakdown of the old Cold War order."[11] As we will see, her analysis of the impact the border opening had on the political situation in the GDR is quite accurate. Sarotte's emphasis on the border opening serves to highlight the role ordinary citizens played in brining down the East German state. While her assessment of the border opening and the power of the people that emanated from this event is important, she largely fails to address a necessary component of the political crisis in the GDR in 1989: Honecker. It is imperative to consider that Honecker did not yield to reforms, even as other leaders did. Thus, as the developments of 1989 are considered, it is also essential to note the "factors" that remained the same, furthering the crisis in a way.

Conversely, Corey Ross's chapter on the fall of the Berlin Wall in *The East German Dictatorship* highlights the political problems Honecker and the SED faced as pressure mounted. Important for our purposes is Ross's argument "that at each critical juncture it was collective action 'from below' on the part of ordinary East Germans that pushed the process of regime

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[9] Mary Elise Sarotte, *1989,* 18.
[10] Mary Elise Sarotte, *1989,* 16.
[11] Mary Elise Sarotte, *1989*, 31.

erosion beyond the point of no return…"[12] Perhaps most importantly Ross argues, "it would seem that the internal pressures for change largely followed and were made possible in the first place by changes in the external environment."[13] Ross's argument largely gives rise to the concept that internal and external factors created a political crisis for Honecker and the SED.

While Ross focuses on the political pressure from below, Mary Fulbrook puts much, if not all, of the responsibility for the fall on the SED leadership and mainly on Honecker. In *Anatomy of A Dictatorship* she points to the decreasing legitimacy of the regime, showing the mass exodus of citizens through the Hungarian border as well as the increase in the number of protestors calling for reform chipped away at whatever credibility that Honecker had left. For Fulbrook, the fall of the Berlin Wall was the result of a political chess match as the protestors in the streets forced Honecker's hand by remaining peaceful, thus deeming violence illegitimate. As we will see, however, the resistance on behalf of Honecker to reforms and the will of the people drained the SED of credibility at a pivotal time politically.

All of this literature provides a good starting point for our analysis. It appears that a political crisis was created in East Germany in 1989 and Honecker's mishandling of the circumstances and events in the GDR led to a substantial loss of legitimacy, resulting in his downfall as well as the fall of the Berlin Wall. This political crisis was the result of a combination of external and internal pressures. Two major external pressures made the political situation in the GDR evermore difficult for Honecker by exacerbating his failures in leadership. First, the presence of the thriving FRG, just steps away from the stagnant GDR, magnified the economic problems and deficiencies in human rights of East Germany. Second, reform

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[12] Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship* (London: Arnold, 2002), 138.
[13] Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship*,135.

movements elsewhere in Eastern Europe caused Honecker seem evermore like a hardened communist, as he refused to entertain the ideas of reform. While these external pressures influenced the circumstances in the GDR, there were three internal pressures that increased the already substantial political pressure in East Germany. The first was the "crisis of image" Honecker's positions and decisions during 1989 created. This crisis was caused in large part by changes in countries surrounding the GDR, making Honecker seem out of touch with the reality of the dire political situation in the GDR. The second internal pressure was Honecker's health. Plagued by gallbladder problems during a pivotal time in 1989, he was taken out of the public eye, leaving East Germans and others to speculate on the longevity of their heavy-handed leader and his regime. Finally, political pressure from the people increased substantially throughout 1989. In response to reforms granted in other countries and general dissatisfaction with the regime GDR citizens began to leave the country in droves and, once their "escape route" was closed, took to the streets to openly protest the refusal of the regime to reform. Ultimately, the political pressure would become so great reformers within the SED regime would act to remove Honecker and begin to institute reforms that would bring down the Berlin Wall.

The analysis will begin with an examination of the two external pressures, showing how these created a political atmosphere for Honecker that left little, if any, room for error. We will then move on to the three internal pressures, presenting how the political crisis in the GDR in 1989 manifested itself. We will see that Honecker, by trying to hold on to power for as long as he did, only lengthened the political crisis, significantly decreasing the chances of successful reforms. His leadership during 1989 only proved detrimental to communism in Germany.

The Federal Republic

East Germany was unlike any other Eastern European communist state because it was created not only from a communist takeover at the end of World War II, but also by partitioning an existing country. The division created a capitalist and a communist state, and a sort of competition between the two states. The partition provided the perfect laboratory to determine which economic system was more viable in the 20th century. The FRG not only provided a sense of competition, but also a great source of political pressure throughout 1989. This pressure came from the dramatic differences between the two countries in economics and human rights as well as the FRG's covert actions to undermine the SED regime. Dirk Philipsen points to the unique pressure West Germany placed on East Germany:

> What distinguished East Germany from all other Eastern European countries in transition was the existence of a much bigger and wealthier Western neighbor, a nation which had never given up on the claim to be the representative of all Germans—West and East…The preamble to the West German Basic Law (the West German constitution) state that the document was also formulated 'on behalf of those Germans to whom participation was denied' and called for 'the entire German people…to achieve in free self-determination the unity and freedom of Germany.'[14]

The pressure coming from the mere comparisons between East and West Germany would become pivotal in the removal of Honecker and the Berlin Wall. With the FRG providing a viable and attractive alternative to East German citizens (should they take the risk of emigration), few, if any, political mistakes could be made by the Honecker regime. As we will see, several political "mishaps" occurred during 1989 that ultimately led to the largest political mistake of 1989: the announcement of the "opening" of the Berlin Wall.

The FRG's booming economy made the GDR's economy, considered to be thriving for eastern European communist's standards, look like it was struggling for survival. In 1989, the

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[14] Dirk Philipsen, *We Were the People: Voice from East Germany's Revolutionary Autumn of 1989* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 3.

CIA World Factbook estimated the FRG's gross domestic product (GDP) to be $945.7 billion and the growth rate at 4.3%.[15] Across the border, the GDR's estimated GDP was only $159.5 billion, with estimated growth at 1.2%.[16] The difference between the two countries is even more astounding when it is consider the FRG had a GDP per capita of $15,300 while the GDR's was $9,679.[17] It is clear from these numbers the FRG certainly offered the greater opportunity of economic prosperity. The economic differences were made worse because of the awareness of the East and West German people of the economic disparities between the two countries. West German television broadcasts reached most of East Germany with the exception of the areas, which the TV signal did not reach, deemed the "valley of the clueless." While the FRG had a consumer based capitalist economy offering a variety of goods, the GDR economy simply met the basic needs of its citizens with little choice or availability of consumer goods. For East German citizens, the economic differences became a source of motivation to leave the country to take advantage of economic opportunities existing just across the border. Political freedom also played an important role as some placed a higher importance on freedom of speech and travel that were promised by the FRG.

West Germany made the decision for those who wanted to leave easier and, consequently, increased political pressure on Honecker and the SED, by refusing to recognize

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[15] "Germany, Federal Republic of Economy – 1990," 3/12/2014, http://www.theodora.com/wfb1990/germany_federal_republic_of/germany_federal_republic_of_economy.html.
[16] "German Democratic Republic Economy – 1990," 3/12/2014, http://www.theodora.com/wfb1990/german_democratic_republic/german_democratic_republic_economy.html.
[17] "German Democratic Republic Economy – 1990," and "Germany, Federal Republic of Economy – 1990."

GDR citizenship.[18] This was an attempt "to maintain a common sense of nationality," which served two functions: first to deny the East German state any sort of legitimacy that may come from a separate nationality and, second, to entice GDR citizens to emigrate by making assimilation into West German society as easy as possible.[19] Thus, Honecker was presented with a major legitimation problem. Writing in 1989, G. Jonathan Greenwald, the political counselor to the American Embassy in the GDR, highlighted this problem by stating that the FRG made solutions to the deteriorating economic and immigration situations few and far between: "The GDR cannot adopt many solutions of Eastern Europe's radical reformers lest it be left with only *Realpolitik* [politics based on "real factors" rather than ideology] justification for a separate room in the European House. Between unadulterated Western capitalism and neo-Stalinism, the SED has only one choice."[20] Greenwald suggested that for the GDR to survive Honecker was going to have to embrace communism and be very selective about any sort of reforms. Too much reform would take away the state's right to exist. Too little reform would increase the tension with other countries in the communist bloc and the desire for East Germans to leave the country. Having to strike the right balance made Honecker's political situation particularity delicate.

Honecker and the other SED leaders knew what was at stake with the FRG across the border, enticing citizens, and with them legitimacy, to escape to economic and personal freedom. In an October 1989 cable from the American Embassy in Bonn, Germany, to the Secretary of State in Washington, D.C. it was reported, "Since the early seventies the underlying tension in the FRG's relations with the GDR has been the fact that West Germany's ultimate objective in

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[18] Konrad H. Jarausch, *The Rush to German Unity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 17.
[19] Konrad H. Jarausch, *The Rush to German Unity,* 17.
[20] G. Jonathan Greenwald, *Berlin Witness: An American Diplomat's Chronicle f East Germany's Revolution* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 114.

its policy of 'small steps'–otherwise known as the Policy of Dialogue and Cooperation—is the dissolution of the GDR state as it exists today."[21] This shows, in particular, the GDR facing not only indirect political pressure from comparisons made between the two countries, but also direct pressure as a result of FRG policy. It was predicted, "Both the FRG's traditional policy of small steps and reform in the GDR (viewed as inevitable) will draw the GDR closer to the FRG."[22] From this analysis and the predictions it is easy to see the FRG was actively working against the GDR to undermine East German legitimacy and start the "implosion" of the state.

The FRG's work against the GDR is best exemplified by its dealings with the Hungarians as the border between Hungary and Austria was dismantled. Helmut Kohl (the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany) played an active role in allowing GDR "refugees" in Hungary travel to the FRG:

> In late August…[Kohl] secretly agreed to provide one billion deutschmarks to cover Hungary's budget deficit and on September 1 Hungarian Foreign Minister Gyula Horn personally flew to East Berlin to repudiate the long-standing travel agreement with the German Democratic Republic. On September 11 the public announcement came: all East Germans waiting in Hungary and any who wished to do so in the future could cross from Hungary into Austria and make for West Germany.[23]

As a result, Honecker and SED members began to place responsibility for the emigation crisis with the FRG, refusing to acknowledge that GDR policies could have possibly led to dissatisfaction among the population and with it a willingness to emigrate. While trying to resolve the ongoing emigration crisis, Oskar Fischer, the GDR Minister of Foreign Affairs, highlighted the role of West Germany: "It seems clear that Hungary will be yielding to the

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[21] Cable, American Embassy in Bonn to Secretary of State in Washington, D.C., October 1989, Cold War International History Project.
[22] Cable, American Embassy in Bonn to Secretary of State in Washington, D.C.
[23] Galle Stokes, *The Walls Came Tumbling Down: Collapse and Rebirth in Eastern Europe* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 162.

pressure from the FRG."[24] The leading ideologist of the SED, Kurt Hager, went even further when he said "the Hungarian position worsens with respect to us—in favor of Bonn. They will obey the orders of Bonn."[25] The *Neues Deutschland,* the official newspaper of the SED, also accused the FRG of actively working to destabilize the regime: "This coupe from the FRG, is neither an accidental nor a single move. It is part of imperialism's crusade against socialism as a whole in the course of which special prescriptions are given for each of the fraternal states from Berlin through to Beijing."[26] Finally, Honecker, in his 40th anniversary speech, blamed West Germany for the unrest saying, "In sharp contrast to our politics stand the revanchist demands of FRG politicians, spurring concern and protests through the world."[27] Honecker and other SED leaders clearly saw the FRG as an active threat to their regime.

The FRG provided a comparison that was most unwelcome by Honecker and the SED. From the variety and availability of consumer goods to the freedoms enjoyed by West Germans, the GDR could hardly compete with the capitalist state. Thus, East Germans were presented with a viable, and eventually attainable alternative to communist society in East Germany. The promise of a consumer based society and basic freedoms lured many away and others into mass demonstrations, increasing the political pressure on the SED. East Germans faced a bleak reality, as there was little hope for a change in their society. They could, instead, escape and find hope just across the border. In this way, West Germany provided a source of indirect pressure.

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[24] *Transcript of SED Politburo Session held on 5 Sept. 1989,* National Security Archive.
[25] *Transcript of SED Politburo Session held on 5 Sept. 1989.*
[26] *The "Great Coup" from the FRG,* Commentary by *Neues Deutschland,* 2 September 1989, accessed 2/18/2014, http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/coup.htm. Accessed February 2014.
[27] "Erich Honecker on the 40th Anniversary of the GDR (October 6,1989," *German history in Documents and Images,* http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=2877, Accessed February 2014.

Additionally, the FRG directly pressured Honecker and the SED by providing incentives to the Hungarian government to open their border to East German immigrants. These incentives caused a mass exodus of GDR citizens, which took much, if not all, of the legitimacy of the Honecker regime with it. While the FRG was hardly the only source of pressure for East Germany in 1989, it provided a catalyst for the destabilization of the GDR, giving Honecker little room to work politically and, thereby increasing political pressure on the regime.

Keeping Up with the Neighbors

At one point during 1989 East Germany was *the* outpost of neo-Stalinism in Eastern Europe. Honecker and the GDR were seen as holdouts against reforms as East Germans continued to be oppressed despite a wave of liberalization throughout Eastern Europe. This perception was not the result of changes that were made inside East Germany, but rather largely of changes made in several countries surrounding the GDR. Gorbachev began to steer the USSR towards reforms almost as soon as he took office. Poland followed suit with reforms of its own and, soon after, Hungry did so as well. The embracement of reforms by its neighbors had indirect and direct consequences for the GDR.

With Gorbachev's rise and his implementation of *glasnost* (openness/transparency) and *perestroika* (restructuring), the USSR began to transform into a far more democratic state than it had been in the past. These reforms signaled to opposition groups around Europe that the Soviet Union was no longer supporting the Stalinist measures once used to maintain communist control of governments. Instead, Gorbachev began to rebrand communism as "socialism with a human face" and talked of developing a "common European home." These measures gave hope to reformers and siphoned away legitimacy from hardliners (like Honecker) embedded within the communist establishment. In his December 1988 speech to the United Nations, Gorbachev

argued, "Freedom of choice is a universal principle to which there should be no exception."[28] Those words sent ripples throughout the European Communist bloc as reformers began to call for their freedom to choose. From travel to consumer goods, the people of Eastern Europe were no longer satisfied with their lack of freedom or choices.

Gorbachev's words were heard in Poland, a country that had come very close to being reformed early in the 1980s with the rise of Solidarity and Lech Wałęsa. Forced underground with the declaration of martial law, Solidarity reappeared in 1989. The decline of the Polish economy and the increase in popular discontent increased pressure on the Polish Communist Party (PUWP) to reform. PUWP yielded to reformers and agreed to roundtable talks with opposition groups that resulted in free parliamentary elections for half of the seats in June 1989. The results of these elections were astounding as Solidarity and its affiliated candidates won all of the seats they were allowed to run for, taking 99 of 100 seats "in the less powerful upper chamber," and capturing 161 out of 460 seats in the Sejm.[29] Pro-Government candidates did not fare well as only two were technically elected and the other 33 members failed to get 50 percent of the vote. With those elections, communism in Poland was said to have vanished.

While Gorbachev and the USSR put indirect pressure on the GDR and Poland supplemented this pressure by allowing "free" elections that included opposition candidates, Hungary posed even greater problems to the GDR than the other two countries combined as it began to provide the second greatest source of external pressure beginning in May 1989. This was for two reasons. First, with the growth of opposition movements, the Hungarian Communist

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[28]Mikhail Gorbachev, "Address to the 43rd U.N. General Assembly Session"(Speech, New York, December 7, 1988) Wilson Center, http://legacy.wilsoncenter.org/coldwarfiles/files/Documents/1988-1107.Gorbachev.pdf, Accessed March 2014.

[29] Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 533.

party released its control over the government. This gave substantial power to the opposition groups as in May 1989, "the party leadership agreed to open round-table talks with the democratic opposition. A mixture of reform from above and pressure from below accelerated the rate of change."[30] These discussions resulted in free elections, and the establishment of a new legislature, helping to end communist rule in Hungary. Secondly, Hungarian soldiers began to dismantle the fence (complete with alarm system and barbed wire) that ran along the Hungarian-Austrian border in May. The decision to take down the fence was made in February 1988 as the Hungarian communist party felt that improved relations with the west made the expensive and somewhat dangerous border useless.[31] This, in turn, created a large opening in the iron curtain, and with it, a pathway to the free west.

Yet reform was something that was not easy to come by in East Germany. This was not only because of Honecker's refusal to acknowledge problems and, therefore, the need for reforms, but also what liberalization would mean for the communist German state. Despite this, Gorbachev pushed the state toward reform in his address to the East German Politburo in October 1989. Gorbachev used the USSR as an example pointing out, "that it seems it would be much easier for you than for us [referring to reforms]. You do not experience such tensions in the scoio-economic sphere. But to make a decision to undertake political reforms is also not an easy thing to o. In the future you will have to make courageous decisions."[32] Gorbachev was attempting to use the Soviet Union as an example to show Honecker reforms were needed and

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[30] Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism*, 531.
[31] "Hungary Begins Dismantling Border Fence," *Associated Press,* May 2, 1989, http://www.apnewsarchive.com/1989/Hungary-Begins-Dismantling-Border-Fence/id-f7682c87b477f99fb429c252e4a330a3, Accessed April 2014.
[32] "Record of Main Content of Conversation Between M.S. Gorbachev and Members of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Socialist United Party of Germany," *National Security Archives,* October 7, 1989, Accessed February 2014.

liberalization could still allow him and the SED to remain in control.[33] Perhaps in an attempt to put Honecker in touch with the reality of 1989 he said, "The people demand a new social atmosphere, more oxygen in the society, especially because we are talking about the socialist regime."[34] As if this was not enough to inspire quick action on behalf of Honecker and the SED Gorbachev brought his point home by saying, "It is important not to miss our chance here."[35] It is evident that his speech provided a sense of urgency to many in the room as Krenz and others took action just a few days later to remove Honecker from his leading role.

The reforms that Gorbachev was prescribing for the GDR represented a threat to the state, however. In an October 1989 cable from the American Embassy in Moscow to the Secretary of State in Washington, D.C., it was speculated that two "policy analyses" were conducted by the USSR "to consider the impact of implementing reforms in the GDR…"[36] One of the analyses concluded, "that if the East Germans implemented reforms, they would begin eroding the state's reason d'etre, thereby inviting turmoil."[37] The other analysis "argued that if the East Germans did not implement reforms, they would similarly fan dissent, because of increasing demands from young people for a greater liberalization of the political and economic system."[38] Additionally, it was reported, "Soviet academics have taken note of statements by East Germans, such as Chief of the Academy of Sciences Otto Rheinhold, who have argued that

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[33] In hindsight, perhaps Gorbachev was not entirely understanding of the political circumstances surrounding the GDR at the time.
[34] "Record of Main Content of Conversation Between M.S. Gorbachev and Members of the Politburo."
[35] "Record of Main Content of Conversation Between M.S. Gorbachev and Members of the Politburo."
[36] Cable, American Embassy in Moscow to Secretary of State in Washington, D.C., October 1989. Cold War International History Project.
[37] Cable, American Embassy in Moscow to Secretary of State in Washington, D.C.
[38] Cable, American Embassy in Moscow to Secretary of State in Washington, D.C.

if the GDR pursues Western-like reforms it would call into question the reasons for the existence of the 'Socialist' Germany."[39] These reports show the complex political situation that was created for Honecker. There were few, if any, "good options" available to Honecker. Transformations around him changed his image to that of a hardliner. Yet the steps needed to change this perception would almost certainly end the East German state. This, perhaps, explains the inaction of Honecker despite the pressure from East Germany's neighbors.

Internal Pressures: Image, Health, and the Pressure of the People

We have set the stage to analyze the downfall of Honecker and, ultimately, the GDR as a whole by examining the external political pressure from the FRG and the reformers within the communist bloc. These external pressures alone created a political crisis for Honecker. When coupled with several forms of internal political pressure, Honecker and the SED faced a political catastrophe. There were three main internal pressures. The first was pressure from Honecker's image problem; as he appeared increasingly radical in his refusal to pursue reforms, East Germans and others around the world saw him as a hardliner. This substantially decreased whatever legitimacy Honecker may have had in 1989. The second source of pressure was Honecker's failing health. Absent from the public eye at a crucial time during the political crisis, leaders and citizens alike were forced to speculate on the status of their leader. Honecker's disappearance suggested the SED regime was weak and vulnerable. This perceived weakness and vulnerability of the regime gave rise to the most substantial internal pressure of the crisis: the pressure of the people: those who left the GDR and those who stayed to protest increased the pressure on Honecker and decreased the legitimacy of the East German state. Ultimately, neither

[39] Cable, American Embassy in Moscow to Secretary of State in Washington, D.C.

Honecker nor the regime could stand up to these three considerable pressures. The regime was simply overwhelmed by the size and scope of the political crisis it faced.

A Hardliner in 1989: Honecker's Image Problem

The substantial and revolutionary changes undertaken by communist leaders and countries surrounding the GDR caused great problems for Honecker's image. His decision to resist any sort of reforms and to endorse violent and restrictive remedies to the immigration crisis and ongoing protests made him seem like a Stalinist leader from years past. This perception of Honecker would cause Krenz and others to act to remove him in an attempt to save the GDR from dissolution.

With the changes in the perception of communist leaders led by Gorbachev and furthered by the pursuit of reforms in countries such as Hungary and Poland, Honecker began to appear to be on the wrong side of communism. Gorbachev gave rise to a new breed of leader; one that was receptive to the issues facing his country and willing to give up limited power to address and solve problems. Leaders in Poland and Hungary also came to terms with the reality of their economic systems and relinquished their control, hoping to salvage their country. Ludwig Mehlhorn, an East German well known for opposing the SED regime, highlighted the contrast between the GDR and the reform minded countries:

> You have to realize that even international politics in the framework of East-West relations had been pushed toward a dead end through the policies of the GDR leadership, at least since the mid-eighties. The GDR leadership blocked all policies of détente that were associated with Gorbachev, and that were pushed forward when countries such as Poland and Hungary began to open up toward the west. During all this time, the GDR remained the last Stalinist bastion in Central Europe.[40]

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[40] Quoted in Dirk Philipsen, *We Were the People: Voice form East Germany's Revolutionary Autumn of 1989* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 83.

Despite the resistance of the GDR leadership, Gorbachev and other reformers provided a sense of hope to activists and reformers within the GDR, doing further damage to Honecker's image. Ingrid Köppe, an East German activist, reported, "For me, Gorbachev very much represented a confirmation of many things I and many of my friends had thought all along, whether it was his statements concerning peace or human rights, or just his commonsensical and logical approach to things."[41] Honecker knew the inspiration and hope Gorbachev provided created a real threat to his regime. Köppe also gave a sense of why this was:

> We had quite a few hopes, which explains why it was all the more incomprehensible to us that while the Soviet Union had always been portrayed to us as the great example we should follow—after Gorbachev, this rapidly changed. They [SED] banned the Soviet magazine *Sputnik,* and they banned a number of Soviet movies. So all of a sudden our leadership created this distance from the Soviet Union, all the way to banning a variety of things from there. At the same time, I thought that they could not possibly keep that up for very long; they could not afford to isolate themselves from the entire socialist bloc.[42]

This shows Honecker was well aware that reformers around the communist bloc were creating an era of reforms, greatly jeopardizing his regime. Consequently, he sought to control the damage being done, which, ironically, caused even more damage, as increased restrictions on the population were perceived as an outdated communist tactic when compared with other countries. Honecker's positions changed relatively little during the 1980s. Instead it was his surroundings that gradually shifted, forcing him to adapt, ultimately changing his image in a negative way that could not be reversed.

Additionally, Honecker's decision making during 1989 damaged his image. There are two decisions that best demonstrate this point. The first was Honecker's support for the "Chinese

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[41] Quoted in Dirk Philipsen, *We Were the People,* 190.
[42] Quoted in Dirk Philipsen, *We Were the People,* 190-191.

Solution."[43] G. Jonathan Greenwald again provided an inside account of the Honecker regime when he reported "Six weeks after Tiananmen Square, the GDR is still going out of its way to support how the Chinese answered the power question…Schabowski is in Beijing, where, *Neues Deutschland* reported, he found appreciation 'for the GDR's solidarity with China's steps to put down disorders, which had expanded to counterrevolutionary riots.'"[44] Honecker's decision, which this undoubtedly was, to continue to support the Chinese at a time when non-violence appeared to be the order of the day helped to solidify the popular notion that he was more than willing to use violence to maintain control. This, in turn, fomented not only fear, but also resentment, as East Germans knew the "leader" of the communist bloc, Gorbachev, regularly spoke of peace and nonviolence.

The other, and perhaps more drastic and detrimental, decision Honecker made that severely damaged his image was to close the East German border with Czechoslovakia. This was a "last-ditch" attempt to stop the immigration crisis late in 1989. On October 4th, the *New York Times* reported, "In an attempt to stop an exodus of its citizens that had turned chaotic, East Germany said Tuesday that it would allow refugees already in Czechoslovakia to head west. Then it closed its borders."[45] This may have signaled the beginning, even though it had been a long time coming, of the end for Honecker as his image and credibility could hardly stand up to another radical decision. Greenwald wrote, "The decision to close off Czechoslovakia 'temporarily' is a sign of desperation. Honecker's standing with the public, and probably the

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[43] The "Chinese Solution" refers to the use of violence against protestors occupying China's Tiananmen Square in June 1989.
[44] G. Jonathan Greenwald, *Berlin Witness,* 73.
[45] Serge Schmemann, "Refugees in Prague to Leave for West," *New York Times,* October 4, 1989, A1.

Politburo as well, has been further reduced."[46] This move was particularly politically damaging as it served to demonstrate the drastic difference between Honecker and a majority of the other communist leaders in 1989. Instead of working to grant freedoms, he was effectively trying to seal East German citizens in the state. It seemed that Honecker's image could not get any worse. Miraculously, it did.

The 40th anniversary celebration of the GDR was supposed to be a time for Honecker to show he was in control and that the political upheaval of the last few months was nothing more than a passing phase. Instead, the celebration turned into a public display by East German citizens of their frustration with Honecker and the hardline positions of the SED. Anatoly Chernyaev, an advisor to Gorbachev, reported, "As M.S. [Gorbachev] and Honecker walked together, a continuous roar in the air: 'Gorby! Gorby!' emanated from the thousands, or hundreds of thousands of people. Nobody paid attention to Erich. At the meetings there were posters in Russian: 'Gorbachev—you are our hope!'"[47] This was a major blow to Honecker's image and legitimacy. Even worse, just a day before the October 6th celebration, Chernyaev noted Gorbachev's resistance to attending the celebration: "He really does not want to. He called me twice, said that he polished his speech to the letter, knowing that they will be examining it under a microscope… there is not a word in support of Honecker… but he will support the Republic and revolution."[48] These assessments show the true nature of Honecker's image as Gorbachev, and, more importantly, East Germans voiced (in their own unique ways) their disgust with his leadership.

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[46] G. Jonathan Greenwald, *Berlin Witness,* 163.
[47] "October 8, 1989," *The Diary of Anatoly S. Chernyaev 1989* (National Security Archives), 36, http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB275/1989%20for%20posting.pdf, Accessed February 2014.
[48] "October 5, 1989," *The Diary of Anatoly S. Chernyaev 1989.*

By October 1989 Honecker's image as a respectable leader had all but been destroyed. His resistance to reforms moving through the communist bloc signaled his idealistic commitment to German communism as well as his failure to understand the political reality of his situation. Honecker held fast as his legitimacy decreased with his increasingly hardline position. It seemed that with every change embraced in another country, Honecker became more radical in his commitment to *not* pursuing reforms, insisting the GDR was economically and politically stable. As his image deteriorated, his legitimacy waned considerably. This only added to the political crisis in the GDR, as Krenz and the SED would be forced to adapt major reforms in the hope of maintaining control over and the existence of East Germany.

Honecker's Health

One aspect of the political crisis leading up to the fall of the Berlin wall often overlooked by scholars is the decline of Honecker's health in the middle of the emigration crisis which took place during the late summer of 1989. Details on his various ailments are hard to come by. I reviewed several *New York Times* articles from the period when his medical problems first started to get a better sense of the procedures Honecker underwent from July to September 1989.[49] An article published on July 9th, 1989 reported that Honecker had left the Warsaw Pact Meeting in Bucharest, Romania as he was "suffering from a gall bladder ailment."[50] On July 20th, *New York Times* reporter Serge Schmemann noted Honecker "was stricken with what his

[49] Many of these articles, as will be seen, cite speculation by West German politicians as to the condition of Honecker while also using reports from the East German state media. Despite these articles the true nature and extent of Honecker's health problems during 1989 have not been readily disclosed.

[50] Craig R. Whitney, "East Bloc Optimistic On Arms," *New York Times,* July 9, 1989, A3.

official press described as a severe gallstone attack."[51] According to the same source, Honecker spent one night in a hospital before returning to East Germany where he remained in a hospital for another three days before being released and promptly went on a "scheduled vacation."[52] Another article published on August 22nd ventured that Honecker underwent perhaps another surgery to remove gallstones.[53] By this time there was a great deal of speculation in the West German news that Honecker's illness was more serious than previously thought. The *New York Times* published some of this speculation on August 31st:

> As the preparations for what could be the culmination of a summer-long migration continued, new rumors circulated in Bonn that the condition of Erich Honecker, the 77-year-old East German leader, was considerably worse than indicated by official reports that he had undergone surgery for gallstones and was recovering. West German press said there were intelligence reports that the operation on Mr. Honecker was abandoned because of the condition of the gall bladder tissue and speculated that doctors may have found cancer.[54]

Speculation continued on September 16th as East Germany canceled a scheduled visit with members of the West German government. Details about Honecker's health were made more complicated by the fact that Gorbachev was still planning to attend the 40th anniversary celebration of the GDR in early October. Schmemann (who published a majority of the articles reviewed) wrote:

> Mr. Gorbachev's plans to attend also raised questions about whether Erich Honecker, the 77-year-old East German leader, would be able to attend. Mr. Honecker has not appeared in public since he had gallstone surgery in mid-august, prompting numerous unconfirmed reports in West German newspapers that he was seriously ill or dying. Western diplomats in East Berlin have been skeptical

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[51] Serge Schmemann, "Illness Sparks Succession Watch in East Germany," *New York Times,* July 24, 1989, A3.
[52] Serge Schmemann, "Illness Sparks Succession Watch in East Germany."
[53] Reuters, "Honecker Has Operation," *New York Times,* August 22, 1989.
[54] Serge Schmemann, "Refugees in Prague to Leave for West," *New York Times,* October 4, 1989, A1.

> of the reports but they agreed that failure to appear with Mr. Gorbachev would indicate that he [Honecker] was politically finished.[55]

Ten days later, according to Schmemann, Honecker finally reappeared in public after being absent for over five weeks. Schmemann noted, "Mr. Honecker looked somewhat more aged and pallid than last spring, though otherwise his usual self. During his absence, tabloid newspaper in West Germany speculated on his condition, reporting at various times that he had terminal cancer or had lost the will to live."[56] This reappearance largely ended the speculation about Honecker's health. Others, however, still pointed to his past health problems as a weakness. A diary entry from Anatoly Chernyaev reported that Gorbachev said Honecker had undergone four operations and his health was still in question as late as October 1989.[57] Honecker's failing health, to Gorbachev, was enough to warrant his stepping aside, allowing another leader to guide East Germany through the political crisis.

Honecker's health problems came at an important juncture in the GDR's political crisis. With the opening of the Hungarian border and the announcement in early September that East Germans would be allowed to cross the border and travel to the FRG through Austria, the emigration crisis that had carried on for a number of weeks during the late weeks of the summer came to a head. Thousands of East Germans left their homes and travel to Hungary and packed the West German embassy while others simply tried to cross the border. This crisis played a large role, as we will see later, in bringing down Honecker and the Berlin Wall.

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[55] Serge Schmemann, "East Berlin Cancels a Visit by West Germans," *New York Times,* September 16, 1989, A4.
[56] Serge Schmemann, "East German Leader, Long Absent, Reappears," *New York Times,* September 26, 1989, A8.
[57] "Diary of Anatoly Chernyaev regarding Erich Honecker, October 11, 1989," *National Security Archives*, http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB275/1989%20for%20posting.pdf, Accessed February 2014.

Honecker's absence during this time was pivotal because it gave rise to a great deal of speculation and contributed to weakening the regime. Greenwald provided an apt analysis of Honecker's absence:

> Honecker's illness, of course, could not have come at a worse time. His policy of opening to the West while rejecting reform and holding Gorbachev at arm's length is being declared bankrupt by the thousands seeking to reach West Germany. He appeared helpless since the crisis began. Unless he shows soon he is in charge, the Politburo's second row will be under great pressure to end the drift.[58]

Greenwald also argued, "It is difficult to see how Honecker can long survive his twin failures of policies and health."[59] While it is difficult to say for sure the impact Honecker's absence from the public eye had on the emigration crisis and the mounting political tension within East Germany, it does appear his health problems raised even more questions about the legitimacy and, more importantly, power of his regime. A characteristic of many European communist regimes was the importance of projecting a powerful image of its leader. This can be seen dating back to Lenin and Stalin and was perhaps best exemplified by Nicolae Ceauşescu and the cult of personality that was created in his image in Romania. With the power of the GDR regime already in question, Honecker's growing political powerlessness was not only highlighted, but also worsened by his sickness and absence. This most likely signaled to GDR citizens that the regime was ending and the leader they had feared for so long was no longer in control. With its economy and leader's health failing, it is hard to see how any GDR citizens could be optimistic about the future without substantial change in the structure of East German government and society. Ultimately, Honecker's ill health at a pivotal time in 1989 made matters worse for him and the SED regime as his disappearance from the public eye left a great deal of uncertainty and

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[58] G. Jonathan Greenwald, *Berlin Witness,* 121.
[59] G. Jonathan Greenwald, *Berlin Witness*, 145.

did not allow him to project the strong image that was needed to maintain full control over the growing political crisis in East Germany.

Leavers and Liberalizers: The Power of the East German People

Studied far more extensively than the problems Honecker's health presented to the regime, the pressure of the East German people may have ultimately contributed the most to the fall of the Berlin Wall. There are two studies in particular that highlight the importance of "people pressure" in opening the Berlin Wall. The first is Corey Ross's *The East German Dictatorship* in which he asserts, "The popular movement was, on other words, the principle driving force behind the watershed events of October and November 1989 that were made possible in the first place by the changes in the international framework and the reformist currents within Eastern Europe."[60] Accordingly, Ross points out, "the 'real revolutionaries' of 1989 were the emigrants and the masses who rejected the parameters of dialogue offered by the regime and demanded the basic rights and freedoms enjoyed by Germans in the Federal Republic."[61] This part of Ross's argument highlights not only the importance of the pressure of the people, but also the complexity of the movement as those who left the GDR for the FRG (leavers) and those who stayed, eventually protesting in the streets (liberalizers), "joined" to create what is thought of as the East German protest movement.

Likewise, Mary Fulbrook, in *Anatomy of a Dictatorship*, argues, "people pressure" had a major impact on the regime. She gives a better sense of how this pressure was created during 1989, arguing, "Throughout the summer months, there was a growing ferment of ever more open

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[60] Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship*,139.
[61] Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship*, 145.

discussion and debate about the sense of crisis in the GDR."[62] These discussions soon grew without fear of the East German state security, the *Stasi.* For Fulbrook, this "unchecked" power to discuss and complain "was perhaps the crucial mobilizing factor."[63] East German citizens had finally found their long suppressed voice in 1989. The mass "exodus," according to Fulbrook, precipitated this newfound power of the masses.

Ross and Fulbrook do a very good job of putting the pressure from below in context and acknowledging that it played a major part in the political crisis in the GDR. Thus, what we are presented with is two "rounds" of pressure that can be combined and considered the East German protest movement. The first round of pressure came from the high number of leavers. A *New York Times* article published on August 19th, 1989 reported, "So far this year, 55,970 East Germans have come to the West, about 15 percent of them without official permission. That compares with 39,832 people for all of 1988."[64] While the number of people who had decided to leave at this point was staggering, the problem was only going to get worse for Honecker and the SED as thousands of East Germans remained in Hungary. There was a great deal of uncertainty about the number of East Germans vacationing in Hungary that would ultimately decide to leave. The *New York Times* reported, "an estimated 200,000 East German vacationers are still in Hungary, and their intentions will not become known until the East German school holidays end on Thursday."[65] Yet, there were estimates that as many as 20,000 East Germans would remain

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[62] Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship: Inside the GDR 1949-1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 248.
[63] Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship,* 248.
[64] Ferdinand Protzman, "Westward Tide of East Germans Is a Popular No-Confidence Vote," *New York Times* August 19, 1989, A1, A3.
[65] Serge Schmemann, "Bonn Braces for New Wave of East Germans," *New York Times,* August 31, 1989, A7.

and try to travel to West Germany.[66] As the summer of 1989 drew to a close, thousands of East German "refugees" remained in Hungary, hoping to cross the border and travel to freedom. On September 10th, it was reported that Hungary would allow 7,000 "refugees" to travel to West Germany.[67] An estimated 60,00 East Germans, classified s "tourists," were still left in Hungary.[68] The decision was one of, if not *the,* most pivotal made during the emigration crisis because it gave sustainable hope to East German citizens that they would be allowed to emigrate. It also provided a relatively easy way for those dissatisfied with Honecker and the regime to leave and quickly assimilate in West Germany. Thus, in Feiwel Kupferberg's (author of *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic*) view, this "[e]xit movement represented an imminent threat to the very existence of the GDR because it gradually eroded its authority."[69] Leavers took with them not only personal goods but also the important "state goods" of legitimacy and fear.

As these "state goods" flowed out of East Germany with the emigrants, the citizens who stayed were suddenly empowered. With the legitimacy of the regime largely in question and fear of the state security waning, the liberalizers were able to focus on reforms and improving the state. Those who left provided legitimacy to this newfound East German reform movement. An increasing number of East Germans took to the streets to protest the Honecker regime. Yet the structures for a large, influential, and open opposition movement had not been established (perhaps a testament to the power of the East German state police, the *Stasi*) prior to 1989. In fact, a report release in June 1989 ("Stasi Report on the Size and Structure of the East German

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[66] Serge Schmemann, "Bonn Braces for New Wave of East Germans."
[67] Serge Schmemann, "Hungary Allows 7,000 East Germans to Emigrate West," *New York Times,* September 10th, 1989, A1,A12.
[68] Serge Schmemann, "Hungary Allows 7,000 East Germans to Emigrate West."
[69] Feiwel Kupferberg, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 91.

Opposition") paints a picture of weak and relatively non-existent opposition movements. The report notes:

> persistent attempts at gathering and assembling by such persons—who have made it their goal to weaken, undermine, and politically destabilize the GDR to the point of changing its social relations—have led to the formation of corresponding groupings and groups. These are almost exclusively embedded in the structures of the Protestant churches in the GDR, or they are able to make extensive use of the material and technical resources of these churches for their activities.[70]

As such, it is evident there was a small opposition movement, if but fragmented and largely out of the public eye. In the report, the Stasi highlighted the importance of the church to the opposition:

> Currently there are ca. 160 alliances of this kind [hostile] in the GDR. Among them are a significant number from which hostile-negative actions, or actions otherwise directed against the socialist state and social-order, emanate continuously or in connective with a particular occasion. They are divided into just 150 so-called church-based, grass-roots groups that designate themselves based on the demagogically claimed 'aim' and 'content' of their activity or their personal composition…[71]

The sheer number of these groups shows the high degree of fragmentation and perhaps disorganization of the East German opposition. To call it a "movement" at this point in 1989 would be generous, if not wrong. The most striking part of the report, however, is the estimated amount of people who were categorized as part of these "alliances:" "The total potential of these alliances—including peripherally affiliated forces, which generally represent mere participants in activities/events, who do not pay dues—amounts to ca. 2500 persons total."[72] Thus, as late as

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[70] "Stasi Report on the Size and Structure of the East German Opposition," June 1, 1989, *German History in Documents and Images,* Accessed February 2014.
[71] "Stasi Report on the Size and Structure of the East German Opposition."
[72] "Stasi Report on the Size and Structure of the East German Opposition."

June 1989 (and perhaps even later) "open and organized opposition" in East Germany seemed anything but.

In a somewhat interesting paradox, opposition in the streets began to grow (slowly at first) as more people decided to leave. This growth in opposition can be attributed, in part, to an increase in self-confidence among East Germans, according to Sarotte. She argues, "The rise of East German assertiveness would be extremely important."[73] This "assertiveness" was largely the consequence of the success of many East Germans taking their lives into their own hands and making the decision to leave for the FRG. But there was another element, Sarotte writes, which increased confidence and assertiveness: the closing of the GDR border with Czechoslovakia.

As Sarotte argues, "Dissent, expressed throughout most of the summer and fall in the from of mass exit, had been forced by the border sealing into voicing itself in mass demonstrations."[74] This is supported by an October 7th, 1989 *New York Times* report which noted, "With the flight [of East Germans] curtailed by the closing of the Czechoslovak border earlier this week, the focus of popular frustration seemed to shift to the streets."[75] From this it appears the mass exodus of East Germans and response from Honecker and the SED served as a necessary condition for open opposition in the GDR. As demonstrations slowly increased, a new group started to gain notoriety. The *New York Times* pointed to this relatively new opposition group, the New Forum, which seemed to be responsible for the protests: "Many demonstrators said they were followers of New Forum, whose founders said they were dedicated to staying in

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[73] Mary Elise Sarotte, *1989,* 28.
[74] Mary Elise Sarotte, *1989,* 35.
[75] Serge Schmemann, "Police and Protesters Clash Amid East Berlin Festivity," *New York Times,* October 9, 1989, A18. These demonstrations came just a few years after the 40th Anniversary of the GDR during which East Germans humiliated Honecker by chanting please to Gorbachev to save them from their hardline leader.

East Germany and campaigning for changes along socialist lines."[76] With that, the New Forum became the face of East German opposition.

The New Forum's origins can be traced back to September 1989 as the group arose from increased frustration with the regime and the desire to stay in the GDR to make changes from within. The "Founding Appeal of the New Forum" notes the dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs in East Germany: "We are wasting our time in sullen passivity, while there are more important things we could be doing for our lives, for our country, and for humanity."[77] The New Forum sought to include all those who wanted "to take part in the discussion and resolution of crucial social problems in this country."[78] This factor made the group such a viable threat to the regime since the members were not seeking dissolution, but rather liberalization of German communism to bring it more inline with Gorbachev's version, socialism with a human face. New Forum's emphasis on regime reform rather than dissolution increased the pressure substantially on Honecker as it gave the reformers within his regime a sense of legitimacy; reform actions on behalf of the regime would now be seen as a response to the people and curry favor with the west, perhaps allowing the state to survive a while longer.

New Forum's newfound following quickly mobilized and protests began to increase in numbers rapidly as confidence increased and other opposition groups and movements became better organized. Leipzig soon became the epicenter for demonstrations as an estimated 50,000 people took to the streets on October 9th. Despite clashes between protestors and police in previous days, the marches around East Germany were peaceful as "no clashes were reported,

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[76] Serge Schmemann, "Police and Protesters Clash Amid East Berlin Festivity."
[77] "Founding Appeal of the New Forum," September 9, 1989, *German History in Documents and Images,* Accessed February 2014.
[78] "Founding Appeal of the New Forum."

although the police presence in Leipzig and East Berlin was strong."[79] These protests were indicative of the trend in opposition quickly sweeping through East Germany. In just about 10 days, according to *New York Times* reported Serge Schmemann, opposition had swelled as "tens of thousands of East Germans across the country took to the streets…"[80] Additionally, in just a month of semi-official existence, the New Forum claimed to have had 25,000 supporters.[81] Still, opposition and demonstrations continued to grow. On October 16th, 100,000 marched in the streets of Leipzig, reportedly the largest protest march in decades.[82] This demonstration came after "throngs of East Germans emboldened by the Government's conciliatory stance last week packed five Leipzig churches for the weekly service for peace, which has become a major focus of the swelling movement for reform."[83] Every week the reform movement grew as the number of protestors increased substantially from week to week. On October 23rd, 300,000 demonstrated in Leipzig and just a week later, "Chanting demands for everything from free elections to the ouster of the secret police, more than 300,000 East Germans marched in Leipzig's old center in what has become the major weekly ritual of the growing popular movement for change."[84] The demonstrations had grown from few thousand without much organization to loosely planned and organized marches with hundreds of thousands of East Germans. These protests can be seen as a popular response to the weakness of the regime from the ongoing political crisis. It was

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[79] Serge Schmemann, "East Germans Let Largest Protest Proceed In Peace," *New York Times,* October 10, 1989, A1, A10.
[80] Serge Schmemann, "East German Movement Overtaken by Followers," *New York Times,* October 16, 1989, A6.
[81] Serge Schmemann, "East German Movement Overtaken by Followers."
[82] Serge Schmemann, "100,000 Protest in Leipzig In Largest Rally in Decades." *New York Times,* October 16, 1989, A12.
[83] Serge Schmemann, "100,000 Protest in Leipzig In Largest Rally in Decades."
[84] Serge Schmemann, "Another Big Rally In East Germany," *New York Times,* October 30, 1989, A17.

becoming increasingly apparent to East Germans the regime was politically bankrupt. With mounting outside support not only from the FRG but also the USSR for reforms, the people took the opportunity to voice their concern and attempted to take charge of their state.

As the protestors grew in number, the pressure on the regime increased. This pressure ultimately proved to be detrimental to the SED and whatever stability was left: "Under the pressure of mass demonstrations from October onwards, these splits within the leadership increasingly came into the open. In a vain attempt to stabilize the situation, the Politburo finally decided to replace the aging Honecker with Egon Krenz."[85] Hertle also elaborated on the importance of the pressure that emanated from the protests writing, "The protests by the population, as well as the mood of the party members, put the Party and State leadership for the first time in the history of the GDR under such enormous pressure that it had to respond directly through far-reaching personnel changes."[86] The change in SED leadership demonstrated a marginal propensity for the regime to reform itself.

Yet even with a change in leadership, the protests didn't stop. In fact, they grew larger, perhaps in response to the leadership change and the evaporation of fear of the hardliner Honecker. Additionally, the perceived responsiveness of the regime to the demonstrations most likely explains why two of the largest protests in October 1989 came after Honecker left office. The people had finally found a way to pressure the regime into positive change. This demonstrates the enormous power the East German people possessed in September and October 1989. They had slowly built a movement that had failed to materialize for 40 year. This is not to

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[85] Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship*, 136.
[86] Hans-Hermann Hertle, "The Fall of the Wall: The Unintended Self-Dissolution of East Germany's Ruling Regime," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, (12/13), 134.

mention the almost immediate success of the opposition movement as it inspired change in the regime and, eventually, society. Without the enormous people pressure, it is difficult to see how the regime would have collapsed so quickly. Honecker had been able to hold on to power despite illness, the disdain of the leader of the Soviet Union, and an active reform movement surrounding him. Yet he could not withstand the power of the enormous demonstrations.

Conclusion

The events in the GDR that ultimately led to the downfall of the Honecker regime can best be described as a political crisis, which was badly managed. This would suggest the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent reunification of Germany was hardly inevitable. In fact, had Honecker or another SED leader managed the reform movement that swept through Eastern Europe better East Germany may have been able to survive longer than it did. There was a substantial movement focused on reforming the GDR and not throwing out communism in favor of reunification and capitalism. Frank Eigenfeld, a founding member of the New Forum, highlighted this point saying, "we had stated very clearly in our appeal that we wanted to address all those who wanted to *stay*, all those who wanted to fight for a transformation of the *existing* society—in short, all those who wanted to achieve a dialogue between party and people and sough a meaningful debate about all the problems that the party had previously kept the lid on."[87] Additionally, there were a growing number of members of the SED, like Hans Modrow (the last communist prime minister in East Germany) who "had come to represent the hopes of all those who either wanted to continue a party-led reform of socialism in the GDR, albeit in a reformed and democratized fashion, or those who could simply not yet fathom a future for the GDR

[87] Quoted in Dirk Philipsen, *We Were the People,* 227.

'beyond the party.'"[88] Modrow pointed out, "it had become clear by the late seventies that things could not go on like that [in the GDR]. If I look back at my own thinking and conduct, including the reports I wrote to Honecker at the time, then it becomes clear that the late seventies or early eighties definitely represented the point in time where we should have started fundamental restructuring."[89] This quote seems to put much, if not all, the blame for the downfall of the GDR on Honecker. Yet, Modrow's analysis discounts the role of external and internal pressures that ultimately brought down the regime. The combination of the dramatic reforms sweeping through Europe and the presence of a capitalist economy and society in the FRG served as a catalyst in propelling the political crisis. Events within the GDR moved at such a fast pace that Honecker and the rest of the SED appeared to be well behind and, as a result, lost complete control of the political situation.

This is not, however, to minimize the shortcoming of Honecker or his regime. He was largely out of touch with the politically reality of the time, evident in a meeting between Gorbachev and Krenz:

> Comrade Krenz went on to say that the change of Comrade Honecker had occurred in 1985 when Comrade Gorbachev was elected as secretary general of the CC of the CPSU. Suddenly, Comrade Honecker saw himself confronted with a young dynamic leader who approached new questions in very unconventional ways. Until that time he had viewed himself in that role. Slowly he lost his sense of reality.[90]

Honecker's severely obstructive view of reality only served to paralyze the SED, furthering the crisis and by September 1989, he and his regime were financially and politically bankrupt.

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[88]Dirk Philipsen, *We Were the People,* 90.
[89] Quoted in Dirk Philipsen, *We Were the People,* 95.
[90] "1989: GDR Document No. 1 Memorandum of Conversation Between Egon Krenz, Secretary General of the Socialist Unity Party (SED), and Mikhail S. Gorbachev, Secretary General of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU)," *Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive,* Accessed February 2014.

Caught between the reforming communist world and the capitalist FRG, Honecker had few, if any options as the East German people began to demand changes. Fulbrook perhaps best summarized this difficult situation:

> When one analyzes the course of events in the GDR, however, it would seem that the pressures from *below* and from *outside* were in fact of paramount importance. The 'implosion' of the regime, or the effective abdication of the domestic élites, came largely as an initially unintended reaction to what had become an increasingly uncontrollable situation.[91]

While Sarotte is right that the situation became uncontrollable and that pressure from below and outside was important to the fall, she is somewhat wrong that the collapse of the regime was an "unintended reaction." When there is a political crisis and it is handled as badly as what it was, with a leader who was absent and as out of touch as Honecker, the regime must make substantial changes to survive. In the case of East Germany, the margin for error for change was so small that it allowed for few mistakes. Unfortunately for them, mistakes were made. Thus, the reaction to the pressure was not unintended, even though one of the results (opening of the Berlin Wall) may have been. In a year ruled by the people, the refusal of Honecker to yield to any reforms precipitated the end of communism in Germany. When we look to analyze the events of 1989, especially in the GDR, it is important to remember that the fall of the Berlin Wall is mostly the result of German action. While Gorbachev played a large role in the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, it was ultimately the people of the GDR who took their future into their hands and made change happen. The political crisis in East Germany may have been the result of several pressures, but the largest and most influential pressure was, by far, that of the people.

What this paper has shown is that image is of particular importance to political leaders. Honecker did not appear to have a real image problem until 1989 when changes around him were

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[91] Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship,* 245.

being made at a rapid pace. He was no different than any other communist leader. Yet when reformers came to power in many of the Communist countries and he was forced to dig his heels in to defend the GDR's right to exist, he became a neo-Stalinist hardliner, or at least seen that way. Had he been able to embrace reform and play a role in keeping the GDR up with the sentiments of 1989, he and the regime may have survived longer. In the end, the regime could not stop the most important pressure of all: the desire of the people to be free and prosperous.

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