

## Chapter 3: The Comprehensive Crisis of Empire

### 1. The Crisis of Ideology

The Soviet empire and the Ideological and Imperial paradigm as its analytical frame of reference had rested on three major pillars: Marxist-Leninist ideology, military power and economic resources. For the imperial edifice to collapse, it would have been sufficient for one of the pillars to fall. In the period from the late 1970s until the mid-1980s, however, all three supports had begun to crumble. What were the reasons for this turn of events? What role, if any, did developments in the two Germanys play in Soviet imperial decline? And what contribution did the German problem make to the fundamental reconsideration of priorities and policies that was to occur under Gorbachev? These are the central questions to be analyzed in this chapter.

As described in the previous chapter, in any political or imperial system, ideology can be said to play a number of important functions. It can fulfil four major functions: analytical or cognitive; utopian, visionary or missionary; operational; and legitimizing. By the end of the 1970s, Marxist-Leninist ideology failed to fulfil any of these functions. Alexander Yakovlev, the chief architect of major revision and ultimately destruction of the whole edifice of Soviet ideology, made this very clear. The theoretical basis on which the Soviet system and the Soviet Union's approach to international politics rested, as he told a conference of communist party secretaries in September 1989, had been gravely 'deformed'. The model of socialist development as exemplified by the Soviet Union had essentially 'exhausted' itself.<sup>323</sup>

Indeed, each and every major cognitive and predictive element of Marxist-Leninist ideology had turned out to be false. Some of the dogmas had been revised under Khrushchev, notably the idea that military conflict among the imperialist states was as 'inevitable' as war between imperial-

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323 Speech by Alexander Yakovlev at the Conference of Communist Party Secretaries for Ideological Questions, Varna (Bulgaria), 26-28 September 1989. The speech was included as agenda item 8 for the SED Politburo meeting of 17 October 1989; SED, Central Archives, Politburo *Arbeitsprotokolle*, J IV 2/2A/3247.

ism and socialism. But other major formalized perceptions and predictions had remained in force. This concerned the notions that the ‘contradictions’ between the ‘power centres of imperialism’ were more basic than the links that unite them; that in the long run the ‘correlation of forces’ would shift in favor of socialism; that conflict would end with the victory of socialism; that the socialist mode of production was superior to that of capitalism; that the ‘national-liberation movements’ would bring about states with anti-imperialist, non-capitalist and ultimately socialist orientation; that class relations are the determining factor of international affairs; and that nationalism would wither away. The increasing gap between ideology and reality and the decline in the effectiveness of the Soviet system did not lead to a withering away of the state or of nationalism but rather of the attractiveness of the Soviet model of development. The ensuing crisis of ideology affected all areas of international politics. It was evident first and foremost in the highly developed industrialized world, that is, in Western Europe, the United States, and Japan. But it also pervaded Central and Eastern Europe, and the countries of the Third World.

In Western Europe, in the late 1970s, the principles of individualism, pluralism, democracy, the market economy and an active civil society clashed with the communist ideas of monolithic politics and society as well as central planning in the economy. The communist parties in Western Europe, in order to enhance their influence and chances to win power, increasingly began to distance themselves from the Soviet model and develop a new body of thought under the heading of ‘Eurocommunism’. The Italian and Spanish, much less so the French, but other smaller European communist parties, subscribed to it.

This development in the international communist movement was vehemently opposed by Soviet ideologists. By the end of the 1980s, in part as a result of Soviet measures but also because of a significant credibility gap between the communist parties and mainstream political and socio-economic forces, ‘Eurocommunism’ in Western Europe had run its course. Even the traditionally strong communist parties of Italy and France found themselves faced with a serious decline in their electoral strength. In other Western European countries things remained as unsatisfactory as ever from the Soviet perspective. In West Germany, for instance, the German Communist Party (DKP) continued to receive less than one percent of the vote in Bundestag and Länder parliamentary elections and thus failed to gain representation at both the federal and the state level. It thus had no measurable influence in West German political life.

In Central and Eastern Europe Soviet ideology had never taken root. The communist regimes in the countries of this area suffered from the defects of having come to power and being kept there by the Soviet armed forces. Society in that region was perennially affected by Western viruses leading to infections such as ‘socialism with a human face’ and ‘market socialism’. Moscow was able to suppress acute flare-ups of the disease but unable to provide a cure. The last cycle in, from Moscow’s perspective, political pathology requiring strong curative medicine, had been the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia, necessitating the Warsaw Pact’s intervention in August 1968. Some return from the acute to a latent state of the ‘revisionist’ disease had taken place in the country in the early 1970s. However, not least as a result of the CSCE Final Act of 1975 and the activities of the Helsinki Groups, serious remissions occurred in the CSSR and throughout Eastern Europe. In Poland the outbreak in 1980-81 was especially serious and proved to have serious consequences also for the German problem.

To put the developments in Poland and their effects on the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe in perspective, according to the orthodox Soviet definition ‘antagonist contradictions’ could exist and crises could occur only in *capitalist* systems.<sup>324</sup> Andropov, in his position as general party secretary, still adhered to this dogma but he had at least admitted: ‘Yes, we do experience contradictions as well as difficulties.’ To think that this could be different would be ‘abandoning safe, even though harsh realities.’ History had taught that ‘contradictions that by their nature are non-antagonist can produce serious collisions if they are not taken into consideration’.<sup>325</sup> Several theorists went beyond the ideological euphemisms still apparent in the pronouncements of their chief. They called attention to the absurdity of drawing a distinction between contradictions that cannot be solved at all and contradictions that can be solved in theory but not in practice. To them, as the crisis in Poland 1980-81 had shown, it was nonsense to stick to the theory of the *perezhiiki proshlogo*, that simply the ‘remnants of the past’ were responsible for acute problems. It was more appropriate in their view to look at the policies of the local communist

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324 The security implications and management problems of the Polish crisis will be dealt with in the next section. In the present section only the ideological dimension of the crisis will be considered.

325 Yuri N. Andropov, ‘Uchenie Karla Marksa i nekotorye voprosy sotsialisticheskogo stroitel’sтва v SSSR’, *Kommunist*, No. 3 (February 1983), p. 21.

parties which could produce ‘political crises with all its dangers for socialism’.<sup>326</sup>

The ideological failures were equally momentous in the Third World. In the 1950s and 1960s, it had seemed to Soviet ideologists and political leaders that the rapidly accelerating processes of decolonization would set the newly independent ex-colonial countries on a non-capitalist path of development in internal system structure and on an anti-Western course in foreign policy. From Moscow’s vantage point, to accelerate the process it had appeared expedient to provide aid to the so-called ‘national-liberation struggle’. But whereas it turned out that Soviet support could occasionally decide the question of power in the short term, the Soviet Union was incapable of contributing meaningfully to long-term socio-economic development of the countries concerned. More often than not, after a period of cooperation with Warsaw Pact countries in the security field, the new states turned to the West for development aid. Furthermore, Moscow’s overestimation of the importance of the Third World in the East-West competition contributed to the overextension, overcommitment and rising costs of empire of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

As for the costs of empire, to underpin its (crumbling) ideological basis significant sums of money were wasted for an endless procession of visiting communist dignitaries, their medical treatment in special hospitals in Moscow, vacations in Sochi and hunting trips in Siberia despite the fact that these dignitaries often had no more than a nuisance value in their own countries.<sup>327</sup> In fact, the smaller and more unimportant the party, the greater its profession of loyalty to Moscow. This was noted also by Gorbachev even before he became chief of the CPSU and embarked on a major revision of Soviet ideology: ‘We have to ask ourselves, why it is that influential and strong parties separate themselves from us, whereas the

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326 A. P. Butenko, ‘Protivorechiia razvitiia sotsializma kak obshchestvennogo stroia’, *Voprosy filosofii*, No. 10 (1982), p. 27. The author at that time was a member of the USSR Academy of Sciences and Deputy Director of the Institute for the Economy of the World Socialist System. A similar approach was taken by several other authors, including the Vice President of the USSR Academy of Sciences, P. N. Fedoseev, ‘Dialektik des gesellschaftlichen Lebens’, *Probleme des Friedens und des Sozialismus*, No. 9 (September 1981), pp. 1192-1200.

327 Interviews with Zagladin, Rykin, and Grigoriev.

small and insignificant parties remain orthodox and faithful to Moscow.<sup>328</sup> Such pertinent questions, it would seem, are an illustration of a more general malaise felt by Soviet leaders and part of their realization that the international communist movement had turned from an asset into a liability. Indeed, as Vadim Medvedev, head of the CC's department for relations with communist and workers' parties in 1986-88, observed in retrospect: Whereas earlier, 'world socialism' in theory and practice had exerted a powerful influence on world affairs, 'at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, its development stopped, which contrasted sharply with the rapid progress [achieved] in the West and among some newly industrializing countries'.<sup>329</sup>

## 2. Military Power and Declining Political Influence

The second pillar on which the Soviet empire had rested was military power. In retrospect, it is quite apparent that some fairly simple but stubbornly executed ideas underlay Soviet foreign policy from Stalin to Chernenko: military power could be transformed into global political influence; military-strategic parity with the United States could be used to advance claims to political equality; preponderance in conventional weaponry and forces and superiority in short and medium-range nuclear systems could serve not only to safeguard Soviet positions in Eastern Europe but to change the domestic and foreign policies of the Western European countries in directions favourable to Soviet interests; and the deployment of naval and airborne forces capable of intervention and power-projection far beyond the periphery of the Soviet Union would deter Western intervention in Third World countries and induce them to cooperate with the Soviet Union.<sup>330</sup> In the 1970s, from Soviet perspectives, favourable developments in international relations had seemed to confirm the validity of such notions. In the early 1980s, however, failures occurred more or less simul-

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328 In October 1984 in a conversation with Vadim Zagladin, as reported by Chernyaev, *Shest' let s Gorbachevym*, p. 19. Zagladin at that time was one of the deputy chiefs of the CC's International Department.

329 Medvedev, *Raspad*, p. 8.

330 See Hannes Adomeit, 'The Political Rationale of Soviet Military Capabilities and Doctrine', in *Strengthening Conventional Deterrence in Europe: Proposals for the 1980s*, Report of the European Security Study (ESECS) (London: Macmillan, 1983), pp. 67-104.

taneously in Soviet policies towards the United States, Western Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, Japan, China, and the Third World, necessitating a fundamental conceptual reassessment.

*The United States.* In the early 1980s, Soviet international relations specialists began to realize that the depth of ‘contradictions’ in the West had been overestimated and that the forces that bound together the three main ‘power centres of imperialism’ were stronger than those that put them at odds with each other. In practical political terms, it had proved impossible to separate the United States from Western Europe and Japan. There had, of course, been many divisive issues in Western alliance relations: sanctions in response to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan; sanctions as a punishment for martial law in Poland; the West German gas, credit, and pipeline deal; the stationing of medium-range missiles in Europe; and doubts about the reliability and loyalty of various European allies. However, after autumn 1983, these controversies had receded in importance or disappeared altogether.

In the United States, the strength, composition, and orientation of socio-economic and political forces had also changed, a fact that the *amerikanisty*, the Soviet experts on American affairs, were quick to recognize. Their main line of interpretation at the beginning of the first Reagan administration was the notion that the new conservative philosophy and hard-line political approaches in the United States were essentially short-lived and would soon subside. However, as the Republican Party headed for a resounding electoral victory in 1984, they and other international relations experts increasingly came to adhere to the view that, what they called the ‘conservative wave’ in the United States was a more lasting and dangerous phenomenon.<sup>331</sup>

As for American defense policies, it may have appeared to Soviet political leaders and analysts that NATO in the mid-1970s was no longer able successfully to compete with the Warsaw Pact in the arms competition,

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331 Yakovlev, for instance, as late as June 1985, thought that the ‘conservative wave’ in the United States was generated and supported by that part of the bourgeoisie that was intimately connected with the scientific-technological revolution and high-technology military industry. In his view, this explained the interest of the Reagan administration in shifting the East-West competition to the military-technological sphere; see the discussion between him and Vadim Zagladin, chaired by Fyodor Burlatsky, ‘Vostok – Zapad. Tsivilizatsionnye otnosheniia: Neobkhodimost’? Real’nost’? Utopia?’, *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 26 June 1985.

that the Western countries were primarily reacting to Soviet initiatives and that they were increasingly putting faith in arms control negotiations to redress, from their perspective, a deteriorating military balance. Such perceptions, to the extent that they existed, were rendered invalid by new realities in the East-West arms competition. In the late 1970s, defense outlays in the United States began to rise sharply. New challenges were issued to the Warsaw Pact, one in the form of laser-guided conventional weapons and computerized command and control systems, the other in the shape of Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). The deployment of intermediate-range nuclear weapons and the resulting capability of NATO to strike at Soviet territory from Western Europe as well as the ongoing US strategic modernization programs also put Soviet Union under pressure to respond and to do so in an area in which it could compete less easily and effectively: military high technology.<sup>332</sup>

The in-flight destruction, on the night of 31 August – 1 September 1983, of an unarmed civilian South Korean airliner *en route* from New York to Seoul (KAL 007) over the waters of the Sea of Okhotsk exacerbated Soviet-American relations and deepened the international isolation into which the Soviet Union had manoeuvred itself. It also underlined the pitfalls of a mental attitude that relied uncritically on the military and its standard operating procedures. According to Anatoly Dobrynin, then Soviet ambassador in Washington, the KAL 007 crisis 'illuminated the difficult relations and lack of communication between our civilian leaders and the military establishment, the generals being even more isolated from the rest of the world than the politicians'. As invectives were exchanged between the United States and the Soviet Union, a 'haggard and worried' Andropov told Dobrynin: 'Return immediately to Washington and try to do your utmost to dampen this needless conflict bit by bit. Our military made a gross blunder by shooting down the airliner and it probably will take a long time to get out of this mess.'<sup>333</sup> Yet at the same time, the Kremlin leadership 'did not have enough courage to recognize publicly and immediately with deep regret that it [the plane] had been shot down

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332 The impact of SDI on Soviet perceptions and policies will be discussed on pp. 149-50 and pp. 226-27.

333 Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents* (New York: Random House, 1995), pp. 536-37.

over Soviet territory by a tragic mistake. ... It was unusual at that time for the Soviet government to accept [that] it had made any kind of error.<sup>334</sup>

*Western Europe.* Another crucially important failure in the attempt to transform military power into political influence was the Soviet campaign against the stationing of intermediate-range nuclear weapons, the Pershing 2 and cruise missiles, in Western Europe. Chancellor Schmidt had attempted several times to impress upon the Soviet leadership that legitimate Western European security interests would be violated and that West Germany, above all the SPD, would be pushed into a very difficult political situation if the Soviet Union were to deploy a large force of intermediate range nuclear weapons – SS-20 missiles and Backfire bombers. However, until the break-up of the negotiations in 1983, no Western offer for compromise as part of NATO’s ‘dual track’ decision was deemed acceptable in Moscow. Nothing, therefore, slowed the momentum of Soviet deployments. The Soviet Union continued to improve its quantitative and qualitative superiority in INF systems. It attempted at the same time to delay or to prevent altogether the NATO counter-deployments in Western Europe. Its major instrument was a Western ‘peace movement’ that reached impressive strength in 1983.

But what were the results of the conflict over INF deployments? Militarily, even after the Western the stationing of the Pershing 2 and cruise missiles, the Soviet Union gained some advantage. Politically, however, the Kremlin suffered tremendous losses. The SPD-FDP government under Schmidt, as a result of intra-party (SPD) controversies over the issue, fell apart and after the March 1983 parliamentary elections was replaced by a CDU/CSU-FDP coalition government under Helmut Kohl. In Western Europe the Soviet leadership saw itself faced with governments of varying composition, conservative in West Germany and Britain and socialist in France and Italy, yet all of these governments strongly supported the stationing of US nuclear-armed missiles in Europe, the improvement of conventional defense and the strengthening of Atlantic ties. The opposition parties seemed far removed from winning power and shaping defense policies. Finally, the ‘peace movement’ as an instrument of Soviet state policy in Western Europe severely declined in importance.<sup>335</sup>

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334 Ibid.

335 Chancellor Kohl, in a speech on 12 November 1991 in Strasbourg, reflected on the significance of the INF controversy. He stated that the Soviet leadership had come ‘to recognize the futility of its attempts at decoupling European and Ameri-



*Decline of the 'Peace Movement'*. In 1984, officials at the CC's international department were still trying to reassure themselves and the top Soviet leadership that the 'peace movement' was far from defeated. They cheerfully claimed that a June 1984 opinion survey in West Germany had revealed that 87 percent of the respondents were still 'opposed to the stationing of new intermediate-range nuclear missiles' and that they 'supported the withdrawal of those [missiles] that are already deployed'.<sup>336</sup> Soviet propagandists were still consoling themselves with the idea that in the past there had been recurrent waves and periodic ebbs and flows of Western anti-war movements. Each and every wave had tended to be larger and more broadly based. The 'peace movement', they acknowledged, had lost the INF-campaign. They thought, however, that it was now entering 'a new stage of development' and gradually transforming itself into a 'permanent political factor' that would be able 'effectively to exert influence' on government decisions.<sup>337</sup>

Doubts as to the validity of such interpretations were made official only at the Twenty-seventh CPSU Congress in February-March 1986. Gorbachev in his capacity as general secretary promised that the communist party always 'proceeds from the realities of the modern world'. Such realities included the fact that 'It is, of course, not possible to solve the problem of international security with one or two even very intense peace offensives. Only consistent, systematic, and persistent work can bring success.'<sup>338</sup> Subsequently, even *Pravda* commentators were prepared to acknowledge what perceptive analysts had known for some time and discussed in private: 'In the last few years a tendency could be noted among the anti-war movements, including among the most active and relatively important ones, to put themselves at a distance from the peace organiza-

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can security' and 'dividing the alliance'. He was convinced that this realization had been '*an essential precondition for the policy of the New Thinking in the Soviet Union. President Gorbachev himself confirmed this in conversation with me*'; Press and Information Office of the Federal Government, *Bulletin*, No. 137, pp. 1115-16 (italics mine).

336 G. Kirillov and V. Shenaev, 'FRG: Oslablenie pozitsii praviashchei koalitsii', in Oleg N. Bykov, ed., *Mezhdunarodnyi ezhegodnik: Vypusk 1985 goda. Politika i ekonomika* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1985), pp. 193-194. The book appeared in 1985 but the article was written in 1984.

337 V. Orel, 'Antivoennoe dvizhenie: dostizheniia i perspektivy', *Kommunist*, No. 12 (1984), pp. 87-98 (italics mine).

338 *Pravda*, 26 February 1986.

tions of the socialist countries.’ This tendency threatened to ‘divide the progressive forces and thus to diminish their strength’.<sup>339</sup>

*Afghanistan and the Third World.* Soviet failures in the competition over the internal systemic structure and foreign policy orientation of the countries of the Third World were equally glaring. In the 1970s, the dispatch of Soviet military advisers and weapons as well as cooperation with proxies such as Cuba and Vietnam had seemed to have resulted in substantial gains for the Soviet Union at little risk of confrontation with the United States. The early 1980s, however, began to look different. The Reagan administration appeared to be unaffected by the dual shock of Watergate and Vietnam. It was ready to return to a more active containment policy and even a rollback of Soviet gains. Several opportunities for such a policy presented themselves. In Angola, for instance, Soviet and Cuban intervention had failed to arrest the civil war. The government’s loss of control over wide areas of the country as a result opened the prospect that the Marxist regime in Luanda could be overthrown. In Ethiopia, joint Soviet-Cuban intervention had been unable to stop the Eritrean secession and the deterioration of socio-economic conditions. North Vietnam’s victory in the south and its occupation of Cambodia had led to significant economic and political costs, complicating Sino-Soviet relations and the relationship between the Soviet Union and the prospering non-communist countries of Southeast Asia. Finally and most importantly, in contrast to previous interventions in Eastern Europe, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan had not produced a quick military solution and political stabilization. It had led instead to a widening guerrilla war supported by the United States. It remained, as Gorbachev deplored at the Twenty-seventh CPSU Congress, an “open wound.”<sup>340</sup>

*Eastern Europe.* The war in Afghanistan had coincided with the rise of Solidarity in Poland. In fact, in 1980-81, the Soviet leadership under Brezhnev faced an acute dilemma in its attempt to restore control. Shevardnadze later remembered that Afghanistan and the Soviet domestic situation interacted with the events in Poland and heightened anxiety in the Kremlin about possible negative reactions from the West. ‘But that was not all. I think Moscow was given pause by serious and, I suppose, correct fears that the Poles would fight back and that full-scale military actions

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339 Yuri Zhukov, ‘The Anti-War Movements’, *International Affairs* (Moscow), No. 4 (April 1987), p. 23.

340 *Pravda*, 26 February 1986.

would have to be unleashed.<sup>341</sup> Archival evidence has revealed the existence of such fears. When the issue was discussed at a Politburo meeting in late October 1981, even traditional hard-liners such as defense minister Dmitri Ustinov and KGB chairman Andropov had to concede that '*it would be impossible now for us to send troops to Poland*'. They thought that the Soviet Union 'must steadfastly adhere to [its] line not to send in troops'.<sup>342</sup> Mikhail Suslov, the CC secretary in charge of ideology, is reported to have supported this line. 'Under no circumstances are we going to use force in Poland', he exclaimed.<sup>343</sup> However, the collective mind of the Politburo was also made up to the effect that, as foreign minister Gromyko put it, '*we simply cannot and must not lose Poland*'.<sup>344</sup> The two positions seemed mutually exclusive. The Soviet leadership was nevertheless able to avoid military intervention when General Wojciech Jaruzelski imposed martial law. But the basic structural problems of imperial control in Eastern Europe remained. The internal ferment did not end. No stable solution was achieved.<sup>345</sup> As Poland had shown conclusively, the attempt at transforming military preponderance into legitimate and effective political control in Eastern Europe had failed.

To summarize the discussion of military power and its political utility, by 1983-84 the Soviet leaders found themselves in a position of severe international isolation. Unwilling or unable to embark upon a comprehensive rearrangement of relations with the United States, Western Europe, Japan, and China, they adopted an attitude of 'insulted giant' and 'bear in hibernation'.<sup>346</sup> Based on the conviction that in response to the implementation of NATO's dual-track decision they had to live up to their threats of

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341 Shevardnadze, *Moi vybor*, pp. 205-6.

342 For the documentary evidence as compiled and analyzed by Mark Kramer, 'Poland, 1980-81: Soviet Policy during the Polish Crisis', *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* (Woodrow Wilson International Center, Washington, D.C.), No. 5 (Spring 1995), pp. 1, 116-26; p. 121 (*italics mine*).

343 According to Shevardnadze, at one point in the crisis, 'I happened to be in Suslov's office. Someone phoned him to report about the worsening situation in Poland and to insist, as I understood it, on an 'activation of forces.' Suslov repeated firmly several times, "There is no way that we are going to use force in Poland"; *Moi vybor*, pp. 205-6.

344 At a Politburo meeting in October 1980, Kramer, 'Poland, 1980-81', p. 118 (*italics mine*).

345 Shevardnadze, *Moi vybor*, pp. 205-6.

346 Terms used in lead articles by *The Economist* at the time.

political and military countermeasures, they showed a stone-hard face to the outside world. In typically Brezhnevite fashion, Andropov continued with the further deployment of SS-20 missiles, the stationing of ‘operational-tactical missiles’ in the GDR and Czechoslovakia and the forward positioning of nuclear-armed submarines ‘in ocean areas’ close to the US coast. He broke off the arms control negotiations on strategic and medium-range nuclear weapons and for a time also those on conventional arms. Chernenko, his successor, abandoned the policy of selective détente toward the Western European countries, his propagandists attacking the West German government for allegedly aiding and abetting ‘revanchist’ and ‘neo-Nazi’ tendencies. Trends for cooperation between China and the West in economic and security matters were growing. In the Islamic world the standing of the Soviet Union continued to be affected negatively by the occupation of Afghanistan and Moscow’s support for a pro-Soviet and pro-communist system in that country.

All lines of communication were blocked. The Soviet leadership for all practical purposes ceased to be an active participant in international politics and was relegating itself to the role of bystander. However, behind the façade of defiance and stridency, the realization was beginning to gain ground that power in international relations does not primarily depend on quantitative indicators such as the number of weapons and troops, reserves of raw materials, size of the population and the acreage owned or controlled on the Hindukush or the Horn of Africa but on the effectiveness and efficiency of the socio-economic and political system to develop the human potential – the *chelovecheskii faktor*, as this was called under Andropov. A greater awareness of the importance of political, cultural, economic, and technological instruments in the competition for influence in world affairs also began to develop and ultimately to give rise to the New Political Thinking under Gorbachev.

### 3. Declining Economic Performance and the "Costs of Empire"

The third pillar on which the superpower status of the Soviet Union had rested was that of economic potential. This pillar, too, was being seriously eroded. To take one of the crudest measures of stagnation and decline, that of the gross domestic product, in 1961 Khrushchev had quoted unnamed economists as estimating that, at the end of the Seven-Year Plan (1959-65), ‘the USSR will surpass the USA in the volume of production

and approximately by 1970 in per capita output'.<sup>347</sup> The authoritative CPSU programme of the same year improved on this prediction. The 'approximately' was replaced by the assertion that the USSR 'will surpass the USA ... in per capita output' in 1970.<sup>348</sup> That year, however, came and went, and starting from 1975 the official USSR statistical annuals began to show Soviet national income unchanged at the same proportion of US national income, namely at 67 percent. Correspondingly, the slogan of catching up with and overtaking the United States was scrapped. Furthermore, the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO) in Moscow made its own calculations and estimated Soviet national income to amount to only *half* of the American volume. It also concluded that the gap was *widening* rather than narrowing.<sup>349</sup> Unofficial Soviet estimates later put the Soviet-American national income ratio even lower than that.<sup>350</sup>

The Soviet economists' sense of urgency was sharpened by the fact that, in the second half of the 1980s, labour and capital inputs were doomed to slow more rapidly and natural-resource exploitation costs to rise faster. Extrapolation of trends indicated that the Soviet economy was heading for zero and negative growth. As Table 2 shows, Western (CIA) and official Soviet statistical time series data coincided in this portrayal of trends.<sup>351</sup>

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347 Khrushchev on 6 January 1961 at a meeting of party organizations, *Pravda*, 25 January 1961.

348 The embarrassing program was adopted at the June 1961 plenary meeting of the Central Committee of the CPSU; see *Pravda* and *Izvestiia*, 30 July 1961 (*italics mine*).

349 Information received from IMEMO researchers by Philip Hanson of the University of Birmingham. The subsequent analysis of economic developments is based on Phil Hanson's contribution to *The Gorbachev Challenge and European Security*, Report by the European Strategy Group (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1988), pp. 53-69. Hanson was the principal author of the economic section of the report.

350 A particularly sophisticated re-evaluation of the Soviet official data for the 1970s and 1980s and their downward revision was provided by Gregory Khanin, 'Economic Growth in the 1980s,' in Michael Ellman and Vladimir Kontorovich, eds., *The Disintegration of the Soviet Economic System* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 73-85.

351 Sources: *Narodnoe khoziaistvo SSSR* (various years); *Pravda*, 24 January 1988; CIA, *Handbook of Economic Statistics* (Washington, 1986); CIA and DIA, *Gorbachev's Modernization Program: A Status Report*, Paper prepared for the Subcommittee on Security Economics of the US Congress Joint Economic Committee, 19 March 1987; ESG Report, *The Gorbachev Challenge*, p. 58.

Table 2: Decline of Soviet Economic Growth, 1965-1985

	1966-70	1971-75	1976-80	1981-85
<b>A. Soviet official measures</b>				
NMP produced	7.7	5.7	4.2	3.5
NMP utilized	7.1	5.1	3.9	3.2
Gross industrial output	8.5	7.4	4.4	3.6
Gross agricultural output <sup>a</sup>	3.9	2.4	1.7	1.1
Investment <sup>a</sup>	7.4	7.2	5.2	3.2
Capital stock	7.5	7.9	6.8	6.0
Electric power	7.9	7.0	4.5	3.6
Oil, coal, and gas	5.2	5.4	4.2	2.5
<b>B. CIA estimates<sup>b</sup></b>				
GNP	5.1	3.0	2.3	1.9
Industrial output	6.4	5.5	2.7	1.9
Agricultural output	3.6	-0.6	0.8	2.1
Investment	5.5	4.3	4.3	3.4
Capital stock	7.4	8.0	6.9	6.2
Labour (man hours)	2.0	1.7	1.2	0.7

Notes. All output series and the investment and capital stock figures are in constant prices, that is, they denote "real" changes. The Soviet official series, however, are known to contain an element of hidden inflation and therefore are upwardly biased. Note a: For five-year periods, the growth rates shown are those between the total for the period and the total for the preceding five-year period. Note b: At 1982 rouble factor-cost.

Growth, of course, is only one aspect of economic development. When looking at a country's status, prestige and influence in international affairs, other factors are equally important. These concern the quality and technological level of its products, its share in world commodity and financial markets, its capacity for innovation, the volume of foreign direct investment received and the size of development assistance spent abroad. In all of these categories, the Soviet Union was performing poorly. Innovation essentially was limited to the military sphere, with hardly any spillover to the civilian economy. The design features, reliability, and technological sophistication of its industrial products were notoriously poor. Even with large price rebates, they were hopelessly uncompetitive in comparison with Western products. The structure of the Soviet Union's foreign trade very much resembled that of a developing country: the USSR exported large quantities of raw materials, notably oil and natural gas, and imported

machinery. Its share in world trade in the 1970s and early 1980s hovered around 4 percent, was far lower than that of the United States, West Germany or Japan, and was declining. With an economy run by the state, the Soviet Union provided no private investment, which had proven to be an important factor of growth for many of the newly industrializing countries such as Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and China.

The Soviet Union's share in economic assistance programmes was also small. It lacked the West's private programs, and government aid lagged far behind Western shares. The *commitments* were sometimes impressive but actual disbursements small. In accordance with the imperial and ideological paradigm, strategic considerations typically determined aid. But there were also major problems with the aid provided. Servicing and spare parts were difficult to obtain, and regimes in the Third World that were shifting from the acquisition to the consolidation of power and economic development frequently found that the benefits of cooperation with the West outweighed those that could be obtained from the Soviet Union.

Specialization and the division of labour in CMEA did not help. The organization's system of economic exchanges was like 'trading dead cat for dead dog'.<sup>352</sup> The economic organization's inefficiencies merely reflected those of the Soviet-type system of planning and management. In a normally functioning empire, the dependencies are meant to provide benefits to the centre. This was not the case in the Soviet empire. After a period of blatantly exploitative trade and economic relations in the Stalin era, the Soviet Union began to *subsidize* its hold on Eastern Europe. As noted above, East Germany before the building of the wall was an early example of what came to be a more general pattern under Khrushchev and Brezhnev. Subsidization occurred in the form of the delivery of cheap oil and gas; overpayment for industrial products relative to world market prices; and acceptance of industrial products whose quality was inferior to that of commodities exported by Moscow's allies to the West in exchange for hard currency. Whereas such deficiencies were serious enough *per se*, the main concern of the Soviet leaders, in what an astute analyst of Soviet affairs called the 'harsh decade' of the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, was the

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352 The claim to fame for this apt characterization is unclear but probably belongs to Hungarian economists.



impact of the deceleration of economic growth and lagging technological innovation on the military-industrial sector and the armed forces.<sup>353</sup>

### The Military-Industrial Complex and the Challenge of SDI

A number of special features characterized the Soviet military-industrial complex.<sup>354</sup> In conjunction, they amounted to a heavy burden on the Soviet economic mule that, in conjunction with other burdens of empire, it was ultimately no longer able to bear. *Excessive secrecy* was one of the many bales of straw that threatened to break its back. This feature, indeed, was one of the most pervasive phenomena in both Czarist and Soviet Russia. By the late 1960s, it had penetrated the system to such an extent that during the SALT I negotiations members of the Soviet foreign ministry's negotiation team were denied access to information about force levels and other 'secrets' by the members of the Soviet military delegation.<sup>355</sup> Even after the termination of this practice in SALT II, the most important aspects of military affairs remained concealed. These concerned the size and composition of the military budget; the strength, organization, and deployment of the Soviet armed forces; the priorities in military research and development; the scope and rates of weapons production; and the volume, composition, and geographical distribution of arms exports and military assistance. Initiatives in foreign policy were announced only after they had

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353 See Seweryn Bialer, 'The Harsh Decade', chapter 4 in his *The Soviet Paradox: External Expansion, Internal Decline*, Vintage Books (New York: Random House, 1986), pp. 57-80.

354 The term was coined by Eisenhower. In 1961, in his farewell address, he warned against a collusion between 'big business' and the military, that is, against the possible emergence of a 'military-industrial complex' that could 'acquire unwarranted and potentially dangerous political power'; as reported in *The New York Times*, 18 January 1961. The Soviet military, of course, denied the existence of such a complex in the USSR. To General V.N. Lobov, first deputy chief of staff of the Soviet armed forces and a first deputy minister of defense, that idea was 'absurd'; 'Est' li v SSSR voenno-promyshlennyi kompleks?', *Izvestiia*, 16 October 1988. For the late Soviet period, however, it was essentially correct to say that, *whereas the United States has a military-industrial complex, the Soviet Union is a military-industrial complex*.

355 This fact was first revealed by Raymond Garthoff, an American participant in the SALT I negotiations. It was confirmed to this author at that time by a Soviet foreign ministry official.



been decided. Discussions in the Politburo and Central Committee on international security affairs remained unpublished.

A second feature of military affairs and the military-industrial complex damaging to the economy was the *priority given to the arms industry in the allocation of resources*. Military industry received the best in machine tools and instruments. It paid its workers more than what workers and employees would receive in the civilian sector, and they had easier access to better housing and medical facilities. Supply bottlenecks were fewer in arms research, development and production since managers, state officials, and party secretaries learned to attend more quickly to requests from that industry.

A third special feature with negative impact on the economy was the *one-way flow of technological innovation*. As part of the priority given to the military sector, great emphasis was put on military research and development. According to Roald Sagdeev, the former head of the Institute for Space Research at the USSR Academy of Sciences, in the Brezhnev era at least 70 percent of the personnel employed in scientific tasks worked in the military and, therefore, secret and 'closed' sector of science.<sup>356</sup> Military industry was almost exclusively the beneficiary of innovation, with spillover occurring only in one direction: from civilian research and development to the military sector.

Fourth, *military industry was largely exempted from planning constraints*. It was able to enjoy the supply advantages of central planning without suffering its demand disadvantages. Production quotas, for instance, were not assigned to pilot plants and experimental factories, and retooling to upgrade weapons in these enterprises was standard practice.

Fifth, relative to the civilian sector, there was more *effective quality control* in military industry. The defense ministry, as the sole buyer of weapons, made sure that it would get what it wanted. This was achieved mainly by quality-control inspectors attached to each plant. These *voennye predstaviteli*, or military representatives, were empowered to reject products that did not conform to the stringent design specifications laid down by the ministry. They received their salaries from the ministry, and since they were neither employed nor paid by the plant, the establishment of cosy and corrupt relations between them and the plant management was made difficult.

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356 *Novoe vremia*, No. 47 (1988), p. 27.

Finally, the *high levels of military expenditure* contributed to the burdens of empire and the downfall of the Soviet economy. According to Western estimates, Soviet military spending in current prices was said to have increased from about 50 billion roubles in 1970 to approximately 130 billion in 1986.<sup>357</sup> In the period from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, military expenditures were estimated to have increased by 10 percent annually in current prices. Since such rates of growth exceeded that of the economy, the proportion of military expenditures in GNP, according to Western estimates, increased from 12-14 percent at the beginning of the 1970s to 15-17 percent at the beginning of the 1980s.<sup>358</sup> Many Western and Soviet observers, including Gorbachev after he had become General Secretary, thought that such estimates were too low. In conversation with Gromyko, for instance, he assumed that military expenditures constituted 16 percent of national income but 'if one added to that 4 percent for the MVD [Ministry of the Interior] and the KGB, the total would amount to 20 percent, which is the highest [proportion of] military expenditures [of GDP] in the world'.<sup>359</sup>

The level of defense expenditure did not constitute much of a problem in the conditions of relatively high economic growth in the 1950s and 1960s. But as the decline in the growth rates of the Soviet economy continued in the 1970s, objective constraints made themselves felt. The priority allocation of resources to the military sector of the economy became a cancerous growth, a malignant tumour that sapped the strength of the whole economic organism and threatened to destroy it. Starting from the second half of the 1970s, growth of Soviet military expenditures in *real terms*, based on 1970 prices, was estimated as having decreased from about 4 to 2 percent per annum; no growth was recorded any longer in military procurement.<sup>360</sup> Such trends, according to Western analysts, were not the result of deliberate decisions by the political leadership but the in-

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357 The Soviet Economy under a New Leader, Paper Prepared Jointly by the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency for Submission to the Subcommittee on Economic Resources, Competitiveness and Security Economics of the Joint Economic Committee, Congress of the United States, 19 March 1986.

358 Ibid.

359 As quoted by Shakhnazarov, *Tsena svobody*, p. 49.

360 According to CIA calculations, *USSR: Measures of Economic Growth and Development, 1950-1980*, Studies Prepared for the Use of the Joint Economic Committee, U.S. Congress, Washington, D.C., December 1982, p. 54.

exorable consequence of the overall slowdown of the Soviet economy.<sup>361</sup> Even political leaders with a limited understanding of economic affairs – essentially all of the Soviet leaders from Stalin to Gorbachev – could no longer ignore the fact that the share of military expenditures in the gross national product could not continue to rise indefinitely; that a technologically advanced military sector could not exist in isolation from the economy; that the future effectiveness and modernity of the armed forces was threatened by the economic deficiencies; and that tinkering with the system and yet another round of ‘administrative streamlining’ were no longer enough to remedy the problem. The Soviet military was certainly getting restless about the political leadership’s inability to achieve a level of technological sophistication in the military-industrial sphere that would guarantee high military technology competitiveness and military-strategic parity with the United States.<sup>362</sup> Perhaps conscious of the dissatisfaction inside the main pillar of Soviet global power, Brezhnev addressed the top military leaders in the Kremlin only two weeks before his death. He attempted to reassure them that they would get everything they needed. But he also had to tell them that ‘*politics can only be effective if it is based on real economic and military power*’.<sup>363</sup>

It is into this setting that Reagan’s ‘Star Wars’, or Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), has to be placed. As Dobrynin has observed, ‘Our physicists, headed by Academician Yevgeni Velikhov, were as sceptical as many of their American counterparts [about the prospects for developing an effective strategic defense in space] but their views hardly carried much weight. ... *Our leadership, however, was convinced that the great technical potential of the United States had scored again and treated Reagan’s*

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361 See, for instance, Abraham S. Becker, *Sitting on Bayonets: The Soviet Defense Burden and the Slowdown of Soviet Defense Spending*, Rand / UCLA Center for the Study of Soviet International Behavior, The Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, CA, JRS-01, December 1985.

362 Disagreements over economic and military priorities in all likelihood led to the dismissal of chief of staff Nikolai Ogarkov in September 1984; see Jeremy R. Azrael, *The Soviet Civilian Leadership and the Military High Command*, The RAND Corporation, R-3521-AF, June 1987; see also Dale R. Herspring, ‘Nikolai Ogarkov and the Scientific-Technical Revolution in Soviet Military Affairs’, *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (January 1987), pp. 29-59.

363 ‘*Soveshchanie voenachal’nikov v Kreml’e*’, *Pravda*, 28 October 1982 (italics mine).

statement as a real threat.’<sup>364</sup> Such perceptions were not only by the Kremlin in the Andropov and Chernenko interregnum after the death of Brezhnev but also by Gorbachev. Since the argument is made in this book that the crumbling of the three main pillars of empire and a grave domestic political crisis formed a compelling rationale for Gorbachev’s New Thinking, his views on the SDI issue are of considerable importance. There is little direct evidence how he regarded the problem before his accession to power but there is ample proof in his first months in office. The evidence available shows that he recognized science and technology as crucial factors of global political influence and Reagan’s Star Wars not simply as one of the many gyrations of the arms competition but as a *fundamental* challenge to the Soviet Union.<sup>365</sup>

Prior to Gorbachev’s accession to power, a growing number of party officials and academic specialists became concerned about the social costs of high defense expenditures. Shevardnadze later recalled that he had expressed his concern about the impact of the arms race on both superpowers. In a private conversation at his (Shevardnadze’s) home in Moscow, United States ambassador Thomas J. Watson had told him that in the United States signs of a falling standard of living had appeared and that this could probably be attributed to the high costs of the arms race. In his opinion, the same applied to the Soviet Union. By carrying the burden of the arms race both the USA and the USSR were beginning to sacrifice competitiveness relative to other countries. Shevardnadze agreed and cited the examples of the Federal Republic of Germany and Japan: ‘While we were competing in the production and stockpiling of state-of-the-art weapons, they, freed from this burden, surged ahead of us.’<sup>366</sup> Furthermore, he continued, ‘in our economy only the military-industrial complex operated at

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364 Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, p. 528 (italics mine).

365 Evidence will be presented below; see pp. 273–74. Gorbachev, in retrospect, has attempted to *deemphasize* the importance of SDI for changes in the Soviet approach towards the West. For instance, at a conference on ‘A World Restored: Reflections on Ending the Cold War’, organized by West Point Military Academy, 8–9 October 1995, he stated that the Soviet Union had an advanced research program and was ready for cost-effective responses. ‘SDI was not decisive in our movement to a new relationship. Change in the Soviet Union was the decisive factor’; quoted from notes taken by one of the participants.

366 Shevardnadze, *Moi vybor*, pp. 149–50. No date was provided for the conversation. From the context, it appears that it took place in 1985, after Shevardnadze’s appointment to the post of foreign minister.

peak performance, thriving at the country's expense and making it possible for the country to entertain illusions of its own might and power. But suddenly it dawned on us that real power is something much more than nuclear warheads'.<sup>367</sup>

To return to the main line of the argument, the erosion of the three main pillars of empire reflected long-term structural deficiencies of the Soviet empire and the Soviet system. The crisis of empire which this erosion produced was intimately connected with a domestic political crisis in the Soviet Union.

#### 4. The Domestic Political Crisis

The self-proclaimed 'stability of cadres' had been one the main building blocks of the Soviet system under Brezhnev. After the cycles of physical liquidation under Stalin and the hectic administrative reshuffling and frequent discoveries of 'anti-party groups' in the Khrushchev era, Brezhnev finally met the ruling elite's longing for predictability and security of tenure – at a price. Stability turned into stagnation (*zastoy*). Corruption and nepotism became rampant. The 'new class' of party officials became ever more insulated from society.<sup>368</sup> The system of self-generating and self-selecting appointments according to centrally controlled lists (*nomenklatura*) turned party officials into an oligarchy, or a special caste, something akin to an aristocracy, with life peerage that provided power, perks and privileges.<sup>369</sup> The elite, if this term can be meaningfully applied, had its own clannish ties, special stores, maternity wards, funeral services, health resorts and hunting lodges. Its children spent time together, received priority access to higher education and often intermarried. Brezhnev's son, to take an example from the highest level of the hierarchy, became deputy minister for foreign trade, and his son-in-law was promoted to first deputy minister of the interior.<sup>370</sup>

367 Ibid.

368 This phenomenon in the evolution of Soviet-type systems was aptly described by Milovan Djilas, *The New Class* (New York: Praeger, 1968).

369 Terminology used by Mikhail Voslensky, *Nomenklatura*, transl. Eric Mosbacher (London: Bodley Head, 1984), and Georgi Arbatov, *The Soviet System: An Insider's Life in Soviet Politics*, with an introduction by Strobe Talbott (New York: Random House, 1992), p. 227.

370 Ibid.

There was one segment of growth in the period of stagnation: the bureaucracy. In accordance with Parkinson's Law, the number of bureaucrats in the Brezhnev era rose to unprecedentedly high levels. The party apparatus expanded by tens of thousands of officials, many of whom incorporated as a result of the creation of agricultural departments in the party's district committees. About half a million officials (*chinovniki*) filled the hierarchical layers of the party bureaucracy, from the central apparatus (Politburo, Secretariat, CC departments) to the regional and local offices in the Union republics, regions, districts, cities, and territories. Growth occurred also in the number of officials in state and economic administrations. Between 1975 and 1980, their ranks swelled by three million and in 1984 surged to a level of 18.6 million bureaucrats. They could be found, some of the time at least, at their desks in 36 councils of ministers, more than 1,000 ministries and state committees, 51,700 executive committees of the regional and locals soviets, 44,600 production and scientific-production associations, 21,600 state farms (*sovkhozy*), transportation, construction, trading, and service enterprises as well as health and educational institutions.<sup>371</sup>

These data *excluded* the officers and men in the Soviet armed forces, the KGB, border troops, interior ministry and the police. The strength of the five branches of the armed forces – the army, the navy, the air force, the strategic rocket forces, and air defense – added up to a total of about 5 million officers and men.<sup>372</sup> The secret police (KGB) had an estimated 720,000 agents on its payroll, and this agency and the interior ministry (MVD) had under their command 570,000 officers and men in military formations, including several divisions of border and internal security troops.<sup>373</sup> Excluded also were the officials in the labour unions, youth or-

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371 Data as compiled by M.U. Klimko, *Voprosy istorii KPSS*, No. 11 (1984), p. 16, as quoted by Gyula Józsa, 'The Party Apparatus under Andropov and Chernenko', in Federal Institute for East European and International Studies, ed., *The Soviet Union 1984/85* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1986), pp. 25-27.

372 Data from various issues of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) *Military Balance* (London).

373 Astrid von Borcke, 'The Role of the Secret Service', in Federal Institute for East European and International Studies, ed., *The Soviet Union 1984/85* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1986), pp. 49 and 56 as well as various issues of the IISS *Military Balance*. The figure of 720,000 KGB agents is based on research by Yevgenia Albats, *The State within a State: The KGB and Its Hold on Russia – Past, Present and Future*, trans. Catherine A. Fitzpatrick (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux,

ganization (*Komsomol*) and other ‘social formations’, collective farms, or *kolkhozy*, and the state farms (*sovkhozy*).

The numerical expansion of the administrative apparatus and the external and internal security services was matched by an increase in their political representation and influence. The defense minister and the head of the KGB became full members of the Politburo. Brezhnev appointed himself Marshal of the Soviet Union and emphasized his role as supreme commander of the armed forces. Important questions of internal and external security were discussed and decided in a reactivated defense council (*sovet oborony*), a select body of top party and state officials and high-ranking military officers. Prominence, status and prestige of the military were demonstratively elevated. On the occasion of official celebrations in Red Square, the top military leaders were prominently placed atop the rostrum at the Lenin mausoleum, at the right-hand side of the General Secretary; as if to demonstrate equality with the party, they took up half of the rostrum.

The armed forces were called upon to assume a new ‘internationalist’ function in order to be able to advance world-wide ‘state interests’. For that purpose, the navy and the air force were equipped with long-range intervention capabilities.<sup>374</sup>

The priority allocated to military industry in the economy, the privileged position of the military in politics and society as well as the more prominent role of the armed forces in foreign policy could be interpreted as rampant ‘Bonapartism’ or at least as a successful bid by the military for power at the expense of the party. This, however, would be an erroneous interpretation of the essence of civil-military relations under Brezhnev. The undoubted growth in the military’s status and influence did not result

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1994), p. 23. For detail on these figures see *infra*, chapter 5, the section on the KGB.

374 The new ‘internationalist’ role of the Soviet armed forces was explained by [Marshal] Andrei A. Grechko, ‘Rukovodiashchaia rol’ KPSS v stroitel’stve armii sotsialisticheskogo armii’, *Voprosy istorii KPSS*, Vol. 5 (1974), pp. 30-47. The case for using the navy as an instrument for the advancement of Soviet ‘state interests’ was vigorously made by Admiral Sergei S. Gorskov in a series of articles in the navy’s journal *Morskoi sbornik*. For a detailed analysis see Hannes Adomeit, ‘Militärische Macht als Instrument sowjetischer Außerpolitik: Überholt? Unbrauchbar? Unentbehrlich?’, in Hannes Adomeit, Hans-Hermann Höhmann and Günter Wagenlehner, eds., *Die Sowjetunion als Militärmacht* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1987), pp. 200-235.



from a politicization of the armed forces or their deliberate push for power but from a pull exerted by the party.

The same can be said for the enhanced role of the secret police in the 1970s and early 1980s. The KGB was permitted to increase its influence and representation in the Central Committee and the party bureaus of the Union republics. Heydar Aliev, head of the KGB in Azerbaijan, and Boris Pugo, his counterpart in Latvia, became party chiefs in their respective republics. Andropov was chief of the KGB until his transfer to the party apparatus in May 1982. Under his tutelage, the secret police became ever more prominent and active. It was instrumental in implementing a whole series of restrictive measures, curbing cultural expression, religious rights and freedoms and the free flow of information. It helped stifle and silence dissent. It persecuted and suppressed human rights groups like the Helsinki CSCE watch committees. All along, the KGB engaged in image building. It fostered the idea that it was a modern, efficient and reliable institution, devoid of internal corruption and dedicated to furthering the interests of the party, the state and the people, and hence entitled to a privileged role in politics and society.

Bureaucratization and militarization interacted with a crisis of political leadership. One of its many causes lay in the serious health problems that Brezhnev developed after 1975. In the last years of his rule, he was said to have been able to work only for a few hours each day. His death in November 1982 at the age of almost 76 thus came almost as a relief to reform-minded officials in the party and government. In fact, the Politburo's selection of Andropov as his successor was greeted, according to Chernyaev, with an 'outburst of ovations' in the November 1982 plenary meeting of the Central Committee.<sup>375</sup> Such outbursts had occurred previously, some of them carefully stage-managed. This time, however, the enthusiasm appeared to be genuine.

The new leader had the reputation of being intelligent, shrewd, skilful, hard-working, and immune to corruption. He was regarded as having a remarkable mind, political talents, and an intellectual bent and as being incorruptible and selfless, which on occasion bordered on asceticism.<sup>376</sup> His record as ambassador to Hungary during the 1956 revolution, CC secretary in charge of relations with the ruling communist parties in the 1960s,

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375 Chernyaev, *Shest' let s Gorbachevym*, pp. 12-13.

376 Andropov as characterized by Arbatov, *The System*, p. 256.



and head of the KGB in the period from 1967 to 1982 made him appear better informed than anyone in the top leadership about the shortcomings of the Soviet system and the problems of empire in Eastern Europe. He seemed to combine perfectly the qualities of enlightened intellectual and efficient technocrat. Nothing, however, was to come of the high hopes that had accompanied his appointment. He merely prescribed the time-honoured Soviet medicine of a new campaign to cure the social and economic ills that had befallen the country. The campaign was conducted under the heading of ‘mobilization of reserves’ inherent in the system in order to modernize it. The imposition of discipline was meant to help in this effort.

The structural deficiencies of the system had led to a plethora of activities at the margin or outside the legal framework and a thriving ‘second economy’. Many of these activities were advantageous to the consumer since they mitigated the rigidities of central planning and alleviated supply and distribution shortages. Yet rather than legalizing and constructively channelling these forms of private initiative, the new party leader set out to eradicate them. He decreed a relentless struggle against ‘social parasites’, ‘idlers’, ‘work shirkers’ and ‘violators of work discipline’. New regulations went into effect imposing harsher penalties for certain economic offenses such as bribery, speculation and theft of products or tools from the workplace. The police were roused from their doldrums and forced to conduct dragnet operations in shops, bars, restaurants, movie theatres and steam baths to check whether the people found there had legitimate reasons or were skipping work. The dragnet operation was also employed as part of yet another anti-alcoholism campaign. Drunkards were rounded up and punished by pay cuts, demotions, and public denunciations.

It is possible that Andropov considered the expansion of police powers and intrusion into the private sphere to be a preparatory stage for more far-reaching structural changes, perhaps even in a more liberal direction. If so, such changes were never outlined. A mere three months after his inauguration as secretary general of the party, he was put on a dialysis machine for kidney failure. In April 1983, rumours abounded that he no longer commanded a majority among the top leadership. Politburo and Central Committee meetings were postponed. The party chief was last seen in public on 18 August 1983. Like actors in a *theâtre absurde*, and in a repetition of practices adopted in the last years of Brezhnev’s life, Andropov’s subordinates excused the party leader’s absence with claims that he was suffering from recurrent colds. Letters and documents were published on

his behalf to prove that he was keeping abreast of the affairs of state and working indefatigably. Yet Andropov was not at hand to announce and justify the ‘countermeasures’ in response to the West German parliament’s decision to deploy intermediate-range nuclear missiles, and he failed to appear in public in order to explain the circumstances that had led to the destruction of the civilian Korean airliner on flight KAL 007. These tasks were left to Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, the Soviet armed forces’ chief of staff. Essentially, Soviet decision-making, or lack thereof, had reverted to the last years of the Brezhnevite *zastoy*. The political and personal agony, perhaps mercifully, came to an end only on 9 February 1984, when Andropov died.

Another succession and leadership crisis erupted. Reform-minded party officials had hoped that this time the Politburo would chose Gorbachev as party leader. This was not to be. As vividly described by Chernyaev, on 14 February the top leadership was ready to announce its choice for Andropov’s successor to the assembled members of the Central Committee.

Five minutes before the beginning of the session, the candidate members of the Politburo and the CC secretaries, as was customary, entered the hall through a side entrance. [Politburo candidate member and CC secretary] Ponomarev, the perennially first among the second, led the procession. The tension had reached its high point. All eyes were focussed on the left door behind the rostrum, that is, the entrance to the presidium. Who will appear first? Exactly at 11 a.m. Chernenko appeared. Behind him followed [Prime Minister] Tikhonov, [Foreign Minister] Gromyko, [Defense Minister] Ustinov, [CC secretary] Gorbachev and the others. There was dead silence in the hall. No one stirred. When Andropov, after Brezhnev’s death, had been first to enter the plenary hall, everyone had stood up. The members of the presidium sat down, Gorbachev directly next to Chernenko. It was still uncertain [who had been chosen]. Chernenko rose, bent over steeply towards his notes on the table and in an asthmatic voice mumbled a few words about the deceased.

Tikhonov then announced that the Politburo had completed its deliberations and instructed him to ‘propose to the plenum to consider the candidacy of comrade Chernenko’. The Central Committee was stunned. It responded to the proposal with lukewarm applause and to Tikhonov’s *laudatio* of the candidate with embarrassed silence.<sup>377</sup> Predictably, the new leader proved to be as frail as his predecessor, although less imaginative.

One is left to wonder why that selection was made and why Gorbachev was not chosen instead. Some understanding of the reasons may shed

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377 Chernyaev, *Shest’ let s Gorbachevym*, pp. 11-13.

some light on how one should view Gorbachev's position at that time and the policies he pursued subsequently.<sup>378</sup> Four possible reasons can be advanced.

The first is that the gerontocracy did not understand the seriousness of the Soviet predicament and, to the extent that it did recognize problems, thought that they could be managed. In the light of the Politburo's rejection of Chernenko and preference for Andropov in 1982, however, this rationale is unconvincing.

The second possibility is that the Politburo chose a transitional figure with the idea in mind that it would put its trust in a second-in-command (Gorbachev), who would effectively run party and state affairs and take over from him on Chernenko's departure. This explanation is disingenuous. Its attractiveness lies in the fact that, at least up to a point, subsequent events moved in this direction. There is no evidence, however, that this was the Politburo's reasoning at the time.

The third rationale is the idea that the members of the Politburo had been frightened by Andropov's initiatives and feared for their job if they were to select a younger, more dynamic leader. What speaks for such an interpretation is the fact that in his speech of praise to the CC Tikhonov had emphasized the candidate's 'benevolent attitude' towards the cadres and, as Gorbachev discovered at the meeting, there were many happy faces around. These belonged to members of the Central Committee who had felt 'threatened by dismissal or who had already retired but still belonged to the CC. They were hopeful that 'now their time, the tranquil and "stable" [time], in a word, the "time of Brezhnev", would return'.<sup>379</sup>

Finally, opting for someone like Gorbachev, with his only fifty-two years of age at the time of Andropov's death, would have been far removed from the collective political mind of the Politburo. In their view, Gorbachev was simply too young to be allowed to skip several steps on the ladder of seniority. Although no spring chicken at the age of seventy-two, Chernenko was 'younger' than other leading candidates for the top party post – Tikhonov was seventy-eight, Ustinov seventy-five, and Gromyko seventy-four. Did they remember and feel encouraged by the remark made by Andrei Kirilenko, a then member of the Politburo, who had

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378 This discussion draws on John Miller, *Mikhail Gorbachev and the End of Soviet Power* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), pp. 39-40.

379 Gorbatschow, *Erinnerungen*, p. 242.

stated at Brezhnev's birthday celebrations in 1976 that seventy years of age was being thought of in the Soviet Union as 'middle age'?<sup>380</sup> Perhaps.

In conformity with the last argument, a private meeting is said to have taken place shortly prior to the Central Committee plenum, with Gromyko, Ustinov, Tikhonov, and Chernenko in attendance. The four appear to have taken the crucial decision on the succession. Tikhonov was overheard in the corridor as saying, 'I believe that we did indeed decide correctly. Mikhail [Gorbachev] is still young. One also doesn't know how he would behave in that position [of General Secretary]. Kostya [Chernenko] is exactly the right man.'<sup>381</sup>

Whatever the precise reason for his selection, Chernenko as party chief meant continuation of the ineptitude, incompetence, inertia and lack of innovation of the Soviet system. Collectivism in decision-making and continuity of policy would again be emphasized. As previously, some economic experiments and pilot projects would be authorized but comprehensive reform was ruled out. In foreign policy, matters would turn from bad to worse. Given the party chief's infirmities (he was said to suffer from emphysema) and his long periods of absence from the job (for instance, from 15 July to 5 September 1984 he never appeared in public), it is safe to assume that Gromyko was effectively in charge. Some Western scholars have made valiant attempts to portray this interval as rife with Soviet endeavours to re-establish détente with the West.<sup>382</sup> More pertinent, it would seem, are contemporary observations to the effect that under Chernenko's nominal leadership the counterproductive attitudes of 'bear in hibernation' and 'insulted giant' not only continued but turned into an 'aggressively isolationist mood'.<sup>383</sup> The number of Jews permitted to emigrate shrank to a trickle. Andrei Sakharov, already exiled in Gorki, was denied a visa for medical treatment in the West. The Soviet Union cancelled its participa-

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380 *Pravda*, 15 October 1976.

381 Gorbatschow, *Erinnerungen*, p. 241. Gorbachev thus in essence confirms what American journalist David Remnick had heard. "'Kostya [Chernenko] will be easier to control than Misha [Gorbachev],' one of the Politburo members said as he left the room where they had settled the issue." As quoted in his *Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire* (New York: Random House, 1993), p. 63.

382 For instance, Raymond L. Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1984), pp. 168-94.

383 This was the observation made by Richard Owen, 'Chernenko Walling Out the West', *The Times* (London), 28 June 1984.

tion in the 1984 summer Olympic games. The country's direct-dial international telephone circuits, installed for the 1980 Olympics in Moscow, were unplugged and replaced by old-fashioned Soviet operators.<sup>384</sup> New fences topped with barbed wire went up around foreigners' compounds in Moscow and police were instructed to check Russian visitors more stringently. A new article 13 of the criminal code of the Russian Federation made it a crime to pass on to foreigners 'information that constitutes a professional secret'. Another law imposed a fine of 50 roubles on citizens who invited foreigners to stay at their home without informing the police. There was an increase in psychological intimidation and even physical assault against Western, notably American, journalists, diplomats, and tourists.<sup>385</sup> The list of xenophobic measures could be extended and supplemented by examples of a nationalist and military-patriotic revival. At this stage, however, it is necessary to return to the main topic and examine the interaction between the multidimensional crisis of empire and the German problem.

## 5. The Impact of the Crisis on Soviet-East German Relations

The accelerating decay at the centre also affected East Germany as the most exposed part of the Soviet imperial periphery. Perhaps paradoxically, it was not the GDR's actual or perceived socio-economic decline that prompted a crisis in Soviet-East German relations but contradictory Soviet perceptions and policies conducted on their basis. The Kremlin leaders, on the one hand, believed at least part of what they heard from the East German leadership: that the GDR was a political and economic success story. But, on the other hand, and quite in contrast to the idea of the GDR's political consolidation and economic prowess, they were concerned about the country's allegedly increasing dependence on West Germany and drift away from the Warsaw Pact and CMEA. Not least because of this dependency did the Kremlin resent the SED leadership's newly found self-confidence and assertiveness. As described in the previous chapter, early in his

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384 This appears to have happened in 1982, still under Brezhnev, but the practice continued under Andropov and Chernenko; see Kevin Klose, 'The New Soviet Isolationism: A Sorry Retreat', *International Herald Tribune*, 26 May 1984.

385 Richard Owen, 'Chernenko Walling Out the West', *The Times* (London), 28 June 1984.

tenure Honecker had been willing to consent to a package of quadripartite agreements and understandings on Berlin and bilateral agreements with West Germany on intra-German relations. However, in the second half of the 1970s, the new provincial governor had become more self-confident and independent and just as difficult to manage as his predecessor. There was less coordination and consultation between the GDR and the USSR than in the past. The Soviet leadership reacted with admonitions to the SED comrades not to overestimate their role and, in their relations with West Germany, not to let themselves be drawn into further economic dependencies. However, the admonitions fell on deaf ears. And there was very little the USSR could do since it had transferred most of its occupation rights to the GDR and Honecker was firmly in control of the party.<sup>386</sup>

As for the early 1980s, the archival evidence clearly shows how, in Honecker's perception, the GDR's profile had grown after it had received international recognition, including UN membership. A lot of room in SED Politburo meetings is taken up by often exuberant reports on the various visits by Honecker and other Politburo members abroad, visits by Western and other dignitaries to the GDR, exchanges between SPD and SED party leaders, and meetings between East and West German government officials. The new evidence also reveals that, while the relationship with the Soviet Union remained an important part of East German foreign policy, its relative importance for the GDR was declining. East Germany was diversifying its foreign policy, a reversal of roles and policies was taking place and the sources of Soviet-East German conflict changed. In the early 1970s, the controversies had concerned questions of foreign policy. At that time, Moscow had felt confident enough to push for East-West détente. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, and most acutely in 1983-84, East German foreign policy deviationism was again at issue. This time, however, it was East Berlin that felt brave enough to make closer contact with the class enemy.

Honecker's confidence was reflected in his new attitudes towards German unification, thereby confirming Soviet anxiety about East Germany's possible drift into an all-German direction. Turning future events on their head, Honecker told SED officials in February 1981 that,

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386 'Mauerbau mit Genehmigung Moskaus: Kwizinskij als Zeuge im Keßler-Prozeß', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 23 July 1993.

if today certain people in the West make presumptuous speeches and pretend that reunification of the two German states is more important to them than their wallet, then we would like to tell them: be careful! Socialism will one day knock on your door, and when the day comes that the workers of the Federal Republic decide to transform the Federal Republic of Germany into a socialist state, then the question of German reunification poses itself completely anew. There shall be no doubt how we will decide then.<sup>387</sup>

Contrary to such unrealistic notions, as Gromyko had clarified earlier, a united socialist Germany was no longer in the Soviet interest. Although German unification under socialist auspices had no chance ever to be put on the agenda of practical politics, Honecker's all-German pretensions did produce considerable irritation in Moscow (see *infra* in this section). Whenever it came to a confrontation over specific issues deemed important from the Soviet vantage point, the interests of the centre still took precedence over those of the fiefdom. However, the degree of influence the Soviet Union could exert on the broad sweep of East German policies was even more limited than in the past. Frequently it yielded on subordinate issues. In 1983, for instance, Honecker demanded the recall of the two-time Soviet ambassador, Pyotr Abrasimov, who had long conducted himself as if the GDR were his personal fiefdom, attending East German Politburo sessions and interfering almost at will. Andropov obliged.<sup>388</sup> Whereas the CPSU, after Andropov's death and Chernenko's appointment to the post of General Secretary in February 1984, was demoralized, internally divided and internationally isolated, the SED, in contrast, was able to present an almost undivided front. If the weak and ineffective Soviet leadership had wanted to undermine or replace Honecker, it would hardly have known on whom to rely in a reshuffle.<sup>389</sup>

The enhanced self-assurance of the SED derived not only from its improved image and standing in the West but also from developments in Eastern Europe. In the late 1960s, the GDR had only been a junior partner in the Warsaw Pact's so-called 'iron triangle', comprising East Germany, Poland, and Czechoslovakia – a powerful bulwark based on coal, iron and

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387 'Honecker spricht von Vereinigung beider deutscher Staaten', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 17 February 1981.

388 See Kwizinskij, *Vor dem Sturm*, pp. 263-64; see also his remarks on the conduct of Yefremov, Abrasimov's predecessor.

389 See James A. McAdams, 'The New Logic in Soviet-GDR Relations', *Problems of Communism*, Vol. 37, No. 5 (September-October 1988), pp. 52-53; see also Kwizinskij, *Vor dem Sturm*, pp. 255-66.



steel in the economy, orthodoxy in ideology and retrenchment in foreign policy. The triangle, however, had disintegrated in 1968, when the Czechoslovak communist party succumbed to the disease of ‘revisionism’ from which, essentially, it was never to recover. In the second half of the 1970s, helped by massive borrowing from the West, Poland became the Soviet Union’s preferred partner in bridge-building between East and West in Europe. But that country’s role, too, collapsed with the disastrous downturn of its economy, the rise of Solidarity and the downfall of the party. East Germany was the only side of the triangle that seemingly remained unaffected by the viruses of internal dissent and economic decline. Outwardly, throughout the 1970s, it maintained domestic political stability and officially it boasted steady economic progress. Whereas, according to government data of the three countries concerned, the net material product of Poland and Czechoslovakia decreased at the beginning of the 1980s (in Poland, it fell by 12 percent in 1981, and by 5.5 percent in 1982; in Czechoslovakia, by 0.1 percent and 0.3 percent respectively), the East German economy *grew* by 4.8 percent and 2.5 percent. East Germany’s reported economic performance in 1983 and 1984 was even better, the growth of the East German national product outpacing that of any other CMEA country.

What, then, were the consequences of the increased self-confidence of the East German leadership for USSR-GDR relations? In the period from the Soviet Union’s intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979 to the Bundestag’s consent to the stationing of Pershing II and cruise missiles on West German soil in November 1983 they were difficult to recognize for the outside observer. Both Moscow and East Berlin had a shared interest in maintaining reasonably good political and economic relations with the countries of Western Europe. Thus Brezhnev, Andropov, and Honecker had fostered the notion of the divisibility of détente and the possibilities for Europe to remain a tranquil island in the rough seas of superpower competition. They had portrayed the Reagan administration as the driving force behind an increased danger of war in Europe and exempted the Schmidt government from the worst criticism. The purposes of this policy of differentiation were apparently to undercut American economic sanctions, to enhance the influence of the West German ‘peace movement’ and to exacerbate divisions in the Western alliance. Both Moscow and East Berlin warned that the European idyll could abruptly come to an end. They threatened that if Bonn were to implement the December 1979 ‘dual track’ decision of NATO and consent to the deployment of intermediate-



range nuclear systems on its soil, intra-German relations would be one of the first major casualties of a new cold war in Europe. They cautioned that the whole carefully woven network of legal, political and economic relations between West Germany and its neighbours in the East could suddenly unravel. Gromyko, for instance, in the fall of 1983, stated in East Berlin that the deployment of U.S. missiles on West German soil would ‘contradict the spirit and letter’ of the treaties normalizing Bonn’s relations with Moscow and East Berlin.<sup>390</sup> Similarly, in October 1983, Honecker warned that if the Bundestag were to consent to the stationing of the missiles, a ‘new ice age’ would ensue in relations between East and West Germany.<sup>391</sup>

But it soon became apparent that Moscow and East Berlin had different reasons for opposing the deployment of missiles in Western Europe. The primary objective of the Soviet leadership was to maintain its military preponderance in Europe and to expand its political influence by means of the ‘peace movement’ and protracted arms control negotiations. By contrast, the East German leadership seems to have been motivated by the desire to avoid being drawn into an accelerated arms race between East and West in Europe and having to bear the brunt of a deterioration in East-West political relations.

In the autumn of 1983, shortly before the Bundestag decision, the attitudes and policies of the Soviet Union and East Germany began to diverge openly. *Neues Deutschland* started publishing letters to Honecker from Evangelical Church congregations, urging him to continue the dialogue between the two German states. Mutual trust, the letters said, should flow from the dialogue and form the basis of a ‘security partnership’ and, as he had explicitly advocated, the formation of a *Koalition der Vernunft*, or ‘coalition of reason’.<sup>392</sup> He also, in order to emphasize the East German position, stated at a plenary meeting of the SED Central Committee in November 1983, that is, only two days after the beginning of missile deployments in West Germany, that the countermeasures decided upon by the Warsaw Pact did ‘not elicit any enthusiasm’ in the GDR and that it was of ‘great importance to continue the political dialogue with all forces’. Charging that the Kohl government had taken upon itself a great responsibility by agreeing to the stationing of missiles, he nevertheless assured the

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390 *Pravda*, 19 October 1983.

391 In a letter to Chancellor Kohl, *Neues Deutschland*, 10 October 1983.

392 *Neues Deutschland*, 22 October 1983.

Central Committee: 'We are in favor of limiting the damage as much as possible.'<sup>393</sup> Thus, new seeds of East German deviation from the Soviet foreign policy line had been sown.

From the Soviet point of view, the problem was difficult to manage since party leaders in several other Eastern European countries, too, continued to be interested in normal relations with the West. Hungary, Romania and, to a lesser extent, Bulgaria were openly asserting their own foreign policy preferences. There was even sweeping ideological justification for the divergence from the Soviet line and the challenge to Soviet authority. Such justification was developed by Matyas Szürös, head of the international department of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Communist Party, in October 1983. In the era of the Comintern and the Cominform, he argued, the national interests of the member states of the 'socialist community' had 'unconditionally' been subordinated to international interests. Such subordination, he stated emphatically, should no longer obtain. Differences in experience were completely natural since there was no 'single correct model' to imitate. Both historic traditions and contemporary conditions made it possible for 'relations between individual socialist and capitalist states to continue to develop despite the fact that the deterioration of East-West relations and the contraction of contacts are the general trend'.<sup>394</sup>

In 1983-84, the SED also began to deviate from the CPSU's internal policies, notably on the issue of the relationship between the state and society. In contrast to the Soviet leadership under Andropov and Chernenko and its attitudes towards dissent, the East German government granted a certain degree of autonomy to the Evangelical Church. It also permitted the establishment of some transnational links between the two German societies, including the churches and the 'peace movement'. On the ideological plane, the SED began to cultivate a new 'special relationship' with Western European social democratic parties. In April 1983, for instance, it organized a major conference in East Berlin on the legacy of Karl Marx, at which the SED argued that the cause of preserving peace had assumed priority over the promotion of social change. Not only were communist par-

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393 Ibid., 26-27 November 1983.

394 In a lecture delivered on 20-21 October 1983 at a conference on the teaching of history after World War II. The lecture was not published at the time. However, an article by Szürös based on it appeared in the Hungarian journal *Tadarsalmi szemle* (Budapest), No. 1 (January 1984), pp. 13-21.

ties of all orientations invited to send delegations to the conference, but so too were numerous social democratic parties, including the SPD. Then, in the following year, the SED began a series of direct negotiations with the SPD on common security issues, first, on a proposed chemical weapons-free zone and later on a European nuclear-free corridor.<sup>395</sup>

Soviet concern was reinforced not only by the fact that Honecker was toying with the idea of German unification under socialist auspices but also by another twist in East Germany's perennial search for national identity. It still emphasized its socialist roots but no longer derived its existence exclusively from the 'revolutionary' strands of German history. It retained the claim that the GDR was the culmination of the tradition associated with the peasant wars of the early 16th century and its leaders (e.g., Thomas Münzer, Götz von Berlichingen and Florian Geyer), the bourgeois revolutions of 1830 and 1848 as well as the proletarian revolution of November 1918. But it now began to associate itself also with the 'whole richness of German history'. Thus, the SED discovered precursors and parallels to its own world view in the writings of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Immanuel Kant and began to reinterpret the historic role of Martin Luther, Frederick the Great and Otto von Bismarck. To the chagrin of the Soviet comrades, it also began to reevaluate the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler on 20 July 1944.<sup>396</sup>

Thus, on the eve of the twentieth anniversary of the assassination attempt, at a meeting of the (East) German Society of Historians and the Central Institute on History at the Academy of Sciences, SED court historians and ideologues claimed that the resistance group under Colonel Graf Stauffenberg had included 'patriotic officers' who deserved 'a place of honour in the history of the German anti-Fascist resistance struggle'. Their cooperation with other leading personalities from different sections of German society had to be regarded as an incipient 'coalition of reason' (!) and their attempt against the life of Hitler on 20 July 1944 as 'a courageous act of historic and national significance'.<sup>397</sup> Contrary to such reinterpretations, an article in the Soviet army newspaper scathingly attacked the Stauffenberg circle as having consisted of forces close to the German 'monopoly bourgeoisie' and having 'advocated an alliance with American imperialism and the creation of a united imperialist front against the Sovi-

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395 McAdams, 'The New Logic in Soviet-GDR Relations', p. 53.

396 *Neues Deutschland*, 20 July 1984; *Krasnaia zvezda*, 19 July 1984.

397 *Neues Deutschland*, 20 July 1984.

et Union'. In obvious allusion to the East German historiographical departures, it warned that current efforts aimed at elevating such forces to the 'rank of national heroes' could not be considered separately from the 'activation of revanchist and nationalist tendencies in West Germany'.<sup>398</sup>

The most important issue, however, and one that was to provide the first of two main triggering mechanisms for a severe crisis in Soviet-East German relations, was the extension of substantial amounts of West German credit to the GDR. In July 1983, the West German government had guaranteed a credit to East Germany in the amount of 1 billion (West German) marks. In June 1984, on a visit in Moscow, Honecker was warned not to increase GDR dependence on West Germany. Honecker chose to ignore the comradely advice, and in late July 1984 another major West German government-guaranteed credit to East Germany in the amount of 950 million German marks was agreed upon. Unacceptably from Moscow's perspective, the West German economic and financial benefits were linked to East German political concessions. For instance, when Bonn announced the second credit, it stated that East Berlin had consented to a list of eleven measures for the improvement of intra-German travel and visits and had given firm assurances that it would permit several thousands of its citizens to emigrate to West Germany in the current year.<sup>399</sup> In fact, in the first half of 1984 a larger number of East German citizens – almost 30,000 – visited West Germany than ever before. Given the importance of the issue for the increasing alienation in Soviet-East German relations and the animosity between Honecker and Gorbachev, the problem of debts and dependency will be analyzed later in more detail.

The second triggering device for the severe crisis in Soviet-East German relations in the summer of 1984 was the preparation of an official state visit by Honecker to the Federal Republic. For the East German party leader such a visit was, in the opinion of former SED Politburo colleagues, an 'important, even emotional issue' and the likely 'crowning of his career'.<sup>400</sup> To provide some background, in November 1981, Brezhnev had visited West Germany for the third time during his tenure in office and had supported the idea of a meeting between Schmidt and Honecker. On 11-13 December 1981, Chancellor Schmidt and Foreign Minister Genscher paid

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398 *Krasnaia zvezda*, 19 July 1984.

399 See the reports on this linkage in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 26 July 1984.

400 Interview with Krenz; Schabowski, *Das Politbüro*, p. 35.

an official visit to East Germany and held talks with Honecker at Lake Werbellin and in Güstrow. However, the German chancellor and his foreign minister, as indeed international public opinion, were shocked when General Jaruzelski, on the last day of Schmidt's visit in the GDR, declared martial law in Poland. The 'internal intervention' in Poland that made it unnecessary for the Soviet Union to intervene could not possibly have been carried out without Brezhnev's endorsement.<sup>401</sup> It was not unlikely, therefore, that the Soviet and, in association with them, the East German stage managers had intentionally attempted to embarrass Schmidt. They could at least have had the decency to delay their action until after Schmidt's return to West Germany. But now, as Polish internal security forces were rounding up Solidarity activists, the intra-German handshakes looked strangely out of place. In fact, not having been given discreet advance warning for a timely cancellation of the visit to East Germany, the chancellor and his foreign minister appeared duped to the West German public. Schmidt nevertheless extended an invitation to Honecker to visit the Federal Republic.

In the circumstances, that is, the continuing East German support for the repression of Solidarity in Poland and the widening controversy over the stationing of intermediate-range missiles in Europe, a visit by Honecker to West Germany at any time in the period from December 1981 to November 1983 seemed completely out of the question. But in 1984, after Honecker's deviation from the harsh Soviet line and the extension of the second West German credit to East Germany, the visit advanced from a dim prospect to specific planning. September was the month agreed upon for the visit. But the Soviet leadership, as will be shown, was adamant that it should not take place. Before examining this hotly debated issue, it is appropriate to sketch the deterioration of Soviet-*West German* relations that coincided with the crisis in Soviet-East German affairs.

## 6. The Impact of the Crisis on Soviet-West German Relations

In March 1984, the Soviet leadership under Chernenko's frail guidance responded to the challenge in the bloc with an ideological counteroffensive

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401 See Sidney I. Ploss, *Moscow and the Polish Crisis: An Interpretation of Soviet Policies and Intentions*, Westview Special Studies on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1986), pp. 135-53.

and at the April plenum of the Central Committee decided to show a stone-hard face to the outside world.<sup>402</sup> Part of the new harsh attitude was the abandonment of selective détente, that is, the policy of relative goodwill and inducements to West Germany and Western Europe, while adhering to an uncompromising attitude toward the United States. The first indications of the new Soviet policy toward West Germany appeared in a communiqué issued at the end of the conference of foreign ministers of the Warsaw Pact countries in Budapest on 20 April 1984, which expressed concern that once again ‘concepts are being propagated that put into question the borders of the European states and their social order and that are directed against the political and territorial realities in Europe’.<sup>403</sup>

Thus, yet another propaganda campaign against Bonn began to take shape. As if in preparation for Foreign Minister Genscher’s visit to Moscow at the end of May, Soviet politicians and party hacks suddenly found a new growth of revanchism’, ‘militarism’, and ‘neo-Nazism’ in the Federal Republic. Whereas accusations of the West German government had until then been based only on guilt by association, that is, on the idea that Bonn was supporting or at least not resisting the policies of the Reagan administration, it was now held *directly* responsible for the sharp deterioration in East-West relations and for an increased risk of war in Europe. In particular, Soviet propagandists attacked Bonn and the decision by the Western European Union (WEU) to lift the restrictions, imposed on West Germany when it entered NATO in 1955, on the production of long-range conventionally armed aircraft and missiles. They claimed that the WEU decision had to be seen in the context of the current ‘policy of the militarist circles’ in NATO, including in West Germany. This policy had entered a highly dangerous phase, they charged, its manifestations being plans for the deployment of new American missiles in Europe, increased defense cooperation in WEU and demands by CDU and CSU leaders for

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402 On the ideological counteroffensive, see the article by Oleg Rakhmanin, deputy head of the Central Committee’s Department for Liaison with the Communist and Workers’ Parties: O. V. Borisov (pseud.), ‘Soyuz novogo tipa’, *Voprosy istorii KPSS*, No. 4 (1984), pp. 34-39. The Soviet ideological counteroffensive was supported by the Czechoslovak Communist Party purged of its reformist and ‘revisionist’ members. An example is the article by party officials Michael Stefanak and Ivan Hlivka, ‘Narodni a internacionalni v politice KSC’, *Rude pravo*, 30 March 1984.

403 *Izvestiia*, 21 April 1984.

the creation of a European nuclear force.<sup>404</sup> Although the Soviet campaign against Bonn is on public record, the question arises why it took so long – almost half a year after the Bundestag vote on missile deployment – to get underway. Several reasons may explain the time lag.

First, the Soviet leadership may not have foreseen the likely evolution of West German domestic politics after the November 1983 Bundestag vote and regarded the position of the SPD on international security issues as promising. In fact, a considerable transformation of the SPD had taken place in the period from 1977 to 1983. In 1977, chancellor Schmidt had commented on the need to maintain a balance between NATO and the Warsaw Pact countries in the ‘gray weapons’ area, that is, the realm between the strategic and tactical nuclear levels. He had been one of the principal architects of NATO’s dual-track decision in 1979. But there was wide-spread opposition to his defense policies within the party. It remained to be seen, from Moscow’s perspective, whether majority opinion in the party would distance itself further from NATO and move towards neutralism or return to the political centre in West German politics.

Second, in the immediate aftermath of the stationing of the missiles, no one could predict with certainty the reaction of the West German ‘peace movement’ and its future influence. The Central Committee’s International Department still assumed or at least hoped that major sections of the opposition outside parliament would continue to demonstrate against the stationing of missiles and draw upon the impressive strength of the more than one million people that it had been able to muster in the fall of 1983. In Moscow it seemed unlikely that the ‘peace movement’ would decline so quickly to political insignificance in the West German body politic.<sup>405</sup> The probable degree of success or failure of Soviet military pressure and selective détente, therefore, may not have been clear in the arteriosclerotic collective mind of the Soviet leadership.

Third, the Politburo may have hesitated to impose a new line on West Germany because, as noted, the Eastern European countries were quite averse to a deterioration of political and economic relations with Western Europe. Party leaders and propagandists in these countries had no illusion

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404 Danil Proektor, ‘Wenn die letzten Limits fallen’, *Neue Zeit* (Moscow), No. 19 (May 1984), pp. 18-21; see also V. Nikanarov, ‘Indul’gentsiia militarizmu: NATO pooshchriaet narashchenie voennoi moshchi FRG’, *Krasnaia zvezda*, 18 May 1984.

405 Interview with Zagladin.



about the great difficulty to make a new ‘revanchism’ and ‘militarism’ campaign against West Germany appear credible. Thus, the Soviet Politburo may initially have wanted to act behind the scenes in order to avoid a damaging public dispute in the bloc and to force the issue only after the failure of attempts at persuasion.

Fourth, the Kremlin may not have realized until the first months of 1984 that vigorous efforts needed to be made to restore the credibility of the Soviet threat posture. Beginning in early 1984, the West German government began to claim triumphantly (but perhaps unwisely) that neither the Soviet countermeasures at the military level nor the dire political consequences threatened by Moscow in the end amounted to much. The ‘new ice age’ of which the Kremlin had warned, had failed to come about. Above all, as West German officials pointed out in private as well as in public, intra-German relations and the status of Berlin had remained unaffected. West Germany’s economic relations, too, had not suffered, neither with the USSR nor with other Comecon countries. Such manifestations of ‘business as usual’ may have increased the pressure on the Soviet leadership to demonstrate that it did, indeed, mean business.

Finally, Chancellor Kohl’s political philosophy and the evolution of intra-German affairs had become an irritant in Moscow. In July 1983, when Kohl had visited Moscow, he had forcefully portrayed reunification as a major foreign-policy goal of the West German government. Subsequently, after his return to the Federal Republic, he had insisted that the German problem was still *eine offene Frage* – an unresolved question – and that, as codified in the 1972 Basic Treaty, ‘special relations’ existed between the two German states. In principle, this was nothing new. Officials in the Soviet foreign ministry and the Central Committee’s International Department, however, thought they had detected a new stridency on the German problem by what, after all, was no longer a government coalition led by social democrats but by conservatives.<sup>406</sup>

Thus, given the persistence of the traditional paradigm in 1984, the Soviet Union’s relations with both East and West Germany were becoming a problem. But the relationship with its recalcitrant and obstructionist *gubernator* in East Berlin had to be dealt with immediately. In late July and early August, the Soviet leadership finally lost its patience. It went public with its criticism and forced the unruly East German satrap to reappear in

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406 Interview with Rykin.



Moscow to face another round of accusations. This important juncture in centre-periphery relations in Europe will be described and analyzed next.

## 7. Debts, Dependency, and Intra-German Relations

In Haydn's 'Surprise' Symphony (No. 94 in G Major), a possibly slumbering audience is rudely awakened in the *andante* of the second movement when, at a second pianissimo, the full orchestra suddenly plays a fortissimo. At this stage in the book, after the *tour de force* on paradigms and parameters, the reader may need a jolt to reinvigorate his interest. If so, nothing could serve that purpose better than two *Pravda* articles that appeared in the summer of 1984. The sensitivity of the subject matter, the timing of the articles and their high-level political backing converged to catch the attention of political leaders and slumbering Sovietologists. The articles also tell a fascinating story of empire and ideology.

Perhaps paradoxically for the uninitiated in the defunct (but now again, in the Putin era, again relevant) art of Kremlinology, the articles were primarily about West Germany but nevertheless infuriated the East Germany leadership. Equally paradoxically for the untrained eye, the first article was written by a certain Lev Bezymensky who – in contrast to the pseudonyms often used by the editors of *Pravda* to lay down the party line – actually existed but who was almost unknown beyond a small circle of specialists in both the Soviet Union and the West.<sup>407</sup> Nevertheless, the article was also published in *Neues Deutschland*, the East German party newspaper. The second article did not have a by-line, and the East German party newspaper failed to publish it.<sup>408</sup> However, the issues it dealt with were considered serious enough by both Soviet and East German party leaders to break off their vacations and hurry to a hastily arranged secret meeting in Moscow. According to widespread Western opinion, it was the advent of perestroika and glasnost that caused a deep political rift between the CPSU and the SED and personal animosity between Honecker and Gorbachev. It can be argued, however, that the chasm between them opened earlier, with the publication of the two articles and the subsequent emergency meeting in Moscow.

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407 Lev Bezymensky, 'Pod sen'iu amerikanskikh raket', *Pravda*, 27 July 1984.

408 'Na lozhnom puti', *ibid.*, 2 August 1984.

Before analyzing the content of the articles, the background for their appearance will be presented first.

First and foremost, their origins are to be found in the extension of two major government-guaranteed credits by the government in Bonn to East Berlin and the Kremlin's conviction that the GDR was dangerously drifting into West Germany's orbit. The first credit, granted in July 1983, amounted to 1 billion German marks (*Milliardenkredit*); the second, almost in the same amount – 950 million marks – was extended in July 1984. Since credit to communist countries in one form or another, for instance, to Poland, was to become a normal part of East-West interaction and had already played a part in Soviet-American relations in the period of détente, it is easy to overlook the significance of the dramatic measure. Except for 'swing' credits to facilitate intra-German trade, credit to East Germany was unprecedented. Furthermore, the political sensitivity of the arrangements was heightened by the fact that they did not occur in a period of renewed détente but rather in one of unabated East-West tensions over the stationing of intermediate-range nuclear missiles in the Soviet Union and Western Europe. In addition, the credits were arranged by Franz Josef Strauß, who in the past had been the *bête noire* of Soviet and East German propagandists and had been attacked by them as a rabid revanchist harbouring nuclear ambitions. For the Soviet Union the main issue was whether East Germany was carelessly embarking upon a slippery path that would lead from economic to political dependency and ultimately to erosion of its socialist foundations.

Günter Mittag, the chief architect of the New Economic Mechanism under Ulbricht and the leader responsible for economic affairs under Honecker, was to acknowledge in retrospect that there had indeed existed a close linkage between politics and economics. At the beginning of the 1980s, he wrote, the GDR had no longer been in a position 'to achieve on its own the necessary qualitatively higher level of labour productivity'. The CMEA could not be relied upon to provide new impetus either. On the contrary, in his view, this organization 'relied on the GDR for the development of new technologies'. Thus, the only thing that remained was ever 'closer cooperation and closer rapprochement' with West Germany although 'we implicitly had to accept the fact that the Federal Republic al-

ways granted assistance under the premise of preparing for future reunification',<sup>409</sup>

Soviet-East German controversies over the issue began in earnest at the beginning of the 1970s. The deteriorating performance of the centralized command economies, including that of the GDR, threatened to erode living standards and political stability. In order to avert that danger, Honecker developed an ambitious *sozial-politisches Programm* that was to provide not only for the continuation of subsidies for cheap food, rent, health care, education, and transportation but also the expansion of housing construction and social benefits, such as old-age pensions, child-care benefits, maternity leave, and a reduced work week. Laudable as the program may have been, the question was how to finance it. If severe cuts in investment were to be avoided, an increase in borrowing was the answer. When the possible risks of such a strategy were pointed out to Honecker at a Politbüro meeting as early as in February 1972, he made it clear that he accepted these risks and that borrowing from the West presented no problem since, as he said, 'We do not have the intention to repay the debts of the GDR in two years.'<sup>410</sup>

The 'oil shock' with its substantial price increases for that commodity – oil prices more than doubled between April 1979 and April 1980 – significantly increased the GDR's borrowing requirements. For whereas the Soviet Union profited immensely and thereby managed to postpone the ultimate hour of reckoning, that is, its collapse, by huge windfall profits, East German economic specialists estimated that the price explosion for oil and raw materials on the world market would 'lead to an enormous additional burden for the national economy of the GDR, amounting to an estimated 25-30 billion [East German] marks'. That, precisely, was the sum that Honecker had intended to spend on the core of his *sozial-politische Programm*, the construction of housing.<sup>411</sup>

East Germany's level of indebtedness subsequently began to rise. This did not go unnoticed in Moscow. In the mid-1970s, prime minister Kosygin told Mittag that East Germany should refrain from increasing its level

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409 Günter Mittag, *Um jeden Preis: Im Spannungsfeld zweier Systeme* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1991), p. 83.

410 Przybylski, *Tatort Politbüro*, Vol. II, p. 49.

411 *Ibid.*, p. 54. The East German mark was officially valued at parity with the West German Deutsche Mark. However, on the black market, one DM was traded for five or more GDR marks.

of Western indebtedness above 6 billion Deutsche Mark.<sup>412</sup> To put this figure in perspective, according to the head of the GDR Staatsbank, even this limit would have been ‘3.6 times higher than the total export volume’ of the GDR and meant that ‘the national income consumed [would have been] higher than the national income produced’.<sup>413</sup> But Honecker and Mittag ignored all warnings and considerations of economic rationality and went far beyond this level. In fact, at that time, GDR hard currency indebtedness was already well over 6 billion Deutschmarks. In 1979 the total debt stood at about 30 billion Deutschmarks.<sup>414</sup>

Werner Krolikowski, a Politburo member and CC secretary for economic affairs in 1973-76, later revealed that ‘at every meeting with Honecker the Soviet party leaders – Brezhnev, Andropov, Chernenko and Gorbachev – warned of the great danger of indebtedness to the West’.<sup>415</sup> At one of these meetings in East Berlin, in October 1979, on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the foundation of the GDR, ‘Brezhnev pounded his fist on the table and, in front of the assembled [SED] Politburo, accused Honecker of leading the GDR into bankruptcy’.<sup>416</sup> The East German party leader pretended to take the criticism seriously and had proposals put before the Politburo to halve the total debt of the GDR in the 1980s. But these proposals were as unrealistic as his previous policies. No serious attempt was made to fulfil the plans, and the level of debt continued to increase.

Honecker and Mittag then began to use an extensive business network under the auspices of Alexander Schalck-Golodkowski, a shrewd and shadowy figure, to raise as much hard currency as possible. The network went under the name of *Kommerzielle Koordinierung* (Coordination of Commerce), referred to by insiders as KoKo, which Schalck also used to amass a private fortune. One of the avenues he pursued was the export of weapons, a scheme that began in earnest in 1982 and earned the GDR about 300 million Deutschmarks in that year.<sup>417</sup> KoKo expanded commer-

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412 Przybylski, *Tatort Politbüro*, [Vol. I], p. 325.

413 Przybylski, *Tatort Politbüro*, Vol. II, p. 50. Grete Wittkowski was the head of the GDR state bank. Her figure of 3.6 is calculated on the basis of a projected debt of DM 5.9 billion (rather than DM 6 billion) for the end of 1973.

414 Przybylski, *Tatort Politbüro*, Vol. I, p. 327.

415 Hand-written notes by Krolikowski, dated 16 January 1990, *ibid.*, Doc. 22, p. 327.

416 *Ibid.*

417 *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 63.

cial exports, too, even if it meant engaging in transactions that would yield only 0.10 Deutschmarks per commodity unit at a production cost of 1 East German mark. Schalck finally used KoKo to exchange East German for West German marks at commercial banks in West Berlin. Since the banks kept each other informed about the volume of such exchanges, Schalck's operatives synchronized their transactions in order to avoid a precipitous fall in the exchange rate.<sup>418</sup>

The imperial centre was apparently well informed about Honecker's economic strategy and, indeed, about internal SED concerns and opposition to the increasing level of indebtedness. One of the informants was Krolikowski, who told the Kremlin in March 1983: 'The deliveries in the export plan with the Soviet Union have not yet been specified up to the necessary 100 percent. Products in the amount of 1.3 billion marks are still missing.'<sup>419</sup> He commented that this state of affairs 'unmasks [the fact] that the most important task [of planning] is the balancing of trade with the NSW [non-socialist world] through [an increase in] exports'. Furthermore, according to Krolikowski, it also showed the GDR's intention "*to sell to the Soviet Union such commodities as cannot be sold in the NSW and in that way to fulfil the plan for exports to the Soviet Union*".<sup>420</sup> Such reports in all likelihood confirmed the Soviet leaders' worst suspicions. Indeed, since politics and economics are linked, they could not have been very surprised about a further observation in Krolikowski's report to the effect that 'the attitude by E[rich] H[onecker] to the Soviet Union and CMEA is characterized by great cunning'. Honecker avoided open criticism of Andropov, but everything he had to say about the new Soviet leader was said with 'cool sobriety, without personal involvement and dedication; [there] wasn't a word of praise'. He merely 'adopted an attitude of watchful waiting to events in the Soviet Union'.<sup>421</sup>

Western estimates of the GDR's debt, too, became more ominous. The *Wall Street Journal*, which had calculated the GDR's debt to the West as being \$11.8 billion at the end of 1980, estimated that this amount would rise to \$18-20 billion by the end of 1985. The *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* provided a figure of \$12 billion in July 1982. The United Nations calculated

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418 Ibid.

419 Ibid., Vol II, p. 65. Krolikowski by then had already been demoted (in 1976) to the position of deputy prime minister.

420 Ibid. (italics mine).

421 Ibid. [Vol. I], Doc. 25, p. 351.

an even higher figure. However, none of these estimates included East German obligations to West Germany in the amount of approximately 3.4 billion Deutschmarks at that time, which were not counted as foreign debt.<sup>422</sup> Forty percent of these debts had a payment period of less than one year. This required that half of all hard currency receipts be used for the repayment of principal and interest. But these obligations could only be met by raising new credit. To compound matters, the deterioration in the terms of trade as a result of the huge increase in the world market price for oil and raw materials made it more difficult to acquire hard currency. Therefore, to repeat, ever new credits were urgently required.

In June 1983, Honecker sent Schalck as his personal emissary to a secret meeting with Franz Josef Strauß. In a personal letter, which Schalck handed to the Bavarian prime minister and head of the CSU, the East German leader revealed economic and financial information that he had withheld even from his own government and party.<sup>423</sup> He effectively bared his soul and confessed to Strauß the GDR's economic predicament. As Strauß later wrote, Honecker told him that he 'could ask for CMEA's help, which for all practical purposes meant Moscow's, but Western assistance was a [preferable] alternative, since he intended to cooperate with [the West] more closely on economic matters'. The letter culminated in the plea to Strauß to use his good offices in Bonn in order to break the barriers which had thus far stood in the way of the realization of his wishes.<sup>424</sup> Schalck insisted on having the letter returned to him to take back to East Berlin. Secrecy, evidently, was of the highest order. Only Schalck and Mittag knew of Honecker's plans. If the wheeling and dealing with Strauß had been discussed in the Politburo, his associates would probably not have dared move against Honecker but someone would undoubtedly have informed the Soviet leaders, and this would most likely have spelled the end of his plans.<sup>425</sup>

Another important part of the background to the *Pravda* articles was Honecker's unbending determination to visit West Germany. Chancellor Schmidt and foreign minister Genscher, as noted above, had paid an official state visit to the GDR in December 1981 and had invited Honecker to

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422 Wolfgang Seiffert, 'Zur Verschuldung der DDR und ihren Konsequenzen', *Deutschland-Archiv*, Vol. 15 (December 1982), p. 1241.

423 Przybylski, *Tatort Politbüro*, Vol. II, p. 63.

424 Franz Josef Strauß, *Die Erinnerungen* (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1989), p. 524.

425 Przybylski, *Tatort Politbüro*, Vol. II, p. 67.

visit the Federal Republic. Consultations with the government in Bonn had advanced far enough by the summer of 1984 to make it seem quite realistic that the visit would take place sometime in the autumn. Given the divergence of Moscow's and East Berlin's *Westpolitik*, the impending visit assumed supreme symbolic significance. The *Pravda* articles for obvious reasons did not refer to it. But, as will be seen, whether or not the visit should take place was a hotly contested issue in the August 1984 emergency meeting in Moscow.

## 8. *Pravda* Articles of Faith

To turn to the *Pravda* articles themselves, the diatribes by Bezymensky appeared just two days after the announcement of the second credit. The author attacked Bonn for 'using economic levers as well as political contacts' in order to gain concessions by the GDR on matters of sovereignty. He reminded his readers that the Federal Republic had still not responded favourably to any of the four demands that Honecker had put forward in Gera, East Germany, in October 1980, that is, during a period of – in Moscow and in East Berlin – perceived risks of East German infection by the Polish Solidarity bacillus. The demands had deliberately been designed to be unacceptable to Bonn. They comprised (1) West German recognition of and respect for a separate East German citizenship; (2) upgrading of the permanent representations in Bonn and East Berlin to the status of embassies; (3) abolition of the Zentrale Erfassungsstelle (central registration office) in Salzgitter for criminal acts committed by East Germans for possible later prosecution; and (4) delineation and readjustment of the East-West German border at the Elbe river.<sup>426</sup> Bezymensky also reminded his readers of statements made by Honecker prior to the stationing of intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Western Europe to the effect that good-neighbourly relations cannot flourish 'in the shadow of the missiles'.<sup>427</sup>

The second, unsigned, article appeared a few days later. It was even more blunt in its attack on Bonn and drew the connection between the new credit and East German concessions more sharply. It warned that the 'eco-

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426 For the text of Honecker's speech in Gera, see *Neues Deutschland*, 10 October 1980.

427 This, in fact, is the title of Bezymensky's article.



conomic lever has frequently been used in the past for the disruption of the post-war peace order in Europe and above all for the destruction of the stability of the GDR'. The lever at present was the 'credit agreement between the Deutsche Bank and the foreign trade bank of the GDR'. With the help of the credit and its deliberate linkage with demands, such as an increase in the number of West German visitors to East Germany and of the volume of printed material imported by the GDR, Bonn attempted 'to gain new channels of political and ideological influence'. Finally, according to the editorial, West Germany tried, 'under the pretext of "damage limitation", to achieve its long-standing revanchist plans' in Europe.<sup>428</sup>

Before focussing on the Moscow emergency meeting and providing an analysis of the Soviet-GDR controversies, three brief observations are in order. First, although the articles were ostensibly directed against Bonn, they were pointed to an even greater degree at East Berlin. Simply put, they outlined how Bonn had more or less skilfully laid a trap and East Berlin had stepped into it. From this perspective, the crucial question concerned the reason for the SED's ill-advised behaviour. Was it a mixture of stupidity, naïveté and overconfidence with a dose of pan-German illusions? Or was it conscious and deliberate policy to construct a 'special relationship' with the other Germany at the expense of the special – 'eternal' and 'fraternal' – Soviet-East German relations?

A second observation concerns the forum of the attack. Ordinarily, inter-party controversies were carefully shielded from international public scrutiny so as not to detract from the appearance of unity and cohesion of the 'socialist community'. The Sino-Soviet rift is a perfect example of this. Soviet criticism of China, for instance, was first voiced in the late 1950s behind closed doors. Moscow then moved to indirect attacks (ostensibly against Albania, but Beijing was the actual target) and finally to open polemics. This pattern strongly suggests that public criticism was a procedure that was only adopted as a matter of last resort when all other avenues of redress had been exhausted. In the specific example at issue here, therefore, the Soviet initiative clearly indicates the prior existence of a pattern of conflict and controversy in Soviet-East German relations, not a mere collective quirk of temper or bad mood in Moscow.

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428 'Na lozhnom puti', *Pravda*, 2 August 1984.

These interconnections and inferences can be drawn *inter alia* on the basis of Honecker's remarks at the high-level secret meeting in Moscow, where he directly referred to the articles and took his critics to task:

As regards the first article, I was informed about it and I decided to have it published because it shows the position of the GDR in its controversy with the FRG. We did not print the second article because it was directed against some of the positions of the CC of our party. We are of the opinion that open polemics do not conform to the norms in the relations between our parties. We are against polemics [in our relationship] with the CPSU; all questions that arise can be solved among ourselves. I called you [Comrade Chernenko] on Monday [12 August] to make clear that *there should be no public attacks since they only harm us and the whole [socialist] community.*<sup>429</sup>

The third observation concerns the author of the attack. Bezymensky was known by CC International Department insiders as being a close confidant of Falin.<sup>430</sup> Honecker was perfectly aware of this.<sup>431</sup> Thus, there could not have been much doubt in the mind of anyone familiar with Moscow power politics that the signed article had the backing of the most senior officials in the CC's International Department involved in policy making on the German problem. Similarly, the unsigned article published subsequently merely reinforced the importance of the matter since this form of publication was usually adopted by the chief editors of *Pravda* authoritatively to enunciate party policy. In fact, Konstantin Rusakov, the head of the CC department for relations with the ruling communist parties, explicitly acknowledged in the Moscow meeting with Honecker that the articles 'did not pass me by' and that he had 'consented' to their publication.<sup>432</sup> But they also appeared to have the high-level support of the foreign ministry. Gromyko had frequently warned the East German comrades not to overes-

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429 The source for this *exposé* and analysis of the Honecker-Chernenko meeting in Moscow is the verbatim East German protocol (*Niederschrift*) of the discussion; as usual, there is little doubt that the record of the proceedings was kept with customary German bureaucratic accuracy; see SED Politburo, *Arbeitsprotokolle*, J IV 2/2.039/280, transcript of meeting, p. 59 of typed original (italics mine).

430 Interviews with Grigoriev. Later, Falin and Bezymensky appeared as co-authors of an orthodox Soviet version on the origins of the Cold War; see *Pravda*, 29 August 1988.

431 Interviews with Krenz.

432 Transcript of meeting, p. 73 of typed original.

estimate their role and in their relations with West Germany not to let themselves be drawn into economic dependence.<sup>433</sup>

A final observation is related to the previous point. The articles unquestionably not only had to have high-level backing in the Politburo but also that body's *approval*. However, when such authorization would have had to be given, Chernenko was on vacation. The second in command in Moscow was Gorbachev, and it is precisely he whom Honecker suspected of having been responsible for clearance of the articles. This suspicion was fully confirmed in the East German party leader's mind at the August 1984 emergency meeting in Moscow. According to what Honecker later told Krenz, Gorbachev, in the car from the airport to the Kremlin and in the meeting in the Kremlin itself, showed himself well informed about the content of the articles.<sup>434</sup>

## 9. The Chernenko-Honecker Emergency Meeting in Moscow

The record of the meeting which took place on 17 August 1984 provides instructive insights into the reality of 'fraternal relations' behind the façade of harmony and consensus. It provides a vivid example of what in communist parlance euphemistically went under the name of 'open' and 'frank' exchanges – in other words, the blunt expression of serious disagreement.<sup>435</sup> It clearly brings into focus the state of relations between the Soviet Union and East Germany, the sharp differences in their interpretation of international affairs, the sources of conflict between the two countries and their leaders, the personalities of the top leaders and the origins of the personal animosity and alienation between Gorbachev and Honecker.

The character of meetings and their outcome are usually predetermined by the participants. This was no different at the Moscow conference. The participants included on the Soviet side the most senior representatives of empire and ideology: Chernenko, the party chief; Gorbachev, the second

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433 'Mauerbau mit Genehmigung Moskaus: Kwizinskij als Zeuge im Keßler-Prozeß', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 23 July 1993.

434 Interview with Krenz; Gorbachev, at the August 1984 emergency meeting with Honecker in Moscow, refers to having talked to Honecker in the car; see transcript of the meeting, p. 64 of the typed original.

435 The terms were used several times by the participants to characterize the meeting.

in command; Dmitri Ustinov, Politburo member and defense minister; Viktor Chebrikov, Politburo member and head of the KGB; and the aforementioned Rusakov, Central Committee secretary in charge of relations with the ruling communist parties. The foreign ministry was represented only by Georgi Kornienko, one of its first deputy ministers. As the proceedings would show, his presence amounted to little more than token participation: the meeting was evidently intended to be an exercise in ‘proletarian internationalism’ and the reassertion of communist party discipline in the bloc rather than a matter of diplomacy.<sup>436</sup> On the German side, the delegation similarly included the most senior and powerful figures of the party and security hierarchy – Honecker as chief of the delegation; Politburo members and party secretaries Kurt Hager, responsible for ideology, and Hermann Axen, the party secretary for international affairs; Erich Mielke, Politburo member and chief of state security; and Günter Sieber, the head of the CC department for international relations.<sup>437</sup>

The tone of the meeting was set by Chernenko’s terse welcoming remarks and his disingenuous observation that ‘the leadership of the GDR [sic] has apparently seen the need to achieve clarity concerning certain important questions in our relations’ and that this ‘coincides with the wish of the Soviet party leadership’. It was, of course, obvious to everyone in the room what this ‘need for clarity’ was all about. Honecker was first given the opportunity to outline the East German position. He did so without the slightest trace of regret or remorse. On the contrary, in what must have been at least one full hour of presentation, he vigorously defended his point of view and policy.<sup>438</sup> In the process, at least from the perspective of an impartial debating judge, he effectively destroyed the Soviet argument.

Honecker initially made three technical and procedural points to undercut the Soviet position. First, ‘in the name of the Politburo of the CC of the SED’, he extended ‘cordial greetings to Comrade Chernenko and the other comrades of the Soviet party leadership’ and reported: ‘On Tuesday

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436 The reader does not need to be troubled with the enumeration of the other participants mentioned in the verbatim record. They included V.V. Sharapov, a personal assistant to the general secretary; A.I. Martynov, sector head in one of the CC departments; and A.N. Tarasov, another CC official, as translator.

437 Also included in the talks was Bruno Mahlow, Sieber’s deputy; he acted as translator.

438 His opening statement amounted to a total of 42 double-spaced pages. To deliver one page of text would probably have taken about one and a half minutes.

[13 August], a session of the Politburo of the CC of the SED took place which dealt with several questions arising from some articles in *Pravda*.<sup>439</sup> In accordance with ‘instructions of the Politburo’ of the SED, he wanted to respond to the questions at issue. He thus conveyed the idea that he had discussed his response to the Soviet attack with his colleagues in the Politburo and that he had their full backing. He had apparently anticipated Soviet criticism to the effect that his policies were ‘subjectivist’, that they perhaps did *not* have the backing of the SED leadership and that he was trying to conceal from them the extent of the rift between him and the Soviet leadership. Indeed, later in the meeting, Chernenko pointedly asked: ‘Do the members of the Politburo of the CC of the SED actually proceed from [the assumption] that everything that happens in the relations between the GDR and the FRG, including the preparation of the visit [of Honecker in West Germany] is coordinated in advance with the Soviet Union and that there is mutual agreement about that?’ He had his doubts about that and did, indeed, convey them to Honecker: ‘[Y]our comrades are [perhaps] not properly informed about our positions’.<sup>439</sup>

A second procedural issue raised by the East German party leader was that of the form and venue of the Soviet attack. He flatly denied that there was anything to talk about concerning East Germany’s relations with West Germany. ‘For the SED, [West German] revanchism and the necessity of unmasking it is not at issue. In the struggle against revanchism, the SED has always taken a firm position.’ At issue in reality were ‘speculation and efforts made in the West to drive a wedge between our two parties’. The SED, Honecker claimed, based its policies on the view that one should not allow public rifts, ‘not even one millimetre’, in the relations between the GDR and the USSR to come out into the open since that only benefitted the class enemy. The CPSU in his view did not act in accordance with that principle. He made this perfectly clear later in the acrimonious exchanges when he said that he thought ‘that there should be no newspaper articles of this kind without prior’ consultation and coordination and that such a procedure should be no problem.

Surely, it should be possible without much difficulty for the chief editor of *Pravda* to call the chief editor of *Neues Deutschland* over the VCh [top secret] line [linking the Warsaw Pact countries] ... to say, ‘Listen, Günter [Schabowski, chief editor of the East German party newspaper and a candidate member of the Politburo in 1984], we are planning this or that. We should talk

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439 Transcript of the meeting, p. 52 of the typed original.

about it and coordinate things and we could jointly consider what formulations are the most appropriate.’

Such coordination had not occurred, Honecker implied.

On a third technical point, although he had already insinuated that, on matters of substance, everything in the Soviet-GDR relationship was perfectly in order and that there was really nothing to discuss, he attempted to deflect in advance possible Soviet criticism of complacency by reminding his hosts that he had ‘cut short’ his vacation (something that any German, East or West, would do only in a true emergency) ‘to deal with these questions’.

On substantive issues, the East German party leader embarked upon a broad *tour d’horizon*. He referred to the summit conferences of the Warsaw Pact countries in Prague (January 1983) and Moscow (June 1983) and the foreign ministers’ conference in Budapest (April 1984) and claimed that a common line had been agreed upon. In essence, it consisted of the idea that ‘the struggle for peace is the most important question of the contemporary era’. This struggle and the consistent application of the principles of peaceful coexistence by the Warsaw Pact had not failed to impress the political leaders in the capitalist states. For instance, it had ‘put the adherents of a confrontational course in the USA government on the defensive’. Furthermore, he asserted, ‘one could not overlook a process of differentiation’ in these countries. This was an important point because ‘differentiation’ was seen by the Soviet leadership as part of a pernicious Western policy directed against the cohesion within and among *socialist* countries. Honecker thus reminded his Soviet critics that the tables could be turned, with the member states of the Warsaw Pact playing on the differences within and among the countries of the Western alliance.

He then dealt with the enhanced role of the GDR in world affairs. The country’s international stature was portrayed by Honecker – more implicitly than explicitly – as one of the more important results of the activist, peace-oriented policies of the GDR. Almost in passing he mentioned that the SED had had the opportunity recently to explain its approach to international affairs not only ‘in talks with the representatives of the communist and workers’ parties and the national-liberation movements’ but also with the chiefs of government of Canada, Sweden, Greece, Italy, the Federal Republic of Germany, Great Britain, France, Austria, Finland, Spain,

the Netherlands, India, Syria, Egypt, Nicaragua, Mexico and Malta as well as ‘to the parliamentary presidents of numerous countries of the world’.<sup>440</sup>

To look ahead briefly at this stage, in the subsequent months of its continued defiance of Moscow, the SED was to emphasize even more strongly the theme of the enhanced international recognition, status and influence of East Germany. For instance, in an internal report on the visit of British foreign secretary Geoffrey Howe to East Berlin in April 1985, the SED Politburo adopted the by then typical posture of self-congratulation and confidence. It thought that the visit had ‘clarified’ the fact that Britain in its European policies had ‘to take into account more strongly than before the growing international position of the GDR and its authority as a political and economically stable state’. The visit had further ‘strengthened the international position of the GDR and the international influence of its peace policy’.<sup>441</sup> Even more importantly, the SED leadership went beyond the idea of differentiation as a useful concept for the socialist community’s approach to the West. It commented favourably on Great Britain’s alleged aim of reducing the ‘evident lag’ in her relations with the socialist countries and that she was now ‘actively taking part in the [Western] policy of differentiation among the member states of the Warsaw Treaty’.<sup>442</sup> This assessment flatly contradicted the Soviet line to the effect that, as mentioned, Western policies of differentiation were considered detrimental to Warsaw Pact cooperation and cohesion.

The next move in Honecker’s justification of his policies was a bow in the direction of the USSR. It came in the form of an endorsement of the Soviet Union’s military strategy and doctrine. He criticized the United States for wanting to ‘increase its first-strike capability’ against the countries of the Warsaw Pact by deploying nuclear missiles in Western Europe, including West Germany. He charged that the United States ‘*de facto* refuses to accept the principle of military parity and equal security’, ‘strives for military superiority’, and is ready to ‘start a new, extremely dangerous round in the arms competition, connected above all with the militarization of space and the creation of anti-missile and anti-satellite systems’. He reminded his Soviet hosts that the United States had used nuclear weapons in Hiroshima and Nagasaki and had not renounced the future use of these

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440 Ibid., pp. 6-7.

441 SED Politburo, *Arbeitsprotokolle*, Politburo meeting of 16 April 1985, J IV 2/2A/2748.

442 Ibid. (italics mine).



weapons despite the fact that the USSR had already done so. Finally in his review of strategic matters, he lashed out against Washington for intensifying war preparations in Asia and the Pacific and intervening in Central America, the Near and Middle East as well as in southern Africa. For all of these reasons, he went on, the GDR was determined to contribute to 'maintaining the military-strategic balance under any circumstance'. After the beginning of the stationing of intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Western Europe it had for that reason 'taken the appropriate countermeasures agreed upon with the USSR'.

On the surface, this seemed to be a mere confirmation of Soviet viewpoints. However, one of Honecker's central points was his insistence on the advantages of a *balanced* approach, consisting of both military countermeasures and a peace offensive. Turning specifically to Germany, he asserted that the 'peace movement in the FRG is far from exhausted'. It actively continued its struggle and had to be taken seriously by all the political forces in the FRG, also by the government. There was consequently 'every reason on our part to encourage this struggle by an offensive, forward-oriented activity'. This should include reiterating that the military countermeasures of the Warsaw Pact would be rescinded if the West were to stop and reverse its stationing decision.<sup>443</sup>

Continuing with the diagnosis of political and socio-economic forces in West Germany and the plea for a flexible response, Honecker adopted the traditional Marxist-Leninist view as to the 'contradictory nature' of developments in that country. He asserted that Kohl and Genscher conducted policies even more strongly focussed on the United States than those pursued by the previous left-liberal government of Schmidt and Genscher. Nevertheless, it saw itself confronted with the necessity to continue *Ostpolitik* and, in essence, to adhere to the treaties concluded earlier. Furthermore, after the government of SPD and FDP under Chancellor Schmidt had so resolutely advanced NATO's dual-track decision and the stationing of missiles, the social democrats had now changed their tune. They now opposed the stationing of these weapons and supported a number of Warsaw Pact proposals on international security. This change of heart had, in his view, been the result of (1) the 'peace policy of the socialist countries',

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443 The beginning of Honecker's review of the importance of the 'peace movement', the SPD and the labour unions is on p. 9 of the original transcript and continues on pp. 19-23. For reasons of coherence, the two parts are presented in conjunction by this author.

(2) the ‘pressure exerted by the peace movement’, (3) the past ‘electoral results’ in West Germany and (4) ‘future electoral decisions’ in that country. From this he derived a central point of his argument and justification of his policies. The SED had ‘used the altered state of affairs as an opportunity significantly to expand its contacts with the SPD at all levels’.<sup>444</sup>

East Germany, in Honecker’s summary, had to conduct policies towards West Germany that would meet four criteria. The policies had (1) ‘to be understood and supported by the popular masses in our country’ and also (2) ‘by the greatest possible number of citizens in the FRG’; (3) ‘to [contribute] to mobilizing the forces of peace and opposition in the FRG rather than letting them fall into a state of resignation’; and (4) ‘to make it more difficult for the Kohl government to ally [itself] to the Reagan administration’.<sup>445</sup>

After this review of East-West relations and the principles of East German policy vis-à-vis West Germany, Honecker finally dealt with the first of the two most important issues in the Soviet-GDR controversy – his impending visit to West Germany. (The other issue, it will be recalled, was credit and dependency.)

Concerning the question of my visit to the FRG, we let ourselves be guided by the inevitable task of the mobilization of all forces for peace, against the USA course of confrontation and against the destruction of the European treaty system. *When the question is being posed when this visit shall take place the answer should be ‘Now’, and [it should take place] in conjunction with the thirty-fifth anniversary of the GDR [on 7 October], when we will demonstrate the strength of our socialist GDR.*<sup>446</sup>

He (needlessly) reminded Chernenko and the other CPSU Politburo members that the idea of the visit was nothing new. The invitation was issued ‘three years ago by Chancellor Helmut Schmidt. It has been renewed by Chancellor Kohl. A corresponding invitation has also been issued by President [Richard von] Weizsäcker’.

The following arguments, in Honecker’s view, supported the idea that the visit to take place ‘now’.<sup>447</sup> First, it would *enhance the standing and*

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444 Transcript of the meeting, p. 23 of the original (italics mine).

445 Ibid., p. 33.

446 Ibid., p. 38 (italics mine). As a matter of nuance, the record has Honecker saying that the visit *soll* (shall) rather than *sollte* (should) *stattfinden* (take place). This reinforces his point that there was no doubt that the visit should and would take place.

447 The numbering and sequence of the arguments are mine.

*prestige of East Germany relative to West Germany.* Honecker explained that he would travel in his capacity as the head of state of the GDR. His counterpart, the federal German president, ‘has assured me that he will treat me in the same way as Todor Zhivkov [the Bulgarian president] who, as is known, will visit the FRG before me’. This, he boasted, would ‘demonstrate that the socialist German worker and peasant state is a sovereign and independent state that conducts relations with the FRG on the basis of international law’.

Second, the visit would *strengthen East Germany’s influence in West German politics*; it would affect the orientation of the political parties and the outcome of elections scheduled in several of the West German Länder in autumn 1984. Almost all the political parties in West Germany welcomed the idea of his visit, Honecker told his critics. This applied first and foremost to the Greens and to the ‘peace movement’. But it was true also for other political parties and forces. The FDP supported the visit because it saw it as improving the party’s electoral prospects in the upcoming parliamentary elections. As for the SPD, their leaders

have let us know that they place great value on the visit to take place in the next few weeks. The chairman of the SPD, Willy Brandt, recently again addressed himself directly to me and expressed his hope that he will [be able to] meet with me. He let it be known that he expected me to have dinner with him in Bonn. Similar statements have been made by [SPD leaders Hans-Jochen] Vogel, [Egon] Bahr, [Horst] Ehmke, and others. Vogel told me at the beginning of August that the SPD has a special interest in the visit because it [the party] expects from it a strengthening of its position in view of the upcoming elections. [Johannes] Rau, SPD prime minister of North Rhine Westphalia, and [Oskar] Lafontaine, the SPD chairman of the Saarland, have expressed themselves in the same way. Elections will take place in both of these federal states. If the SPD were to win, the correlation of forces in the Bundesrat would be changed. On the whole, the leadership of the SPD expects assistance from my visit and the propagation of our policy so that it [the SPD] will be able to create in the FRG a new majority against the CDU-CSU.

Even in the conservative party there were circles that supported the visit, Honecker claimed. The CDU, as everyone knew, was ‘connected with important groups of the West German economy’ for whom the continuation of trade relations with the USSR, the GDR and other socialist countries was an important matter.

Third, Honecker argued, the visit would *improve the international standing and prestige of East Germany.* In this context, he once again reported that in the past months he had met with the heads of government of Sweden, Greece and Italy. Soon he would travel to Finland, and in late fall

he expected the French prime minister and the chancellor of Austria to visit East Germany. The French president, François Mitterrand, had sent him a message. And Egon Krenz, his deputy, was at present on a visit to Greece. His own visit to West Germany, therefore, 'would be part of a series' of visits and exchanges and would 'underline that the relations of the GDR with the FRG are of the same quality under international law as those with other capitalist countries'.

Fourth, the visit would contribute to a *normalization of East-West relations in Europe*. Not too long ago, he reported, Chancellor Kohl had visited Budapest. Zhivkov was getting ready to travel to Bonn. Comrade Chnoupek, the Czechoslovak foreign minister, had visited Bonn and issued an invitation to the German chancellor to visit Prague. Representatives of other socialist countries were planning to have meetings in Bonn. 'In this context, my trip to the FRG would be a normal occurrence, whereas if this visit were not to take place this would create the impression of an extraordinary event.'

Finally, the visit could serve as an opportunity for *more effective coordination of Soviet-GDR and Warsaw Pact policies toward West Germany*. At the moment, there were no coordinated proposals on the details of the visit, otherwise, of course, the East German foreign ministry would already have entered in consultations with its Soviet counterpart. There was still time and the opportunity for the Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact countries to provide inputs. East Berlin was ready for consultation and coordination with its partners.

Honecker completed the explanation and justification of his policies by saying that

All in all, after consideration of all factors, we have arrived at the conclusion that the visit in the FRG would be right and beneficial for our joint policy of struggle for lessening the danger of war and against the arms policy of the USA and NATO. ... We have, of course, also considered the question of cancelling the visit. A cancellation, [however], if it were not explained convincingly to the population of the German Democratic Republic as well as the peace forces of the FRG and the international public, could really satisfy *only the extremists in the FRG and the USA who are intent on preventing the visit*.<sup>448</sup>

In other words, by opposing the visit, the Soviet leaders were objectively aligning themselves with the worst elements of the class enemy.

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448 Ibid., pp. 38-44 (italics mine).

Before turning to the rebuttal by the ‘Soviet comrades’, it is necessary to observe that up to that point Honecker had studiously avoided raising the very subject that had been central to the *Pravda* attacks: the allegedly successful West German strategy of undermining the political reliability and stability of the GDR by using the ‘economic lever’. The implication of this – no doubt deliberate – omission was apparently that the Soviet argument was so wide of the mark that it was unworthy of serious consideration.

### Chernenko’s Response: The Empire Strikes Back

The Soviet Politburo had obviously discussed and formulated the line to be taken in response to its unruly German satrap. Chernenko graciously made a few polite references to the ‘great respect’ the Soviet comrades felt for the ‘achievements of the GDR’ and even asserted that ‘we are learning from the experience of the German comrades’. But he then ungraciously replied to Honecker’s lecture: ‘Much of what you, Comrade Honecker, have just told us, is well known to us, but your account confirms the necessity of a timely and open talk.’<sup>449</sup>

Almost predictably, he began by adopting the time-honoured approach used by Stalin and his successors in order to enforce bloc discipline: the portrayal of a dangerous world that required vigilance. He claimed that the main cause of increased tension in the world lay in US imperialism and the ‘striving of the USA to unite the Western countries in the struggle against socialism’. Europe remained the main arena of the East-West competition. ‘Here lies the main border between the two systems, here is the most forward line of the controversy between socialism and capitalism, and exactly here can be found the main direction of the attacks by the West against us.’

What about West Germany, then? Chernenko called it Reagan’s European bailiff, the ‘main force militarily, economically, and ideologically’ carrying out Reagan’s policies ‘on our continent’. Continuing, the Soviet party leader did not mince words.

The [speaking with a] forked tongue [in international relations] and the militarist tendency in the policy of the FRG [today] are comparable to Bonn’s ac-

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449 Transcript of the meeting, p. 45 of the typed original.

tions under Adenauer. Bonn and Washington act in full accord with each other. The USA is stationing new missiles in Europe, calling for a crusade against socialism and calling in question the realities of post-war development. Bonn has declared the German problem to be unresolved, has officially demanded [reestablishment of] the borders of 1937 and speaks of special German relations. More vigorous efforts are being made to undermine the socialist order in the GDR. That can be recognized by the naked eye.

The second club used traditionally by Soviet leaders to enforce bloc discipline was the assertion that disobedience threatened common security interests. This, too, was argued by Chernenko. For him, the relations between the GDR and FRG directly affected 'the security of the Soviet Union and the socialist community as a whole'.<sup>450</sup> The conclusions to be drawn were unambiguous:

The policy of revanchism is a policy of war. I talked about this on 14 June 1984 [when you visited Moscow for talks with us] and I said that we couldn't really understand why the GDR is exercising such restraint towards the revanchist and nationalist policy of the FRG. To respond favourably at present to [the West German desire for a] broadening of relations with the FRG means to provide it with additional channels for ideological influence in the GDR. The state of affairs itself and Bonn's positions dictate the necessity of a line of delimitation. What is required is stubbornly to put to the FRG the principled demand for the strengthening of the sovereignty of the GDR and the unconditional respect of this sovereignty by Bonn. [It is] in this context that one should put the question of your visit in the FRG.

A third club used in the past by Soviet hard-liners and interventionists in the bloc was the charge that the satraps had in previous meetings promised to mend their ways but had subsequently reneged on their promises. This approach was also used by Chernenko and put squarely in the credit-and-erosion-of-socialism context.

You, Comrade Honecker, in our talks in June, did not voice any doubt and said that the GDR completely agreed with the Soviet Union on all international questions. Putting it mildly, the state of affairs after our talks has not improved. Nevertheless, declarations have been issued concerning new measures for facilitating contacts and the improvement of possibilities for visits of citizens and children from the FRG. These measures, from the point of view of internal GDR security, are dubious and constitute unilateral concessions to Bonn. You receive financial benefits as a result. But these are in reality only

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450 Ibid., pp. 48, 50.

illusory advantages. *The point here is [the danger of] additional financial dependencies of the GDR on the FRG.*<sup>451</sup>

As if the warning had not been clear enough, Chernenko added: ‘The events in Poland [in 1980-81] are a grave lesson from which one should draw conclusions.’<sup>452</sup>

The Soviet party leader denied that the process of East-West German rapprochement in any way enhanced the status of the GDR relative to West Germany. On the contrary, he asserted, ‘Whereas the positions of Bonn in the affairs of the GDR and West Berlin have been strengthened, the GDR has not made progress on any of the vital questions.’ This applied, for instance, to the recognition of a separate East German citizenship, the borders, the change of the status of the GDR representations to embassies and the recognition of Berlin as an inseparable part of the GDR.

What, then, was Chernenko’s response to the alleged opportunities for exploiting differentiation in the West German body politic and influencing the orientation of political parties and public opinion? What about the possible benefits of ‘damage limitation’ after the stationing of the missiles and the presumed advantages of constructing a ‘coalition of reason’ across the East-West divide? His reply was unequivocal: ‘Yes, in the FRG there are some anti-missile and anti-war sentiments. In the ruling circles there are also some politicians who proceed from sober positions.’ However, all of that ‘does not provide any rationale for the slogan of an all-German coalition of reason. This slogan is being used by those who are attempting to camouflage their policy and to deceive the people by phraseology without class content.’<sup>453</sup>

Another part of the party leader’s rebuttal in closed circle reveals more about the basic conceptual approach adopted by party leaders Brezhnev, Andropov and Chernenko than anything else they may have said publicly. The whole matter really came down to this, Chernenko explained. It was necessary ‘not to convey the impression that the hard line of the Reagan administration is producing results because conciliatory responses lead to even stronger and more brazen pressure’.<sup>454</sup>

Within this frame of reference, Chernenko returned for the third time in his rebuttal to the issue of the impending Honecker visit to West Germany.

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451 Ibid., p. 48 (italics mine).

452 Ibid.

453 Ibid. p. 51.

454 Ibid.



Incongruously, he mused that this was, ‘of course, a matter that has to be decided by the SED’. However, the Soviet comrades believed ‘that they [the SED leaders] would collectively and mutually, taking into account the considerations expressed by us, re-examine this question ... *We also would like to tell you that we Soviet communists would react positively if in the circumstances that have arisen you were to cancel the visit.*’<sup>455</sup>

Just in case, so that the point of Soviet displeasure would not be lost, Chernenko concluded by thanking Honecker for his invitation to attend the thirty-fifth anniversary celebrations of the foundation of the GDR and informed him that ‘we have taken the decision to send a representative delegation led by Comrade Gromyko’ to East Berlin – a clear *affront* since such a delegation ordinarily would be headed by the party chief or his deputy.

In essence, this completes the effort at extracting nuggets from the gold mine of the Moscow secret meeting. But there are two sets of exchanges that are of special interest here, one between Defense Minister Ustinov and Honecker and the other between the East German leader and Gorbachev.

### The Ustinov-Honecker Exchanges

Ustinov’s participation in the proceedings confirms the notion of him as a leader of narrow intellectual ability. In his interjections he twice repeated the Chernenko theme on West Germany as the main executor of Reagan’s policies in Europe. He then moved on to explain to Honecker the nature of the Bundeswehr as the ‘main strike force of NATO’. Honecker predictably and disdainfully brushed off Ustinov’s attempt at lecturing him on a topic he thought he knew more about.

*Honecker:* Comrade Ustinov, we are very well informed about what you are saying. Just recently I decorated two female comrades who worked in NATO staffs. We know very well how things are going. Concerning the FRG and the role of NATO in US policy, I’ve also made clear our view to Comrade Ceaușescu who didn’t want to believe it. You can forget about any further remarks on that issue.

*Ustinov:* It would be good, Comrade Honecker, if you were to remind [Ceaușescu] of this during your visit to Romania. There are other facts. The

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455 Ibid., p. 53 (italics mine).

Bundeswehr provides 50 percent of all land forces of NATO and 30 percent of the air forces. I only mention this here in order to make it clear what this is all about. You shouldn't take it the wrong way.

*Honecker*: I know all this, Comrade Ustinov, and have to deal with it daily. ...

*Ustinov*: I know that you know this, Comrade Honecker. What we are talking about here is unmasking the FRG – the NATO – line. It's important for that reason to work with the facts such as, for instance, the existence of refugee organizations with 2.5 million members, soldiers' associations with 4 million members, 80 Nazi organizations, associations of reservists, etc.

*Honecker*: Well, all that is obvious, Comrade Ustinov, and we don't mutually have to convince ourselves [that these things exist]. However, as for the questions we are dealing with, I think that we can arrive at the conclusion that *it is up to the SED to decide on the question of the visit in the FRG*.

*Ustinov*: We would like to point out that with the greater opportunities for citizens of the FRG to enter the GDR the danger of espionage is rising. We also ask whether, when the gates are opened more widely, the [reliability of the] soldiers will not be affected negatively.

*Honecker*: First, we haven't opened the gates more widely. Second, *there is no linkage between credit and the easing of travel*. Naturally, we have to continue ideological work on this problem. There are only very few citizens in the GDR who do not have any relatives in the FRG. We have to be aware of this. And concerning the children from the FRG who come to us, they won't be able to push us around. And the pensioners who go from [the GDR] to the other side – they all come back.<sup>456</sup>

The *théâtre absurde* of 'I know that you know, comrade' and the reflections on the potentially disruptive behaviour of capitalist kids on the socialist block need no further comment. But to complete this insight into the inner workings of centre-periphery relations and the further evolution of Soviet policies on the German problem, it is necessary to look at Gorbachev's participation in the proceedings.

### The Gorbachev-Honecker Exchanges

Gorbachev's role in the meeting amounted to a reinforcement of the pressure on Honecker to cancel the visit and toe the Soviet line. Yet his performance was typical for him in several respects. It demonstrated his apparent proclivity for compromise and consensus, his notion that persuasion is

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456 Ibid., pp. 69-72 (italics mine).

preferable to coercion, and that one only needed patiently to explain one's own point of view for the adversary eventually to relent and agree to a common position. As 'history' – the collapse of empire and the implosion of the Soviet Union – was to underline, serious problems with noble and laudable approach arise when there is a serious clash of interest and the opponent is unwilling to change his mind. This is precisely what happened in the Moscow meeting.

Gorbachev began, in effect, by assuring the unrepentant sinners in the dock that the Soviet comrades were well-meaning. He 'would like to state unambiguously that our common opinion proceeds from the view that what is at issue here is not a crisis situation in our relations' but certain questions needed some 'clarification', and this, indeed, should be, as he, Honecker himself, had stated earlier in the car, the main purpose of the meeting. But even more than that: 'Our meeting should lead to reconciliation and bring about trust.' Having thus cast himself in the role of a lenient judge, he nevertheless lashed out against the culprits on the *banc d'accusés*, telling them that the rift that had opened up in Soviet-East German relations needed to be repaired and harmony to be restored so as to preclude the adversary from exploiting the differences. He joined Chernenko and Ustinov in their scathing criticism of East German gullibility and susceptibility to the Western strategy of differentiation, quoting an unlikely source in his support:

Even the Italian ambassador in Washington, in his talks in the State Department, has – in connection with the [planned] visit by Comrade Honecker in the FRG – drawn the conclusion that new processes are developing in Eastern Europe which needed to be watched carefully and that the [Western] policy of differentiation was producing results. We proceed from the view that this will be taken into consideration [by you].

He also reiterated the Soviet Politburo line that a more dangerous state of international affairs had developed 'as a result of the policy of the Reagan administration' and that West Germany acted as its 'main ally'. As proof of the enhanced dangers, he referred to President Reagan, who had tested a microphone before giving a speech, jokingly counting down to zero for a hypothetical missile launch against the Soviet Union. Gorbachev took or pretended to take the countdown seriously. 'As we say [in Russia], what the sober person keeps in his head, the drunk betrays by his tongue.' (Honecker agreed or pretended to agree, adding that the East German press had published the TASS statement that had decried the apparent Reagan outrage.) Gorbachev pressed on relentlessly on this theme: 'In its draft

party platform, the Republican Party states that the course of confrontation and pressure has to be strengthened. The Soviet Union is portrayed there as an unnatural state and as the central danger for the USA.<sup>7</sup>

Turning specifically to the German problem, Gorbachev demonstrated that he had done some homework prior to coming to the meeting. He used the commemoration of the building of the Berlin wall on 13 August, held in West Berlin, to attack the very ‘people by whom you would be received if you were to visit the FRG’. He charged that in their speeches at the commemoration

President [Richard von Weizsäcker], [Intra-German Affairs Minister Heinrich] Windelen and [Secretary of State in the Foreign Ministry Alois] Mertes have issued declarations to the effect that Berlin is the capital of Germany. They spoke of the German problem as being unsolved. They criticized [Hans] Apel [the leading SPD candidate in the Berlin city council elections] and his statement to which you just referred [that the German problem was no longer open].

He then looked at the problem through the lens of the traditional Politburo paradigm and the alleged necessity of having to punish West Germany for having consented to the stationing of missiles.

When the missiles were put up and the social democrats consented to the stationing, we stated that if nothing were to happen [to reverse this], a new element would be created, things could not go on as before, and there would be repercussions also on the relations between the two German states. And what is happening now? The contacts are being broadened, the visit is being prepared and credits are being extended. This does not match up with our declarations.

In light of the changed circumstances, Gorbachev summarized, it was necessary to ‘think carefully about all this’. And as for the controversial *Pravda* articles, he claimed that ‘each and every one of the arguments [made there] can be supported’.<sup>457</sup>

To conclude, once the Soviet leaders had made public their opposition to Honecker’s planned visit to West Germany, the trip became a test of wills that a dutiful ally could not afford to win. On 4 September, East Germany’s permanent representative in Bonn announced that the date for the trip was ‘no longer real’ – in plain English, that the trip was cancelled.<sup>458</sup>

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457 Ibid., pp. 64–66.

458 Evaldt Moldt, who announced the East German decision; see *Neues Deutschland*, 5 September 1984. A new date for the visit was not set.

In justification of the cancellation, East German spokesmen cited remarks by CDU parliamentary leader Alfred Dregger to the effect that West Germany's future 'does not depend on Herr Honecker doing us the honour of a visit'.<sup>459</sup> Todor Zhivkov was to follow suit and also excused himself.

## Summary

The following conclusions and lessons can be drawn from the period stretching from the end of the 1970s until the beginning of the Gorbachev era. First, the controversies between East Berlin and Moscow, like Bonn's differences with Washington, were not about adherence to the alliance *per se* but about the direction of alliance policies. This concerned first and foremost the Warsaw Pact's relationship with the West. But as will be seen in the next chapter, the differences pertained to global affairs, including relations with China. Nevertheless, the Moscow meeting and the cancellation of the Honecker visit served to demonstrate the as yet limited scope and purpose of the East German deviation from the Soviet line. It was certainly preposterous to assert that an attempt was made by both Germanys to 'try reunification on the sly'; that a decade later, the world would 'learn of secret negotiations in these years that took place between Germans who put Fatherland ahead of ideology'; and that this attempt 'should not be a surprise' because it was 'only natural'.<sup>460</sup> Even then it was evident that the 'natural' political inclination of a party leader like Honecker was to strengthen the political and economic viability and international standing of his régime. He had made his career in the pursuit of these objectives, not least by taking charge of security during the building of the Berlin wall. The improvement of intra-German relations and a search for more leeway in the GDR's relations with the Soviet Union were quite compatible with these objectives. But as the great number of applications for exit visas to West Germany showed, the legitimacy and viability of the régime remained in doubt. The political system of the GDR still very much depended upon Soviet support and so did its economy under conditions of high prices for energy and the limited competitiveness of East German industrial products on the world market. Whatever the objective conse-

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459 As quoted by *Neues Deutschland*, 25-26 August 1984.

460 William Safire, 'The Germanys: Trying Reunification on the Sly', *International Herald Tribune*, 14 August 1984.

quences of his policy, Honecker had no intention to destroy the Soviet-East German relationship.

Second, despite the fact that the overt controversies in East-West relations of the late 1970s and early 1980s were very much about international security issues, such as the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, the threat of intervention in Poland, and the stationing of nuclear missiles in Europe, *economic* factors were becoming an increasingly important part of East-West relations. The Soviet leaders could not escape this reality, notwithstanding their vigorous and vicious criticism of West Germany and its alleged strategy of undermining the political and ideological foundations of the GDR. This was proven, for instance, by the fact that 1984, the year of the Soviet punitive countermeasures to the missile deployments, was also the year in which Soviet-West German trade, with the amount of 25 billion Deutschmarks, reached a new record.

Third, the Soviet-East German differences neither stemmed from nor did they result in Soviet pressures on the GDR or on other CMEA countries to sever their economic and credit links with West Germany. The June 1984 summit meeting of the East bloc's economic organization supported the maintenance and expansion of such links. It did so with good reason, for if the economic fortunes of the GDR and other members of the bloc had declined or declined further, the Soviet economy, too, would have suffered. Soviet interests would have been even more negatively affected if economic stringencies in Eastern Europe had led, as in Poland, to political upheaval and the erosion of party control. Soviet criticism of East Berlin, therefore, concerned the *scale* of East German indebtedness and had a primarily *political* rather than economic rationale.

Fourth, it was predictable that there would be a shift in the GDR's approach after the cancellation of the planned visit. Hans Modrow, the party secretary of the SED for the Dresden district, clarified this in December 1984: 'The "separate German track" has come to an end, at least for the time being.' Henceforth, 'we will be very active in seeking to broaden our contacts with all Western countries, ... not only with West Germany'.<sup>461</sup>

The final and most important point about this period, however, is the comprehensive nature of the crisis that the Soviet empire was facing. The central features of the crisis, as described here in detail, were the transfor-

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461 Hans Modrow, in an interview with US correspondent Henry Tanner, *International Herald Tribune*, 14 December 1984.

mation of ideology from an asset to a liability; the inability to transform military power into political influence; the failure effectively to compete with the Western industrialized countries in the scientific-technological revolution; and the inability to provide effective political leadership either for a revitalization or for a fundamental change of the Soviet domestic system. Cutting through all of the fog of innuendos, charges and counter-charges on the German problem, both within the Soviet bloc and between East and West, the central problem for the Soviet leaders from Stalin to Chernenko was their inability to 'digest' the part of Germany it had acquired in the Second World War. They remained caught in a dilemma that became acute in the late 1970s and early 1980s. They were incapable of providing legitimacy for their control of Eastern Europe or of making it cost-effective. Yet imprisoned by the parameters of the Ideological and Imperial paradigm, they were as yet unprepared to divest themselves of the imperial burden in the centre of Europe. It took a new leader and an entirely new approach to international relations to make possible the solution of the seemingly intractable German problem.