HOW DID COMMUNISM TRANSFORM THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

"Proletarier aller Länder, vereinigt Euch!"
(Workers of the world, unite!)
The Role of Walter Ulbricht

How did he stabilise and maintain power in the GDR?
Ostensibly, a temporary provisional state pending German reunification. (Until the early 1970s when the GDR was internationally recognised.)

**Head of State: President**
Wilhelm Pieck

**Head of Government: Prime Minister**
Otto Grotewohl

**Upper House (Länderkammer)**
Represented the five regions (Länder)

**Parliament (Volkskammer)**
Representative of the people.
The Actual Constitution (1949)

- Ostensibly, a temporary provisional state pending German reunification. (Until the early 1970s when the GDR was internationally recognised).

- Replaced by Staatsrat (Council of State) after Pieck’s death (1960)

- Prime Minister took less of a political role in comparison with the SED General Secretary - Walter Ulbricht.

- Upper House (Länderkammer) Represented the five regions (Länder)

- Parliament (Volkskammer) Representative of the people.

- Basic organisational units of the Party in the workplace or residential area.

- SED’s role became officially enshrined in 1968

- Not democratically elected - seats pre-allocated for each political party.

- All bloc parties increasingly under the control of the SED

- Formal pretence at a multi-party system
Abolished in 1958. The regions (Länder) were replaced by Bezirke smaller and more numerous regions in 1952, so it had no point—although it hadn’t really represented the old regions anyway.
The regions (Länder) were replaced by Bezirke, smaller and more numerous (and easier to control) regions in 1952. This led to the abolition of the upper house.
How democratic was the GDR?

‘Democratic Centralism’

- Decisions taken at the centre should be passed down and implemented below; and that views and opinions from the people should be influenced as far as possible by the Communist Party... They can be closely monitored for evidence of the ‘lack of clarity’ or the ‘influence of the Class enemy’.

- Views should be conveyed up to the central decision makers to be taken into account.

- Another Marxist-Leninist principle for you!

‘False Consciousness’

- Under capitalism, people were influenced by bourgeois ideology in such a way that they did not fully understand their own class interests. The Communist Party was there to lead and to change people’s views.
Other organisations

- Stasi (Staats sicherheitsdienst).
- State Security Service.
- State within a state.
- “The sword and shield of the Party”.

- ‘People’s Police in Barracks’, which in 1956 became the National People’s Army (NVA).
- Regular police forces and border guards.
- Soviet tanks (visible presence and threat).
People’s Reactions to the State

- The Youth of the GDR had been socialised under the Hitler Youth organisations.
- They blamed their elders for Nazism and believed they were no longer to be trusted—many turned instead to supporting the new regime.
- Christa Wolf, “when we were fifteen, sixteen years old, and under the shattering influence of the whole truth about German fascism, we had to turn away from those who, in our opinion, had in these twelve years become guilty by virtue of their presence, their going along with it, their keeping silent.... Then an attractive offer was made to us: You can, they said, get rid of or work off your not yet fully realised participation in this national guilt by actively taking part in the building up of the new society, which is the precise opposite, the only radical alternative to the criminal system of National Socialism...”
- However, some were critical of the continued low standard of living and constraints in political freedoms, particularly in comparison to the West.
What were relations like with the West?

- Stalin, wants in on industrial power of the West.
- Certainly wants it on his side and not as part of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, dominated by the USA - “collective defence”, the member states will all defend one state if it is invaded).
- Stalin made moves to give up the GDR in favour of a united, neutral Germany.
- Chancellor of West Germany (Konrad Adenauer) rejected this advance believing it to be propaganda. Contemporaries and historians see it as the same.
- Unrest was starting to stir within the GDR. SED leadership started adding increased protection and fortification of the inner-German boundary. In May 1952, a five kilometre exclusion zone along the border between East and West Germany was created- for forcibly removed ‘unreliable’ people from their homes and villages.
17th June 1953: Uprising

- People were stroppy- tightening of the borders and enforced collectivisation of agriculture. There was also an emphasis on enhanced productivity.

- Following the death of Stalin in March 1953, things were changing in the USSR and the new leadership were not happy with developments in the GDR. Ulbricht and the SED Politburo were called to Moscow and asked to make changes.

- The Politburo announced that workers were to produce 10% more (raised work norms) while their wages would remain the same.

- There wasn’t time to brief the press on these announcements, so different messages came out in the Communist Party newspaper Neues Deutschland and the official trade union newspaper, Tribüne which followed Ulbricht.
17th June 1953: Uprising

- 16th June 1953, workers on Berlin’s prestige building project, the Stalinallee, stopped work and marched to the House of Ministries, demanding the retraction of raised work norms.
- One worker seized a loudspeaker and announced a general strike.
- This was echoed by local radio in West Berlin and spread throughout the GDR.
- First mass uprising against communist rule in the history of the Soviet bloc.
17th June 1953: Uprising and consequences.

- On the next day (17th) hundreds of thousands of workers protested against the social and economic policies of the Ulbricht regime and called for his downfall and reunification with the West.

- Ulbricht called the USSR in to help. Uprising was crushed by Soviet tanks. The West German government looked on, but did not intervene, in case they started a major international conflict.

- Despite the forceful repression of the uprising, and accompanying violence and mass arrests, the workers won concessions and increased work norms were no more.
Other consequences

- Increase in Stasi. Growth continued into the 1980s. SED more determined to crush any other signs of unrest.
- SED leader Ulbricht’s position strengthened (so that it didn’t look like they were giving in to the demonstrators).
- Bound the GDR more closely into the Soviet bloc, into Warsaw Pact (counterbalance to NATO who had included FRG in 1955) and COMECON (economic benefits for those countries under Marxism-Leninism).
- Turned the ‘People’s Police in Barracks’ of East Germany into the National People’s Army.
- Some historians claim it was the beginning of a latent civil war that lasted until the end of the GDR in 1989. Others say there was stabilisation after the building of the Berlin Wall. No real mass unrest again until 1970s and 80s.
The Hungarian Crisis

- Ulbricht and the SED leadership were keen to preserve and expand the Stalinist structures of the GDR even after the death of Stalin when the USSR had begun a process of de-Stalinisation under new leader (Khrushchev’s) proclamation.

- Stalin’s policies and ideology had been the founding principles of the new state and party and had secured Ulbricht’s power.

- What might it mean for the GDR is the USSR reject these policies?
The effect of Khrushchev’s declaration of de-Stalinisation

- Generated change throughout eastern Europe.
- Poland had rioted- Khrushchev had allowed the introduction of moderate reform in June 1956.
- In Hungary, Imre Nagy (reforming communist leader) pushed for Hungary to withdraw from the Warsaw Pact. In the GDR this led to hopes that there might be a more democratic and humane socialism. Demands for a third way between anti-capitalism and anti-Stalinism.
- This clearly threatened Ulbricht.
It all comes to a head 1956

- Soviet troops invaded Hungary in 1956 to squash the revolution.
- Over 3000 people died and Nagy (along with 2000 others) was captured and executed.
How does Walter Ulbricht survive?


Concessions: shortened the working day and freed 21,000 political prisoners - reduced discontent.

Those talking about a ‘third way’ were removed - even though it was rumoured they had the support of Khrushchev.

By 1957, Khrushchev had begun to appreciate the stability Ulbricht represented in the GDR.

Ulbricht continued to purge the party of those who were moderate. When the President died, Ulbricht became the chairman of the Council of State alongside First Secretary of the General Committee of the SED and also a member of the Politburo - he controlled all.
What was it like to live in the GDR?
The Context

Disadvantages of the GDR

- Shortage of raw materials.
- Land lost to Poland.
- Population dislocated.
- Little industry already present.
- Much taken for reparations by the Soviets.
- Nationalisation.
- Issues with land reform.

This remained the case until 1963, when the SED created a New Economic System which separated the two states.

The International Context

- Separated from FRG.
- At first looked to the West - but forbidden to join the Marshall Plan.
- 1950, joined Comecon. It could not keep pace with the development of modern technology in the West, and so geared trade to the eastern bloc.
- Trade trebled within the eastern bloc - 40% to the USSR.
- USSR controlled the economy of the GDR and they never paid full value for goods.

Industry and the ‘Planned Construction of Socialism’

- Planned before the formation of the GDR to work as the Soviet Union.
- Five Year Plans (such as the USSR used).
- Ambitious targets were set, there was an emphasis on heavy industry achieved at the expense of consumer goods.
- Centralised planning.
- Heavy pressure on the work force.

- This led to:
  - Unprofitable, hastily set up industries set up at inappropriate locations.
  - Consumer goods would have revived the domestic market quicker, and kept the people happier. It also would have led to more development of technologies which could later be applied.
  - Private initiatives and investment were discouraged.
  - Targets meant quantity over quality.
  - Workers were tempted to go to the West.
Industry

- Large enterprises taken into Soviet control or state ownership. Private enterprises became squeezed out until by the mid 1960s, tiny part of the total industrial economy.

- **People’s Own Factories** (*Volkseigene Betriebe*, VEBs): owned and managed by the state ‘on behalf of the people’. Party set targets, watched workforce, work discipline and related social activities.

- Emphasis on quantity. Heavy industry, not consumer demand. Unrealistic five year plans constantly introduced, revised and replaced by new plans.

- Living standards improved but not to the extent of the economic miracle in the increasingly affluent West Germany in the 1950s. Rationing continued until 1958.
Later Plans

- Attempted to address this: more consumer goods and technological progress (“Modernisation, Mechanisation and Automation”). First nuclear reactor in 1957.
- Improved, 1958-59 the GDR grew by 12% per annum. Rationing was ended.
- Housing, basic goods (bread, milk and potatoes) were set at low prices - which did lead to some issues for those who lived in the east but worked in the west.
- Second FYP was abandoned and an ambitious Seven Year Plan (1959-1965) introduced (aiming to increase production by 188%, consumer goods by 177% and extend collectivisation). Ulbricht claimed that the GDR would ‘to catch up and overtake’ the West by 1961. No-one believed him, and people kept fleeing to the West, until the building of the Berlin Wall.
How did the economy and social structure change? LAND

As you will remember- large landed estates had been redistributed. However, new owners did not have resources- machinery, seeds, livestock, fertiliser etc. Hence, the SED decided that the way forward was collectivisation: producing ‘land production cooperatives or *Landesproduktionsgenossenschaften* or LPGs.

See the following...
LAND

Big Farm - redistributed under economic denazification
**LAND**

However, cannot be farmed due to one only having a pig and the other only having a few seeds and another having no equipment...
Collectivisation! Under the “building of socialism”!
LAND

Farms abandoned, many flee west while they could. Food supply shortages. Unrest contributing to uprising in 1953.

West!
No-one learns...

- Second wave of collectivisation in 1960-61 also led to mass flight- major role in decision to build Berlin Wall.

- No more fleeing west.

- However, East German agriculture became more efficient and training was available for the farmers of the GDR- specialists etc. Collective farms became like large factories- work rather than property.
Social Issues and the Berlin Wall
# Changes in East German Society

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<td>Millions of refugees from lost eastern territories.</td>
<td>Three million (approx) fled during the build up to the Wall.</td>
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<td>Socioeconomic policies such as expropriation of landed estates, nationalisation and state ownership removed the middle classes.</td>
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Upward Social Mobility - based on the right political compromises.

- Opportunities for lower status people - working class, peasants, left wing, women - to advance.
- Party loyalists (often working class or peasant) acquired educational credentials and specialist degrees.
- Managers of factories were increasingly Party apparatchiks (agent of the Party apparatus, with no particular training or competence and often transferred from responsibility to responsibility based on loyalty). They were there simply to oversee production in the VEBs.
- Old middle classes gave way to **Socialist intelligentsia** - professional classes including critical intellectuals, writers and artists, journalists, engineers, scientists, doctors, architects and other professional groups. Displaced old propertied and educated middle classes. Committed to the Party system.
Women

- What happened to doctors was a useful case in point. Pre-WWII, the majority of doctors were male and Nazi, by the mid 1960s, many doctors were women and newly trained.

- Gained support in the form of maternity care, work based crèches and after school childcare facilities were all expanded- in order to ensure their full participation in the workforce as well as being wives and mothers.

- Women were still mainly in lower status and part time positions (enhanced upward mobility for males).

- Assuming the right political compromises, of course...
Mass Organisations are very important

- **Free German Trade Union (FDGB):** virtually every working adult was a member. State run (and thus SED controlled). Represented workers’ interests and provided them with holidays (union owned hotels/ hostels/ camping sites).

The following are significant mass organisations in the Soviet zone of occupation/GDR:

- FDGB: League of Free German Trade Unions
- FDJ: Free German Youth
- DFD: Democratic German Women’s League
- KB: League of Culture
- DSF: German-Soviet Friendship Society
- GST: Society for Sport and Technology

- The German-Soviet Friendship society was about bringing good relations between Germans and Soviets and convincing people that they had been liberated.

- Many historians believe that these mass organisations are about controlling the German people- their leisure activities and spare time. Sound familiar?
The Problem of the Church

- According to Communists “religion is the opium of the masses” (nice little Marxist phrase for you).

- 17 million people were in the GDR, 15 million of them were Protestant, 1 million were Catholic.

- There was also the problem of the Churches having collaborated/condoned/ignored the Nazis as an institutional body. Having said that, individual Christians did stand up against the Nazis.

- Churches originally left alone from GDR policies - e.g. land reform left alone Church land and church officials were left alone from denazification. Until...
Measures against the Church

- Law for the Democratisation of the German people: removed religious instruction from schools.

- 1952-53, the Campaign against the ‘Junge Gemeinde’: the loosely organised youth group of the Protestant Churches. The SED waged a campaign against this group - made it more difficult for members to complete higher education. Called off in 1953.

- The ‘Jugendweihe’: (youth dedication service to Communism). It included a commitment to the atheist worldview of the Marxist-Leninist state. The Church thought this was incompatible for some reason and this led to conflict, especially as those refusing the Jugendweihe was discriminated against in school and prevented them from going on to higher education - thus having a professional career outside of the Church. By the end of the 1950, the Churches had to surrender.
Then what happened?

- In the course of the 1960s and 1970s, there was an attempt at a Christian-Marxist dialogue, infiltrated by Stasi spies and sought to influence the Church. The Church was pressurised into finding an agreement.
SEDs were trying to win the hearts and minds of the German Youth.

Free German Youth (FDJ) organised school based activities, and camps and outings.

They also liked parades.
The education system was redesigned to turn nearly all schools into comprehensive ‘polytechnic’ schools with close links to industry. ‘Twinning’ arrangements between schools and factories meant that young people gained practical work experience regularly, and were encouraged to identify with the working class.

There were grants available for poorer people, so they could go to university conversely, people from ‘privileged backgrounds’ with parents from professional classes or those whose parents had been aristocracy were discriminated against.

Young people in GDR often had a pilgrimage to the former Nazi concentration camp of Buchenwald, where the Communist leader Ernst Thälmann had been murdered. Interestingly young people in GDR internalised tales of heroic resistance. In the West, there was a complex of national shame.
Most young people were not convinced by anti-Americanism, and wanted in on the global youth culture - Elvis Presley and the Beatles.

SED responded by outright clampdowns - e.g. enforcing haircuts for those with Beatle hair - and more gentle persuasion - encouragement of GDR style rock bands.

The Wall made a difference to SED policies. Ulbricht supported the Youth Communiqué of 1963 - about respecting the views of young people and allowing them to communicate.

Youth festivals and radio stations set up that could play western music (at a ratio to 40%).

Didn’t last. Honecker stopped them at the 11th Plenum (apparently a full assembly). The same Plenum also saw the banning of a number of films critical to the regime.
NKOTB: Erich Honecker (1912-1994)

• Youthful communist, imprisoned by Nazis.
• In charge of communist youth movement in East Germany.
• In charge of building Berlin Wall (1961)
• Challenged Ulbricht’s leadership mid 1960s.
  Replaced as First Secretary of the SED until 1989 revolution.
Berlin was still under four power control. “an irritating island of West surrounded by the sea of East Germany”.

Kruschev (leader of the USSR in 1958) presented an ultimatum to the western powers, demanding that West Berlin should be reintegrated with the East and become an integral part of the GDR within six months. The Allies ignored it. No confrontation followed it.

In the summer of 1961, the numbers of East Germans sneaking off to West Berlin were increased by collectivisation.

Ulbricht lied, and said they weren’t going to build a wall.

Morning of 13 August, 1961, Berliners woke up to discover a wall. No more access.

The Western powers chose not to intervene, showing that neither side was willing to risk unleashing a major military conflict in the centre of Europe.

Each part of the divided Germany could do what they liked.
The Wall
Stabilised labour force.

1963: New Economic System for Planning and Direction (NÖSPL) introduced. This allowed more flexibility and input at intermediate levels (e.g. not at state level) and reintroduced the profit motive and quality!

Terminated by successor to Ulbricht- Honecker.

There was a continued emphasis on subsidising the necessary basics of life (cheap food) in state run ‘HO’ shops but consumerism became more important in the course of the 1960s and 1970s- special shops such as the Delikat or Intershops where special goods could be brought at higher prices or in Western currency.

Built new houses and towns and things (e.g. Stalinstadt which became Eisenhüttenstadt)- new spirit of building afresh.
Subsidies and Intershop
More Wall
The Wall ctd.

- The wall forced the East Germans to come to terms with life in the East.
- People did hope that things would get better and that living standards would rise- even though freedom of speech and to travel were denied.
- Still, it was weird when the wall came down... East and West Germans were very different...
What was the GDR like?

- Repressive, totalitarian dictatorship?
- Beginning and the end were violent, but the middle was characterised by compromises and conformity?
- Stalinist under Ulbricht?
- Revolutionary?