



Democracy, East Germany and the Berlin Wall

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The GDR was more democratic, in the original and substantive sense of the word, than eastern Germany was before 1949 and than the former East Germany has become since the Berlin Wall was opened in 1989. It was also more democratic in this original sense than its neighbor, West Germany. While it played a role in the GDR's eventual demise, the Berlin Wall was at the time a necessary defensive measure to protect a substantively democratic society from being undermined by a hostile neighbor bent on annexing it.

While East Germany (the German Democratic Republic, or GDR) wasn't a 'workers' paradise', it was in many respects a highly attractive model that was responsive to the basic needs of the mass of people and therefore was democratic in the substantive and original sense of the word. It offered generous pensions, guaranteed employment, equality of the sexes and substantial wage equality, free healthcare and education, and a growing array of other free and virtually free goods and services. It was poorer than its West German neighbor, the Federal Republic of Germany, or FRG, but it started at a lower level of economic development and was forced to bear the burden of indemnifying the Soviet Union for the massive losses Germany inflicted upon the USSR in World War II. These conditions were largely responsible for the less attractive aspects of life in the GDR: lower pay, longer hours, and fewer and poorer consumer goods compared to West Germany, and restrictions on travel to the West.

When the Berlin Wall was open in 1989, a majority of the GDR's citizens remained committed to the socialist basis of their society and wished to retain it. [1] It wasn't the country's central planning and public ownership they rebelled against. These things produced what was best about the country. And while Cold War propaganda located East Germany well outside the 'free world,' political repression and the Stasi, the East German state security service, weren't at the root of East Germans' rebellion either. Ultimately, what the citizens of the GDR rebelled against was their comparative poverty. But this had nothing to do with socialism. East Germans were poorer than West Germans even before the Western powers divided Germany in the late 1940s, and remain poorer today.

A capitalist East Germany, forced to start at a lower level of economic development and to disgorge war reparation payments to the USSR, would not have become the social welfare consumer society West Germany became and East Germans aspired after, but would have been at least as worse off as the GDR was, and probably much worse off, and without the socialist attractions of economic security and greater equality. Moreover, without the need to compete against an ideological rival, it's doubtful the West German ruling class would have been under as much pressure to make concessions on wages and benefits. West Germans, then, owed many of their social welfare gains to the fact their neighbour to the

east was socialist and not capitalist.

The Western powers divide Germany

While the distortions of Cold War history would lead one to believe it was the Soviets who divided Germany, the Western powers were the true authors of Germany's division. The Allies agreed at the February 1945 Yalta conference that while Germany would be partitioned into British, US and Soviet occupation zones, the defeated Germany would be administered jointly. [2] The hope of the Soviets, who had been invaded by Germany in both first and second world wars, was for a united, disarmed and neutral Germany. The Soviet's goals were two-fold: First, Germany would be demilitarized, so that it could not launch a third war of aggression against the Soviet Union. Second, it would pay reparations for the massive damages it inflicted upon the USSR, calculated after the war to exceed \$100 billion. [3]



Courtesy of Brendan Stone

The Western powers, however, had other plans. The United States wanted to revive Germany economically to ensure it would be available as a rich market capable of absorbing US exports and capital investment. The United States had remained on the sidelines through a good part of the war, largely avoiding the damage that ruined its rivals, while at the same time acting as armorer to the Allies. At the end of the war, Britain, France, Germany, Japan and the USSR lay in ruins, while the US ruling class was bursting at the seams with war industry profits. The prospects for the post-war US economy, however, and hence for the industrialists, bankers and investors who dominated the country's political decision-making, were dim unless new life could be breathed into collapsed foreign markets, which would be needed to absorb US exports and capital. An economically revived Germany was therefore an important part of the plan to secure the United States' economic future. The idea of a Germany forced to pour out massive reparation payments to the USSR was intolerable to US policy makers: it would militate against the transformation of Germany into a sphere of profit-making for US capital, and would underwrite the rebuilding of an ideological competitor.

The United States intended to make post-war life as difficult as possible for the Soviet Union. There were a number of reasons for this, not least to prevent the USSR from becoming a model for other countries. Already, socialism had eliminated the United States' access to markets and spheres of investment in one-sixth of the earth's territory. The US ruling class didn't want the USSR to provide inspiration and material aid to other countries to follow the

same path. The lead role of communists in the resistance movements in Europe, “the success of the Soviet Union in defeating Nazi Germany,” and “the success of the Soviet Union in industrializing and modernizing,” [4] had greatly raised the prestige of the USSR and enhanced the popularity of communism. Unless measures were taken to check the USSR’s growing popularity, socialism would continue to advance and the area open to US exports and investment would continue to contract. A Germany paying reparations to the Soviets was clearly at odds with the goals of reviving Germany and holding the Soviet Union in check. What’s more, while the Soviets wanted Germany to be permanently disarmed as a safeguard against German revanchism, the United States recognized that a militarized Germany under US domination could play a central role in undermining the USSR.

The division of Germany began in 1946, when the French decided to administer their zone separately. [5] Soon, the Western powers merged their three zones into a single economic unit and announced they would no longer pay reparations to the Soviet Union. The burden would have to be borne by the Soviet occupation zone alone, which was smaller and less industrialized, and therefore less able to offer compensation.

In 1949, the informal division of Germany was formalized with the proclamation by the Western powers of a separate West German state, the FRG. The new state would be based on a constitution written by Washington and imposed on West Germans, without their ratification. (The GDR’s constitution, by contrast, was ratified by East Germans.) In 1954, West Germany was integrated into a new anti-Soviet military alliance, NATO, which, in its objectives, aped the earlier anti-Comintern pact of the Axis powers. The goal of the anti-Comintern pact was to oppose the Soviet Union and world communism. NATO, with a militarized West Germany, would take over from where the Axis left off.

The GDR was founded in 1949, only after the Western powers created the FRG. The Soviets had no interest in transforming the Soviet occupation zone into a separate state and complained bitterly about the Western powers’ division of Germany. Moscow wanted Germany to remain unified, but demilitarized and neutral and committed to paying war reparations to help the USSR get back on its feet. As late as 1954, the Soviets offered to dissolve the GDR in favour of free elections under international supervision, leading to the creation of a unified, unaligned, Germany. This, however, clashed with the Western powers’ plan of evading Germany’s responsibility for paying war reparations and of integrating West Germany into the new anti-Soviet, anti-communist military alliance. The proposal was, accordingly, rejected. George Kennan, the architect of the US policy of ‘containing’ (read undermining) the Soviet Union, remarked: “The trend of our thinking means that we do not want to see Germany reunified at this time, and that there are no conditions on which we would really find such a solution satisfactory.” [6]

This placed the anti-fascist working class leadership of the GDR in a difficult position. The GDR comprised only one-third of German territory and had a population of 17 million. By comparison, the FRG comprised 63 million people and made up two-thirds of German territory. [7] Less industrialized than the West, the new GDR started out poorer than its new capitalist rival. Per capita income was about 27 percent lower than in the West. [8] Much of the militant section of the working class, which would have ardently supported a socialist state, had been liquidated by the Nazis. The burden of paying war reparations to the Soviets now had to be borne solely by the GDR. And West Germany ceaselessly harassed and sabotaged its neighbor, refusing to recognize it as a sovereign state, regarding it instead as its own territory temporarily under Soviet occupation. [9] Repeatedly, West Germany proclaimed that its official policy was the annexation of its neighbor to the east.

The GDR's leaders faced still other challenges. Compared to the West, East Germany suffered greater losses in the war. [10] The US Army stripped the East of its scientists, technicians and technical know-how, kidnapping "thousands of managers, engineers, and all sorts of experts, as well as the best scientists - the brains of Germany's East - from their factories, universities, and homes in Saxony and Thuringia in order to put them to work to the advantage of the Americans in the Western zone - or simply to have them waste away there." [11]

As Pauwels explains,

During the last weeks of the hostilities the Americans themselves had occupied a considerable part of the Soviet zone, namely Thuringia and much of Saxony. When they pulled out at the end of June, 1945, they brought back to the West more than 10,000 railway cars full of the newest and best equipment, patents, blueprints, and so on from the firm Carl Zeiss in Jena and the local plants of other top enterprises such as Siemens, Telefunken, BMW, Krupp, Junkers, and IG-Farben. This East German war booty included plunder from the Nazi V-2 factory in Nordhausen: not only the rockets, but also technical documents with an estimated value of 400 to 500 million dollars, as well as approximately 1,200 captured German experts in rocket technology, one of whom being the notorious Wernher von Braun. [12]

The Allies agreed at Yalta that a post-war Germany would pay the Soviet Union \$10 billion in compensation for the damages inflicted on the USSR during the war. This was a paltry sum compared to the more realistic estimate of \$128 billion arrived at after the war. And yet the Soviets were short changed on even this meagre sum. The USSR received no more than \$5.1 billion from the two German states, most of it from the GDR. The Soviets took \$4.5 billion out of East Germany, carting away whole factories and railways, while the larger and richer FRG paid a miserable \$600 million. The effect was the virtual deindustrialization of the East. [13] In the end, the GDR would compensate both the United States (which suffered virtually no damage in World War II) through the loss of its scientists, technicians, blueprints, patents and so on, and the Soviet Union (which suffered immense losses and deserved to be compensated), through the loss of its factories and railways. Moreover, the United States offered substantial aid to West Germany to help it rebuild, while the poorer Soviet Union, which had been devastated by the German invasion, lacked the resources to invest in the GDR. [14] The West was rebuilt; the East stripped bare.

The GDR's democratic achievements

Despite the many burdens it faced, the GDR managed to build a standard of living higher than that of the USSR "and that of millions of inhabitants of the American ghettos, of countless poor white Americans, and of the population of most Third World countries that have been integrated willy-nilly with the international capitalist world system." [15]

Over 90 percent of the GDR's productive assets were owned by the country's citizens collectively, while in West Germany productive assets remained privately owned, concentrated in a few hands. [16] Because the GDR's economy was almost entirely publicly owned and the leadership was socialist, the economic surplus that people produced on the job went into a social fund to make the lives of everyone better rather than into the pockets of shareholders, bondholders, landowners and bankers. [17] Out of the social fund came subsidies for food, clothing, rent, public transportation, as well as cultural, social and

recreational activities. Wages weren't as high as in the West, but a growing number of essential goods and services were free or virtually free. Rents, for example, were very low. As a consequence, there were no evictions and there was no homelessness. Education was free through university, and university students received stipends to cover living expenses. Healthcare was also free. Childcare was highly subsidized.



Courtesy of Brendan Stone

Differences in income levels were narrow, with higher wages paid to those working in particularly strenuous or dangerous occupations. Full gender equality was mandated by law and men and women were paid equally for the same work, long before gender equality was taken up as an issue in the West. What's more, everyone had a right to a job. There was no unemployment in the GDR.

Rather than supporting systems of oppression and exploitation, as the advanced capitalist countries did in Africa, Latin America and Asia, the GDR assisted the people of the global South in their struggles against colonialism. Doctors were dispatched to Vietnam, Mozambique and Angola, and students from many Third World countries were trained and educated in the GDR at the GDR's expense.

Even the Wall Street Journal recognized the GDR's achievements. In February, 1989, just months before the opening of the Berlin Wall, the US ruling class's principal daily newspaper announced that the GDR "has no debt problem. The 17 million East Germans earn 30 percent more than their next richest partners, the Czechoslovaks, and not much less than the English. East Germans build 32-bit mini-computers and a socialist 'Walkman' and the only queue in East Berlin forms at the opera." [18]

The downside was that compared to West Germany, wages were lower, hours of work were longer, and there were fewer consumer goods. Also, consumer goods tended to be inferior compared to those available in West Germany. And there were travel restrictions. Skilled workers were prevented from travelling to the West. But at the same time, vacations were subsidized, and East Germans could travel throughout the socialist bloc.

Greater efficiencies

West Germany's comparative wealth offered many advantages in its ideological battle with socialism. For one, the wealth differential could be attributed deceptively to the merits of capitalism versus socialism. East Germany was poorer, it was said, not because it unfairly

bore the brunt of indemnifying the Soviets for their war losses, and not because it started on a lower rung, but because public ownership and central planning were inherently inefficient. The truth of the matter, however, was that East German socialism was more efficient than West German capitalism, producing faster growth rates, and was more responsive to the basic needs of its population. "East Germany's national income grew in real terms about two percent faster annually than the West German economy between 1961 and 1989." [19]

The GDR was also less repressive politically. Following in the footsteps of Hitler, West Germany banned the Communist Party in the 1950s, and close tabs were kept by West Germany's own secret police on anyone openly expressing Marxist-Leninist views. Marxist-Leninists were barred from working in the public service and frequently lost private sector jobs owing to their political views. In the GDR, by contrast, those who expressed views at odds with the dominant Marxist-Leninist ideology did not lose their jobs, and were not cut off from the state's generous social supports, though they too were monitored by the GDR's state police. The penalty for dissenting from the dominant political ideology in the West (loss of income) was more severe than in the East. [20]

The claim that the GDR's socialism was less efficient than West Germany's capitalism was predicated on the disparity in wealth between the two countries, but the roots of the disparity were external to the two countries' respective systems of ownership, and the disparity existed prior to 1949 (at which point GDP per capita was about 43 percent higher in the West) and continued to exist after 1989 (when unemployment - once virtually eliminated - soared and remains today double what it is in the former West Germany.) Over the four decades of its existence, East German socialism attenuated the disparity, bringing the GDR closer to West Germany's GDP per capita. Significantly, "real economic growth in all of Eastern Europe under communism was estimated to be higher than in Western Europe under capitalism (as well as higher than that in the USA) even in communism's final decade (the 1980s)." After the opening of the Berlin Wall, with capitalism restored, "real economic output fell by over 30 percent in Eastern Europe as a whole in the 1990s." [21]

But the GDR's faster growth rates from 1961 to 1989 tell only part of the story. It's possible for GDP to grow rapidly, with few of the benefits reaching the bulk of the population. The United States spends more on healthcare as a percentage of its GDP than all other countries, but US life expectancy and infant mortality results are worse than in many other countries which spend less (but have more efficient public health insurance or socialized systems.) This is due to the reality that healthcare is unequally distributed in the United States, with the wealthy in a position to buy the best healthcare in the world while tens of millions of low-income US citizens can afford no or only inadequate healthcare. By contrast, in most advanced capitalist countries everyone has access to basic (though typically not comprehensive) healthcare. In socialist Cuba, comprehensive healthcare is free to all. What's important, then, is not only how much wealth (or healthcare) a society creates, but also how a society's wealth (or healthcare) is distributed. Wealth was far more evenly distributed in socialist countries than it was in capitalist countries. The mean Gini coefficient - a measure of income equality which runs from 0 (perfect equality) to 1 (perfect inequality) - was 0.24 for socialist countries in 1970 compared to 0.48 for capitalist countries. [22]

Socialist countries also fared better at meeting their citizens' basic needs. Compared to all capitalist countries, socialist countries had higher life expectancies, lower levels of infant mortality, and higher levels of literacy. However, the comparison of all socialist countries with all capitalist countries is unfair, because the group of capitalist countries comprises

many more countries unable to effectively meet the basic needs of their populations owing to their low level of economic development. While capitalism is often associated with the world's richest countries, the world's poorest countries are also capitalist. Desperately poor Haiti, for example, is a capitalist country, while neighboring Cuba, richer and vastly more responsive to the needs of its citizens, is socialist. We would expect socialist countries to have done a better job at meeting the basic needs of their citizens, because they were richer, on average, than all capitalist countries together. But the conclusion still stands if socialist countries are compared with capitalist countries at the same level of economic development; that is, socialist countries did a better job of meeting their citizens' basic needs compared to capitalist countries in the same income range. Even when comparing socialist countries to the richest capitalist countries, the socialist countries fared well, meeting their citizens' basic needs as well as advanced capitalist countries met the needs of their citizens, despite the socialist countries' lower level of economic development and fewer resources. [23] In terms of meeting basic needs, then, socialism was more efficient: it did more with less.

Why were socialist countries, like the GDR, more efficient? First, socialist societies were committed to improving the living standards of the mass of people as their first aim (whereas capitalist countries are organized around profit-maximization as their principle goal – a goal linked to a minority that owns capital and land and derives its income from profits, rent and interest, that is, the exploitation of other people's labor, rather than wages.) Secondly, the economic surplus the citizens of socialist countries produced was channelled into making life better for everyone (whereas in capitalist countries the economic surplus goes straight to shareholders, bondholders, landowners and bankers.) This made socialism more democratic than capitalism in three ways:

- It was more equal. (Capitalism, by contrast, produces inequality.)
- It worked toward improving as much as possible the lot of the classes which have no other means of existence but the labor of their hands or brains and which comprise the vast majority of people. (Capitalist societies, on the other hand, defend and promote the interests of the minority that owns capital.)
- It guaranteed economic and social rights. (By comparison, capitalist societies emphasize political and civil liberties, i.e., protections against the majority using its greater numbers to encroach upon the privileges of the minority that owns and controls the economy.) Stephen Gowans

As will be discussed below, even when it came to political (as distinct from social and economic) democracy, the differences between East and West Germany were more illusory than real.

Stanching the outward migration of skilled workers

Despite the many advantages the GDR offered, it remained less affluent throughout its four decades compared to its capitalist neighbor to the west. For many “the lure of higher salaries and business opportunities in the West remained strong.” [24] As a result, in its first decade, East Germany's population shrunk by 10 percent. [25] And while higher wages proved to be an irresistible temptation to East Germans who stressed personal aggrandizement over egalitarian values and social security, the FRG – keen to weaken the GDR – did much to sweeten the pot, offering economic inducements to skilled East Germans

to move west. Working-age, but not retired, East Germans were offered interest-free loans, access to scarce apartments, immediate citizenship and compensation for property left behind, to relocate to the West. [26]



Courtesy of Brendan Stone

By 1961, the East German government decided that defensive measures needed to be taken, otherwise its population would be depleted of people with important skills vital to building a prosperous society. East German citizens would be barred from entering West Germany without special permission, while West Germans would be prevented from freely entering the GDR. The latter restriction was needed to break up black market currency trading, and to inhibit espionage and sabotage carried out by West German agents. [27] Walls, fences, minefields and other barriers were deployed along the length of the East's border with the West. Many of the obstacles had existed for years, but until 1961, Berlin – partitioned between the West and East – remained free of physical barriers. The Berlin Wall – the GDR leadership's solution to the problems of population depletion and Western sabotage and espionage – went up on August 13, 1961. [28]

From 1961 to 1989, 756 East German escapees, an average of 30 per year, were either shot, drown, blown apart by mines or committed suicide after being captured. By comparison, hundreds of Mexicans die every year trying to escape poor Mexico into the far wealthier United States. [29] Approximately 50,000 East Germans were captured trying to cross the border into West Germany from 1961 to 1989. Those who were caught served prison sentences of one year. [30]

Over time, the GDR gradually relaxed its border controls, allowing working-age East Germans to visit the West if there was little risk of their not returning. While in the 1960s, only retirees over the age of 65 were permitted to travel to the West, by the 1980s, East Germans 50 years of age or older were allowed to cross the border. Those with relatives in the FRG were also allowed to visit. By 1987, close to 1.3 million working-age East Germans were permitted to travel to West Germany. Virtually all of them – over 99 percent – returned. [31]

However, not all East Germans were granted the right to cross the border. In 1987, 300,000 requests were turned down. East Germans only received permission after being cleared by the GDR's state security service, the Stasi. One of the effects of loosening the border restrictions was to swell the Stasi's ranks, in order to handle the increase in applications for visits to the West. [32]

Pauwels reminds us that,

A hypothetical capitalist East Germany would likewise have also had to build a wall in order to prevent its population from seeking salvation in another, more prosperous Germany. Incidentally, people have fled and continue to flee, to richer countries also from poor capitalist countries. However, the numerous black refugees from extremely poor Haiti, for example, have never enjoyed the same kind of sympathy in the United States and elsewhere in the world that was bestowed so generously on refugees from the GDR during the Cold War...And should the Mexican government decide to build a 'Berlin Wall' along the Rio Grande in order to prevent their people from escaping to El Norte, Washington would certainly not condemn such an initiative the way it used to condemn the infamous East Berlin construction project. [33]

GDR sets standards for working class in FRG...and abroad

Despite its comparative poverty, the GDR furnished its citizens with generous pensions, free healthcare and education, inexpensive vacations, virtually free childcare and public transportation, and paid maternity leave, as fundamental rights. Even so, East Germany's standard of living continued to lag behind that of the upper sections of the working class in the West. The comparative paucity and lower quality of consumer goods, and lower wages, were the product of a multitude of factors that conspired against the East German economy: its lower starting point; the need to invest in heavy industry at the expense of light industry; blockade and sanctions imposed by the West; the furnishing of aid to national liberation movements in the global South (which benefited the South more than it did the GDR. By comparison, aid flows from Western countries were designed to profit Western corporations, banks and investors.) What East Germany lacked in consumer goods and wages, it made up for in economic security. The regular economic crises of capitalist economies, with their rampant underemployment and joblessness, escalating poverty and growing homelessness, were absent in the GDR.

The greater security of life for East Germans presented a challenge to the advanced capitalist countries. Intent on demonstrating that capitalism was superior to socialism, governments and businesses in the West were forced to meet the standards set by the socialist countries to secure the hearts and minds of their own working class. Generous social insurance, provisions against lay-offs and representation on industrial councils were conceded to West German workers. [34] But these were revocable concessions, not the inevitable rewards of capitalism.

East Germany's robust social wage acted in much the same way strong unions do in forcing non-unionized plants to provide wages and benefits to match union standards. [35] In the 1970s, Canada's unionized Stelco steel mill at Hamilton, Ontario set the standard for the neighboring non-unionized Dofasco plant. What the Stelco workers won through collective bargaining, the non-unionized Dofasco workers received as a sop to keep the union out. But once the union goes, the motivation to pay union wages and provide union benefits disappears. Likewise, with the demise of East Germany and the socialist bloc, the need to provide a robust social safety net in the advanced capitalist countries to secure the loyalty of the working class no longer existed. Hence, the GDR not only furnished its own citizens with economic security, but indirectly forced the advanced capitalist countries to make concessions to their own workers. The demise of the GDR therefore not only hurt Osis (East Germans), depriving them of economic security, but also hurt the working populations of the

advanced capitalist countries, whose social programs were the spill-over product of capitalism's ideological battle with socialism. It is no accident that the claw back of reforms and concessions granted by capitalist ruling classes during the Cold War has accelerated since the opening of the Berlin Wall.

The collapse of the GDR and the socialist bloc has proved injurious to the interests of Western working populations in another way, as well. From the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 to the opening of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the territory available to capitalist exploitation steadily diminished. This limited the degree of wage competition within the capitalist global labor force to a degree that wouldn't have been true had the forces of socialism and national liberation not steadily advanced through the twentieth century. The counter-revolution in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and China's opening to foreign investment, ushered in a rapid expansion worldwide in the number of people vying for jobs. North American and Western European workers didn't compete for jobs with workers in Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Russia in 1970. They do today. The outcome of the rapid expansion of the pool of wage-labor worldwide for workers in the advanced capitalist countries has been a reduction in real wages and explosive growth in the number of permanent lay-offs as competition for jobs escalates. The demise of socialism in Eastern Europe (and China's taking the capitalist road) has had very real - and unfavourable - consequences for working people in the West.

Going backward

Since the opening of the Berlin Wall and the annexation of the GDR by the FRG in 1990, the former East Germany has been transformed from a rapidly industrializing country where everyone was guaranteed a job and access to a growing array of free and nearly free goods and services, to a de-industrialized backwater teeming with the unemployed where the population is being hollowed out by migration to the wealthier West. "The easterners," a New York Times article remarked in 2005, "are notoriously unhappy." Why? "Because life is less secure than it used to be under Communism." [36]

During the Cold War East Germans who risked their lives to breach the Berlin Wall were depicted as refugees from political repression. But their escape into the wealthier West had little to do with flight from political repression and much to do with being attracted to a higher standard of living. Today Osis stream out of the East, just as they did before the Berlin Wall sprang up in 1961. More than one million people have migrated from the former East Germany to the West since 1989. But these days, economic migrants aren't swapping modestly-paid jobs, longer hours and fewer and poorer consumer goods in the East for higher paying jobs, shorter hours and more and better consumer goods in the West. They're leaving because they can't find work. The real unemployment rate, taking into account workers forced into early retirement or into the holding pattern of job re-training schemes, reaches as high as 50 percent in some parts of the former East Germany. [37] And the official unemployment rate is twice as high in the East as it is in the West. Erich Quaschnuk, a retired railroad worker, acknowledges that "the joy back then when the Berlin Wall fell was real," but quickly adds, "the promise of blooming landscapes never appeared." [38]

Twenty years after the opening of the Berlin Wall, one-half of people living in the former East Germany say there was more good than bad about the GDR, and that life was happier and better. Some Osis go so far as to say they "were driven out of paradise when the Wall came down" while others thank God they were able to live in the GDR. Still others describe the unified Germany as a "slave state" and a "dictatorship of capital," and reject Germany

for “being too capitalist or dictatorial, and certainly not democratic.” [39]

Much as the GDR was faulted for being less democratic politically than the FRG, the FRG’s claim to being more democratic politically is shaky at best.

East Germany...permitted voters to cast secret ballots and always had more than one candidate for each government position. Although election results typically resulted in over 99 percent of all votes being for candidates of parties that did not favour revolutionary changes in the East German system (just as West German election results generally resulted in over 99 percent of the people voting for non-revolutionary West German capitalist parties), it was always possible to change the East German system from within the established political parties (including the communist party), as those parties were open to all and encouraged participation in the political process. The ability to change the East German system from within is best illustrated by the East German leader who opened up the Berlin Wall and initiated many political reforms in less than two months in power. [40]

West Germany outlawed many anti-capitalist political parties and organizations, including, in the 1950s, the popular Communist Party, as Hitler did in the 1930s. (On the other side of the Berlin Wall, no party that aimed to reverse socialism or withdraw from the Warsaw Pact was allowed.) The West German parties tended to be pro-capitalist, and those that weren’t didn’t have access to the resources the wealthy patrons of the mainstream political parties could provide to run the high-profile marketing campaigns that were needed to command significant support in elections. What’s more, West Germans were dissuaded from voting for anti-establishment parties, for fear the victory of a party with a socialist platform would be met by capital strike or flight, and therefore the loss of their jobs. The overwhelming support for pro-capitalist parties, then, rested on two foundations: The pro-capitalist parties uniquely commanded the resources to build messages with mass appeal and which could be broadcast with sufficient volume to reach a mass audience, and the threat of capital strike and capital flight disciplined working class voters to support pro-business parties.

Conclusion

No one would have built a Berlin Wall if they didn’t have to. But in 1961, with the GDR being drained of its working population by a West Germany that had skipped out on its obligations to indemnify the Soviet Union for the losses the Nazis had inflicted upon it in World War II, there were few options, apart from surrender. The Berlin Wall was, without question, regrettable, but it was at the same time a necessary defensive measure. If the anti-fascist, working class leadership of the GDR was to have any hope of building a mass society that was responsive to the basic needs of the working class and which channelled its economic surplus into improving the living conditions and economic security of all, drastic measures would have to be taken; otherwise, the experiment in German democracy — that of building a state that operated on behalf of the mass of people, rather than a minority of shareholders, bondholders, landowners and bankers — would have to be abandoned. And yet, by the history of drastic measures, this was hardly drastic. Wars weren’t waged, populations weren’t expelled, mass executions weren’t carried out. Instead, people of working-age were prevented from resettling in the West.



Courtesy of Brendan Stone

The abridgement of mobility rights was hardly unique to revolutionary situations. While the needs of Cold War propaganda pressed Washington to howl indignantly over the GDR's measures to stanch the flow of its working-age population to the West, the restriction of mobility rights had not been unknown in the United States' own revolution, where the 'freedoms' of dissidents and people of uncertain loyalty had been freely revoked. "During the American Revolution...those who wished to cross into British territory had to obtain a pass from the various State governments or military commanders. Generally, a pass was granted only to individuals of known and acceptable 'character and views' and after their promise neither to inform or otherwise to act to the prejudice of the United States. Passes, even for those whose loyalty was guaranteed, were generally difficult to acquire." [41]

Was the GDR worth defending? Is its demise to be regretted? Unquestionably. The GDR was a mass society that channelled the surplus of the labor of all into the betterment of the conditions of all, rather than into the pockets of the few. It offered its citizens an expanding array of free and virtually free goods and services, was more equal than capitalist countries, and met its citizens' basic needs better than did capitalist countries at the same level of economic development. Indeed, it met basic needs as well as richer countries did, with fewer resources, in the same way Cuba today meets the basic healthcare needs of all its citizens better than the vastly wealthier United States meets (or rather fails to meet) those of tens of millions of its own citizens. And while the GDR was poorer than West Germany and many other advanced capitalist countries, its comparative poverty was not the consequence of the country's public ownership and central planning, but of a lower starting point and the burden of having to help the Soviet Union rebuild after the massive devastation Germany inflicted upon it in World War II.

Far from being inefficient, public ownership and central planning turned the eastern part of Germany into a rapidly industrializing country which grew faster economically than its West German neighbor and shared the benefits of its growth more evenly. In the East, the economy existed to serve the people. In the West, the people existed to serve the minority that owned and controlled the economy. Limiting mobility rights, just as they have been limited in other revolutions, was a small price to pay to build, not what anyone would be so naïve as to call a workers' paradise, but what can be called a mass, or truly democratic, society, one which was responsiveness to the basic needs of the mass of people as its principal aim.

Notes

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