
Politics and Change in East Germany

**An Evaluation
of Socialist Democracy**

C. Bradley Scharf

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Map of the German Democratic Republic

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Preface

In writing this introduction to East German politics and society, I have in mind three purposes.

First, I want to provide a study that is readily comprehensible to English-speaking audiences. West Germans still provide much of the best scholarship on their neighbor to the east; yet translated texts reflect an inevitable preoccupation with "the German problem"—the (implicitly unnatural) division of Germany. Perhaps reflecting some sense of uncertainty over the past and future of their own Federal Republic, West German authors typically devote much effort to portraying the German Democratic Republic's (GDR) inferior record of material accomplishment and political liberty. In contrast, my intent here is to regard the GDR primarily in its own terms and to view its existence as yet another chapter in the discontinuous political history of the German people. The GDR is in many respects an anomaly, but no more so than is the Federal Republic.

Second, I believe that a comparative frame of reference enhances understanding. The German Democratic Republic is unique, as are all other states, yet many of its problems and processes are shared with other systems. For some purposes, the most useful comparisons are with allied nations of the "socialist-state community"; for other purposes, comparisons are more meaningful with Western Europe, Scandinavia, and even North America. In addition to specific illustrations, this approach involves a consistent application of the time-tested concepts of comparative political science. I reject the notion that the study of communist systems requires an entirely separate language of analysis; in my view, politics in the GDR is best understood as a specific manifestation of more or less universal political phenomena.

Finally, this book is joined together by a recurrent theme: the search for the national identity of the German Democratic Republic. Pursuit of this end requires that we cast off the academic residue of cold-war encounters with communist Europe. For more than three decades, memories of human tragedy and Western disillusionment have perpet-

uated the image of totalitarian rule in that region. Today most scholars recognize the shortcomings of the totalitarian model, especially its overwhelmingly propagandistic usages, its proclivity to exaggerate and reify discrete events, and its inability to distinguish one system from another or to account for change within a single system. But outside the community of specialists, this earlier image dies hard. Particularly in the case of East Germany, Westerners have been most reluctant to abandon a superficial, "totalitarian" interpretation.

A broader, more realistic interpretation recognizes that the present German Democratic Republic is a compound of at least four sets of influences. First of all, the people of the GDR are Germans, and their culture and politics are both a continuation of and a departure from historical German precedent. Second, the GDR lies very much within the Soviet sphere of influence. As a consequence, East Germany faces severe restraints in both its foreign and domestic policies, and it is frequently an object and a victim of East-West confrontations. Third, the GDR has a socialist economy, oriented toward skilled labor and technology. It is also deficient in raw materials and energy and, therefore, highly dependent upon foreign trade. Planning for sustained economic growth is thus a forbidding and treacherous task. Last, the GDR has created what is in many ways an advanced urban-industrial society. This social transformation has spawned problems quite familiar in many Western nations, including environmental pollution, urban crime, weaker family structures, and a lower tolerance for social inequalities.

German culture, Soviet hegemony, economic restraints, social change—all of these elements flow together to form a distinctive and increasingly significant political entity. To gauge the importance of each element, and the ways in which the people and political leaders of the GDR seek to make these elements compatible, is the imposing task of this rather short book.

Much of this work had its origins during my studies in Berlin in 1969. I am indebted to a great many colleagues who have shared their insights over the years. In particular, I wish to thank Arthur M. Hanhardt, Jr., Hartmut Zimmermann, and Gero Neugebauer for their encouragement and remembered kindnesses. I wish to express my gratitude to Seattle University for facilitating completion of the manuscript. Special thanks go to Ruth Tressel for heroic typing efforts and, most importantly, to Ann Scharf, my kind and constant critic.

C. Bradley Scharf

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Past and Future in the GDR

The German Democratic Republic (GDR or East Germany) is largely a product of the collapse of the Third Reich and the subsequent division of Europe into hostile spheres of influence. Long viewed in the West as merely "the Soviet occupation zone," the GDR has experienced diplomatic isolation, economic discrimination, and political penetration. It accommodates a mighty Soviet military presence and exhibits a continuing fear of Western challenges. It also severely restricts civil rights on the grounds of fragile national security.

East Germans buy consumer goods from the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany), watch West German television, denounce capitalism, and envy the prestige and material success of the Federal Republic. East Germans also buy raw materials from the Soviet Union, belittle Russian culture, struggle to make socialism work, and regard Soviet power with a mixture of fear and admiration.

East Germany's leaders, whether in the dominant Socialist Unity party (SED) or in one of its associated political or social organizations, share a commitment to "socialist democracy," an unfolding form of participatory rule based upon emerging standards of economic and social equality. They also share a refined sense of the policy restraints imposed by limited economic and fiscal resources, military dependence upon the Soviet Union, and deficient popular acceptance of official goals as worthy and the state as legitimate. Like the educated public, but perhaps more acutely, the GDR's leaders feel the pull of both East and West, the burden of a tragic past, and the fading inspiration of an ever-receding future.

The record of communist rule is not without its bright spots. Despite many unfavorable conditions, the GDR today boasts a high level of industrial and agricultural modernization, a steadily improving standard of living, a wide complement of progressive social policies, and an active role in world affairs. But the present is nevertheless a difficult time. These achievements are now perceived as modest and routine,

and they have not supplanted the need to grapple with conflicting concepts of public purpose and national identity.

Ambiguous Roots

The problem of uncertain national identity is epidemic, affecting large nations and small, rich and poor. It occurs wherever history has brought together diverse cultures, as in North America, the Soviet Union, and many less developed nations. The problem arises also where former unity has yielded to division, as in Ireland, Korea, and Germany. In each example, the search for national identity has its own contours. Cases differ in the extent of public violence and in the scope of personal suffering. But in no case are the circumstances more intense and the implications for world affairs more profound than in the German Democratic Republic.

In both domestic and foreign sources, East German history is conventionally dated either from the Allied conferences at Yalta and Potsdam (February and August 1945), when the boundaries of postwar occupation were set down, or from the formal creation of the GDR on October 7, 1949. For their part, East German historians emphasize departures from a past of feudal and capitalist repression and from the tyranny of national socialism. Western historians, employing similar conventions, depict the present GDR as essentially having no past and, often by implication, as being unnatural or illegitimate. Both interpretations miss the mark.

The land and the people who today constitute the German Democratic Republic do indeed have a past, which cannot be selectively affirmed or denied. Like most nations in the world today, Germany has experienced social upheavals, wars, and changing political boundaries; but Germany has persisted through turmoil as an identifiable entity for a rather long time. In different periods, some German lands experienced degrees of detachment from the whole of Germany. But the sweep of German history has always encompassed the region long known as Central Germany and now identified as the GDR.

Sovereign states have existed here in various forms for over a thousand years. They include much of the Holy Roman Empire; the old Hanseatic city of Rostock; the early duchies of Brandenburg, Mecklenberg, and Saxony; and most of the Kingdom of Prussia. The present GDR was also once the integral central region of the Hohenzollern Empire, the Weimar Republic, and the Third Reich. In a most tangible way, cities, castles, churches, and war memorials stand as monuments to past governments, however ephemeral they may appear in modern history books.

German culture is even more pervasive and continuous. Culture traveled easily across the internal boundaries of old Germany, so it cannot be so readily identified with a specific locale. In a sense, an indivisible German culture—including the arts of Bavarian aristocrats, the commercialism of Hamburg entrepreneurs, and the radical philosophy of Trier's most famous native, Karl Marx—is not the exclusive legacy of the contemporary Federal Republic, but is also the inheritance of the people of East Germany.

Today, a tourist to the GDR can visit the University of Leipzig (Karl Marx) founded some two hundred years before the first Pilgrims landed in New England. Several such old and distinguished institutions mark the generations of prominent people who were shaped by, and in turn helped to shape, the culture of Germany and of much of the Western world. For this is the land of Johann Sebastian Bach and Richard Wagner, of Martin Luther and Otto von Bismarck, of Alexander von Humboldt and Max Weber. East Germany's cultural history includes enduring contributions to the arts and physical sciences, not to mention momentous scholarship in the realms of theology, philosophy, sociology, and government. The manner in which elites and ordinary citizens perceive this history plays an important part in identifying present purposes.

All modern governments have a central task of nurturing patriotism. Because nearly universal concepts of citizenship involve an assumed mutual obligation between the state and citizens, individuals are expected to comply with law in the expectation that the actions of the state will produce public benefit. However, public benefit may not always be evident, especially in individual cases. Governments therefore must seek citizen compliance through reliance on police forces and through a reserve of popular good will, whereby citizens voluntarily give their government the "benefit of the doubt" and generally uphold the legal order even in difficult times. When invested with highly emotional content, this reserve of good will is called patriotism.

In nations with extended territorial and political stability, such as the United States and Great Britain, governments devote little concentrated effort to developing patriotism—except perhaps in wartime. For the most part, patriotic themes emerge simply as a by-product of normal political processes and are transmitted by nongovernmental social institutions. However, in East and West Germany and in many Third World nations, governments cannot afford such a passive approach. Internal diversity, external threats, and a more restricted capacity to deliver promised public benefits create an urgent need for popular good will. Consequently, fostering patriotism becomes a major preoccupation of public officials. In the German Democratic Republic, official efforts to instill patriotism are authored by the SED Department for Culture

and Science. Implementation of these efforts is at least the nominal responsibility of all public and private institutions in society.

Presented as part of a broader "socialist consciousness," this version of East German patriotism incorporates the past in two ways: one relates to cultural history, the other to political history. First, the great achievements of German culture receive strong emphasis in school curricula and in organized recreational activities for youth and adults. This emphasis encompasses mandatory instruction in music and art history, state encouragement of participation in groups of all ages for graphic and performing arts, and extensive public subsidies for repertory theaters and other cultural events. Such government support for cultural activity continues an older German tradition (present today also in West Germany), but it acquires added meaning in the search for national identity.

In the earlier years of more overt Soviet penetration, the SED undertook elaborate screening to insure that the performing arts were limited to the works of "progressive" authors and composers. On occasion, elegant exercises in sophistry were required to determine whether specific composers, regardless of the particular age in which they had lived, had demonstrated a revolutionary or sympathetic attitude toward "the working people." By the late 1950s, however, such arcane censorship had given way to the greater need to revitalize awareness of the breadth of German cultural history. Bach and Beethoven, for example, have been officially restored to a dimension of German culture that is essentially apolitical. Similarly, recent years have seen a new government emphasis on refurbishing old buildings, including castles, churches, and monasteries. Although relics of aristocratic privilege and reactionary values, these structures also testify to historic German achievement.

Other dimensions of German culture are somewhat more difficult to separate from the connotations of recent political history. Both foreign scholars and introspective Germans have observed that the prominent romanticism of German arts has been counterbalanced by a preference for reason and order in public life. This combination results in an almost legendary German industriousness in work habits and a noteworthy efficiency in administrative and military organization. Although certainly overdrawn, the widely recognized caricature of Prussian "iron discipline" is more than faintly reflected in East Germany's self-image. Even today, citizens of the GDR contrast their own putative efficiency and self-control with the assumed indolence and licentiousness of their Slavic neighbors. In return, these neighboring Slavic peoples recall the intimate linkage between Prussian discipline and the ruthless brutality of Hitler's National Socialist regime.

More than its cultural history, East Germany's political history is an awkward second component of patriotism. Official histories repudiate

both Prussian aristocratic rule and the fascism of the Third Reich. Instead, the present state lays claim to a revolutionary legacy dating back at least to the mid-eighteenth century. In addition to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, whose *Communist Manifesto* appeared in early 1848, socialist revolutionaries such as Wilhelm Weitling and Moses Hess contributed to the events leading up to the German revolution of 1848–1849. That upheaval, which featured the first popularly elected parliament in German history, was scarcely a workers' revolution; rather, it was an early effort by the commercial middle class to wrest power from the aristocracy. As an experiment in democracy, this episode was soon repudiated, and it accomplished little more than an extension of Prussian authoritarian rule.

The spotlight shifted briefly to the laboring class, as Ferdinand Lasalle founded the General Association of German Workers in 1863. This more overtly socialist thrust soon waned under the weight of Bismarck's "enlightened" social policies (state-mandated disability insurance and social security), designed to undermine the appeal of the radical opposition. This tactic was followed by the antisocialist laws, which from 1878 to 1890 prohibited socialist or communist political activity.

After the fall of Bismarck, the Social Democrats reemerged as spokespersons for the working class. As their electoral strength increased, however, they turned sharply away from revolutionary goals. This excessively moderate orientation, coupled with Social Democratic defense of the empire, spawned the more radical Spartacus Union under Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, the organization that in 1918 formally became the Communist Party of Germany (KPD). This group promoted scattered workers' councils during the last weeks of World War I, stirred uprisings in several major cities, and introduced a four-week Communist Republic in Munich and Augsburg in the spring of 1919. The KPD also secured participation in the governments of Saxony and Thuringia until ousted by intervention of the Social Democrat-supported central government in the fall of 1921.

As a badly fragmented parliament struggled vainly to resist rightist pressures in the wake of military defeat and economic hardship, the KPD entered its own period of internal division. After receiving 6.3 percent of the vote in the 1925 presidential election, Ernst Thälmann steered the KPD toward closer cooperation with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The result was expanded recruitment among the workers and increased representation in the parliament, combined with tactics designed to hasten the downfall of the Weimar Republic. Ironically, these tactics paralleled those of the National Socialists and facilitated Adolf Hitler's accession to the chancellorship in January 1930.

When the parliament building was destroyed by fire one month later, Hitler blamed the KPD, ordered the arrest of some four thousand communists, and outlawed their party. Communists were thus among the first categorical victims of fascism. Many of the more active KPD members fled the country, going chiefly to Moscow, where they later formed the ten-man Ulbricht Group. Among the survivors in Germany itself, some communists attempted to resurrect secret party cells in the summer of 1941. However, little was achieved until the Ulbricht Group returned to Berlin nine days before the German Army capitulated. On June 11, 1945, the KPD was formally reconstituted, thus launching the four-year transition to communist rule in Germany.

As this brief history suggests, revolutionary politics in Germany has a checkered past. Radical initiatives, whether under Hess, Lasalle, or Luxemburg, invariably have been short-lived, often violent, and usually followed by a prolonged period of political repression. In this perspective, German revolutionaries may be perceived by the working class as harbingers of grief. On the other hand, more moderate approaches to expanding workers' rights in the process of parliamentary democracy have generated stalemate and disorder. In addition to sharpening antagonisms between Social Democrats and communists, these episodes did little to cultivate German faith in democracy or political parties. One might go so far as to argue that effective social change in Germany had occurred primarily under authoritarian regimes and that other experiments in political rule brought only disorder.

Efforts to cull patriotic themes from this mixed history are bound to be awkward—perhaps more so for East Germany than for West Germany. Beyond the obvious discontinuity, there is no clear thread tying together what the SED would identify as “progressive forces.” Nevertheless, there is ample evidence of a heritage of radical socialism and even communism. Although communist political leaders have rarely been successful, some of communism's most articulate advocates have been German. From time to time, their ideas evoked significant popular support. It must be emphasized that German communism is not merely the creature of the Soviet occupation. Although communism is but one of many historical German themes, it is nonetheless an authentic German impulse.

This observation in no way diminishes the profound Soviet impact. Just as the proximity of Soviet forces and the corresponding U.S. and British policies undoubtedly impeded communist organization in the Western zones, so did the Soviet presence determine the shape of communist power in the Eastern zone. In fact, it is precisely this overwhelming Soviet participation that so severely handicaps the German Democratic Republic's search for a distinct identity.