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The German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) experienced an eventful end to the 1980s, to say the very least. While Beijing brought a violent halt to the alleged "counter-revolution" of the students in Tiananmen Square in June 1989, the GDR collapsed without a single shot fired in the same year. When then Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev announced what East Berlin feared would be "regime-threatening" fundamental political and social reforms in the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s, the GDR leadership decided that it was time to patch up relations with China as opposed to indiscriminately adhering to Gorbachev's Glasnost and Perestroika. Some of the exchanges between East Berlin and Beijing in the 1980s, before the GDR collapsed and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) fired into the Tiananmen crowds, precipitating China's international isolation, are examined below.

Keywords: China-GDR relations, Honecker's visit to Beijing, Tiananmen Square 1989, collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR)

From Foes to Fair-weather Friends and Comrades in Arms: The Ups and Downs of Relations between the GDR and China in the 1980s

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I. Introduction

When Erich Honecker, Secretary-General of the GDR's Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED)¹ visited Beijing in October 1986, the Soviet Union and China had no political relations to speak of due to the "Sino-Soviet split" of the late 1950s/early 1960s and would only re-establish high-level political relations in the very early 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union.² Therefore, Honecker's visit to China in 1986 was always going to be observed with suspicion by his political and ideological masters in Moscow. When the GDR "congratulated" Beijing's political leaders for having ended peaceful demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in June 1989 through military force, Moscow under Mikhail Gorbachev had very little left to be suspicious about and was—

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¹ SED in German stands for "Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands."

² For a very detailed analysis of the "Sino-Soviet Split" see Lorenz Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

unlike Honecker and his “yes men” in the GDR political leadership—well aware that the GDR was about to collapse.

Like all other socialist bloc countries in Eastern Europe, Moscow condemned Beijing’s decision to end the students’ demonstrations with military violence. Indeed, Gorbachev more than once in the second half of the 1980s acknowledged and declared that the Eastern European countries had the right to what he called “self-determination.” Following this logic, Gorbachev must have welcomed East German citizens protesting against East Berlin’s repressive leadership in the late 1980s as the ultimate expression of that right. In fact, Gorbachev sought more than once before 1989 to convince Honecker to endorse or at least not oppose the kind of social-political reforms he adopted in the Soviet Union. East Berlin’s endorsement of Beijing’s decision to defend itself against unarmed students with military force turned the GDR into the “odd man out” within the socialist camp at the time. In reality, East Berlin’s cynical support for Beijing, which had opted for violence to end what it claimed was a Western-sponsored “conspiracy” to overthrow the Chinese state, was the ultimate expression of its political helplessness and a desperate attempt to ally itself with Beijing at a time when Moscow was enacting political and economic reforms it perceived as “regime-threatening.”

The signs that the domestic and foreign policies of the Soviet Union under the reformist Mikhail Gorbachev in the mid-1980s were about to fundamentally change were there for all to see—except apparently for Honecker and policymakers in Beijing.³ On the occasion of the XXVII Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in February 1986, Gorbachev announced the intention to comprehensively re-visit the Soviet Union’s foreign policy, renouncing

³ Honecker’s ability to fully understand the political developments and reality around him in the mid-1980s was negatively influenced by a series of personal health problems as well as the demise of his granddaughter Mariana in 1985 caused by decade-long massive environmental pollution in the GDR. This loss in particular is said to have had a devastating impact on Honecker.

central elements of Marxist-Leninist ideology as a basis for Moscow's international relations and policies. Honecker and the GDR's political leadership, however, continued to believe that Gorbachev was "only" planning to modernize socialism as opposed to dismantling it altogether. Honecker's categorical refusal to adopt economic and political reforms in the GDR and his inability to understand that Gorbachev wanted to end the Cold War with the West made sure that the GDR and its so-called "real existing socialism" would land in the dustbin of history when East German protestors and activists started marching for democracy and against the regime in Leipzig and Dresden in late 1989.

II. Patching up Relations in the Early 1980s

In the very early 1980s, East German university professors began to return to Chinese universities⁴ just as official party relations between the SED and China's CCP resumed. Furthermore, East Berlin decided in 1981 to terminate the so-called "solidarity week" for Vietnam and ordered an East German publishing house to stop the publication and circulation of materials critical of China.⁵ In February 1981 during the tenth SED party convention Honecker announced that the GDR would be—under certain conditions—prepared to normalize relations with Beijing: "As far as the GDR is concerned, it remains prepared to normalize relations with the People's Republic of China based on the principles of equality, respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference. We are convinced that peaceful and normal relations are also of interest to the Chinese people."⁶

⁴ These were the first such exchanges in decades since the above-mentioned "Sino-Soviet split" in the late 1950s/early 1960s.

⁵ Publications critical of China were taken out of circulation

⁶ See Protokoll der Verhandlungen des X. Parteitages der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands im Palast der Republik 11. bis 16. April 1981, Band 1, 1-3. Beratungstag, Berlin

While this sounded conciliatory, it was only the very last paragraph of Honecker's speech on relations with China that struck a conciliatory tone. The previous paragraphs of that speech featured quite a different tone and focused on the alleged disadvantages of China establishing relations with the "imperialist" United States:

For the fight against imperialism it would [be] crucially important if such a big country as China made its contribution. However, it turned out that the opposite was the case. Chinese cooperation with the U.S. helps the policies of confrontation among the most reactionary forces of global imperialism. That in particular is true for Beijing's anti-Soviet attitude and its [hostility] toward the community of Socialist countries.

Only a few weeks after Honecker's somewhat "semi-reconciliatory" China speech an official East German delegation travelled to Beijing. Composed of officials from the department of international relations of the SED's Central Committee and headed by Bruno Mahlow, the delegation met a group of officials from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Institute for International Relations.⁷ This visit was in July 1981 and was followed by the visit of two officials from the CCP's Central Committee to East Berlin, the first official Chinese visit to East Berlin since the mid-1960s. Notably, the protocol for the visit stressed that the actual relations between China's Communist Party and East Germany's SED were not discussed.⁸ Meanwhile, it did not provide any information on what the attending officials actually should have talked

(Dietz) 1981, 42.

⁷ Most probably this was an institute affiliated with China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

⁸ The protocol limited itself to, e.g., emphasizing that the Chinese visitors were interested in the economic development of the GDR. The protocol furthermore mentioned that the Chinese Embassy in East Berlin covered all costs for the Chinese visitors in Berlin, probably to emphasize that this was not an "official" invitation important enough for the GDR to cover the costs for the visiting delegation.

about over the course of the visit from July 16 to August 23, 1981 either.

The lack of clarity in the protocol pertaining to the issues Chinese and East German party officials were to discuss during a visit that lasted five weeks is indeed remarkable. While due to a lack of verifiable information one can only speculate as to why the protocol did not provide any stipulations regarding the content of the talks, it can nonetheless be taken for granted that Chinese and East German officials did during the five-week official visit also talk about bilateral relations—in fact it is hard to imagine that they did not. In other words, five weeks would be a long time trying to avoid talking about bilateral relations. However, the GDR's decision not to publish any information on what was discussed in East Berlin could have been related to concerns about what Moscow thought about a long and official GDR-Chinese encounter at a time when Moscow and Beijing were not, put bluntly, talking to but almost only about each other.⁹

Indeed, Moscow was apprehensive about the Chinese-East German encounter at the time and a secret note most probably written by an official from the CPSU Central Committee in June 1982 indicates that it was clearly worried about possible Chinese attempts to improve relations with East Berlin at the expense of relations between Moscow and East Berlin. As one official stated, “Typical for Beijing’s tactics are urgent requests towards the GDR to intensify bilateral relations with Beijing while at the same [time] attempting to harm relations between the GDR and Soviet Union.”¹⁰ As alleged evidence that Beijing was trying to drive a wedge between Moscow and East Berlin, the official further cited Beijing’s proposal to resume the exchange between East German and

⁹ For a short summary of the visit see Aufenthalt von 2 Mitarbeitern des ZK der KP Chinas in der DDR (16. Juli bis 23. August 1981); SAPMO-BArch, ZPA JIV 2/20/139.

¹⁰ See Information (Vertraulich!) 22.06.82 4 Exemplare; SAPMO-BArch, ZPA IV 2/2.035/64. The source and author of this note cannot be verified but it is very likely that it was written by an official from the party's Central Committee.

Chinese university students and professors, journalists and writers. Furthermore, the officials wrote that the Chinese ambassador to East Berlin proposed at the end of 1981 to resume and increase bilateral trade and scientific relations. Finally, the official sounded concerned about the fact that bilateral East German-Chinese trade for the year 1982 would increase by seven percent and that the years 1981 and 1982 saw increased exchanges between the Communist Party in China and the Socialist Party in East Germany. The official concluded by claiming¹¹ that what he refers to as “Chinese propaganda” voiced during encounters with GDR officials suggested that the Soviet Union-led Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA)¹² would have ‘undesired consequences’ for the East German economy.

III. “Neutralizing” Beijing

East Berlin of course denied having been exploited by Beijing and “tricked” into improving relations with it at the expense of relations with Moscow. In fact, East Berlin claimed the very opposite was the case, offering its very own (very peculiar) explanation of what the expansion of bilateral ties with Beijing stood for: “neutralizing” China in order to later reintegrate China into what it dramatically referred to as the “global anti-imperialist fight.”

In a letter to the CPSU Central Committee, the SED Central Committee claimed that all instruments—trade and economic ties, scientific ties, cultural ties, and sports ties with China—would be used toward such an end. Meanwhile, ties and cooperation strengthening China’s military capabilities, the document emphasised, would not be discussed or established. The SED Central Committee presented itself as

¹¹ To be sure, the claim was not supported by any evidence.

¹² Also known as Comecon, it was founded in 1949 and dissolved in 1989 and was the equivalent of the U.S. Marshall Plan for Eastern European economic reconstruction.

very concerned that China's rapprochement with the U.S. would impose what it referred to as a "two-front war" with respect to the Warsaw Pact, creating an anti-socialist coalition consisting of the U.S., China, Western Europe and Japan.¹³ Reality, of course, was very different and the fear of a "two-front war" with China fighting on the side of the U.S. was indeed completely nonsensical. East Berlin's claim that the expansion of trade, scientific and cultural ties would serve to "neutralize" Beijing and keep it from intensifying relations with the "imperialist" West also sounds very implausible and must have been perceived as such in Moscow. In fact, the above-mentioned letter from the SED Central Committee to their comrades in the Soviet Union exhibits such a surreal tone, one may surmise that East Berlin's political elites were already out of touch with political realities in China at the time. Indeed, China's economic opening-up and Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms made sure that China's trade relations with and technology imports from the West in general, and the U.S. and Japan in particular, were becoming far more important than ties with and imports from the GDR.

Following the phase of its "neutralization," the letter continued, China would be included in "dealing the final blow to the imperialist enemy."¹⁴ That does indeed sound very dramatic but nonetheless seemed to have sounded plausible to GDR policymakers who aimed at "freeing China from a complot" with the U.S., as the letter makes clear. China, the letter also noted, should be treated like any other "imperialist trading partner." While the use of such dramatic language and terms in official documents published by the GDR authorities and propaganda organs was not unusual, the arguments and conclusions lacked any kind of credibility. These were rather an expression of political helplessness and

¹³ See Schreiben des ZK der SED an das ZK der KPdSU 27.7. 1982; SAPMO-BArch, ZPA JIV 2/2/1960.

¹⁴ "Hauptstoß," the term used in German, is a very belligerent and dramatic term describing what China would be part of in the future in the view of the GDR.

an attempt to portray East Berlin's rapprochement with Beijing as beneficial for Moscow too. Confirming in the same letter that the GDR had successfully kept Beijing from supporting alleged Western German "revanchism"¹⁵ toward the GDR falls under the same category. In reality, West German policies toward the GDR were instead reconciliatory in the early 1980s, though Bonn nonetheless exploited the fact that the GDR depended on Western Germany for economic and financial aid. The Soviet Union was obviously aware of the fact that Bonn's financial aid toward East Berlin in particular was instrumental in keeping the regime from economically collapsing and rhetoric speaking of "revanchist policies" toward the GDR must have sounded hollow to Moscow in the early 1980s. In sum, the letter's tenor, terms and nuances resembled those of an underage son telling his father what he wants to hear in dramatic language as a confirmation of unconditional loyalty and devotion (to the socialist cause, of course).

IV. Further Improving Ties

The expansion of relations between East Berlin and Beijing over the course of 1982 to 1984 further confirms the assessment that "neutralization" was not what the GDR was pursuing with respect to China at the time. In 1983, East Berlin and Beijing adopted their first bilateral agreement in the sector of telecommunications and in April 1984 a newly established joint committee covering economic, trade and scientific cooperation started meeting on a regular basis. Among the agreements made, the GDR committed to helping with the construction and development phases of more than forty industrial projects in China. This resumed economic and industrial cooperation was accompanied by

¹⁵ "Revanchism" is a term that the GDR reserved for the description of Bonn's policies toward East Berlin over decades. It was, however, never really made clear for what exactly West Germany would seek revenge.

the resumption of bilateral visits in 1984, 1985 and 1986.¹⁶ Between the summers of 1982 and 1985, in fact, relations between the GDR and China intensified to a level that cannot by any account be described as part of the above-mentioned “neutralization” process. Rather, the quality and quantity of exchanges between East Berlin and Beijing suggested that East Berlin was looking to charm an old new friend in case it needed one in the years ahead.

As East German and Chinese universities also intensified contacts, East German athletes took part in an athletics competition in Beijing in the summer of 1982 and GDR media were ordered to increase their coverage on China without criticizing the country in any way. Kurt Vogel, a high-ranking official of the GDR journalists’ union,¹⁷ returned from a visit to Beijing in the winter of 1982 and wrote in the news magazine *Horizont*¹⁸ that his visit was “an emotional reunion with former comrades and comrade-in-arms from 1950, who have never lost faith in the correctness and superiority of the socialist Weltanschauung.”¹⁹

What followed in terms of visits and official high-level exchanges in 1984 and 1985 also continued to look more like engagement rather

¹⁶ These visits involved several GDR politicians and policymakers such as Margot Honecker, Erich Honecker’s wife and Minister of Education, Gerhard Schürer, chairman of the State Planning Commission, and members of the Politburo (Günther Kleiber and Horst Sindermann). Margot Honecker was what was referred to as “Minister of the People’s Education” (Ministerin für Volksbildung) from 1963 until the collapse of the GDR in 1989. Above all, if not exclusively, Margot Honecker is remembered for her hard-line Stalinist policies and her (successful) attempts to militarize the GDR’s education system. She exploited her relationship with Erich Honecker to make her socialist Stalinist fantasies come true and in 1965 introduced the so-called “Uniform Socialist Education System” (Sozialistisches Einheitserziehungssystem), which envisioned military training in schools and campaigns of ideological indoctrination. This was arguably comparable to what the Nazis in Germany referred to as “Gleichschaltung” (literally: “render everything equal”) with regard to schools, universities and public life from 1933-1945

¹⁷ General-Secretary of the Central Committee of the “DDR-Journalistenverband.”

¹⁸ Cited in Werner Meißner, *Die DDR und China 1949 bis 1990-Politik-Wirtschaft-Kultur* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag 1995), 349.

¹⁹ The German term “Weltanschauung” (also used in English) is used here as the English term “ideology” does not accurately describe what Kurt Vogel meant.

than “neutralization.” East Germany’s Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Herbert Krolikowski, for example, travelled to Beijing in May 1984 after which the SED’s Central Committee developed a comprehensive catalogue on how to intensify relations and exchanges with Beijing in the years ahead. This catalogue included the continuation of bilateral political dialogue and the preparation of a bilateral meeting between the East German and Chinese foreign ministers, marking the resumption of official relations between East Berlin’s “Chamber of the People” (Volkskammer, East Berlin’s parliament) and China’s National People’s Congress (NPC) as well as leading to various other agreements in the areas of health, non-commercial payment transactions, scientific and technology cooperation and trade and commerce.²⁰ Krolikowski’s visit to Beijing was followed by a visit of Politburo member Li Peng²¹ to East Berlin in the summer of 1985, without a doubt a high-level visit of such importance as to induce Honecker and his colleagues to believe that East Berlin really mattered to Beijing as a partner with whom to trade goods and coordinate political views and actual policies.²² However, what really mattered to Beijing were its trade and investment ties with the “other” Germany at the time. Indeed, the bilateral trade volume between Beijing and Bonn were at the time more than ten times bigger than the respective volume between Beijing and East Berlin and Bonn was a central source for badly needed technology and know-how in China.

Regarding China’s relations with West Germany, it is accurate to conclude that what Li Peng said to Honecker pertaining to China’s

²⁰ See Schlussfolgerungen des Sekretariats des ZK der SED 6. Juni 1984; SAPMO-BArch, ZPA JIV 2/3/3671.

²¹ Li Peng was to have a key role in Beijing’s decision to end peaceful student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in June 1989 through violent means. For Li Peng’s central role in convincing Deng Xiaoping to declare martial law in China in June 1989, see, e.g., Andrew J. Nathan and Perry Link, ed., *The Tiananmen Papers* (London: Abacus, 2001).

²² This occurred roughly at the same time when high-ranking CCP official Zhao Ziyang visited West Germany.

relations with West Germany during his visit to East Berlin in 1985 was not necessarily what East Berlin wanted to hear. Li promised that China would not interfere in bilateral relations between East Berlin and Bonn and told East German officials that Zhao Ziyang, a high-ranking CCP official (and later CCP Secretary-General) would convey the same message during a visit to Bonn taking place at roughly the same time. Most probably due to its trade and commercial relations with West Germany, which included the export of German know-how and technology crucial for China's economic reforms, China chose not to explicitly support East Berlin's hard-line policies toward the ideological enemy in the West. Before heading back to Beijing, however Li Peng granted something resembling a "consolation prize" to his disappointed interlocutors in East Berlin, stating that he favoured student exchanges with East over West Germany since the GDR was equipped with the 'right ideology.'²³

The mid-1980s saw more official East German-Chinese encounters, e.g. the meeting between Gerhard Schürer, chairman of the GDR's State Planning Commission, and Hu Yaobang, then CCP Secretary-General in Beijing, in July 1985.²⁴ Hu said that China supported the concept of "peaceful co-existence" between the two German states while he warned Bonn during his encounters with West German leaders not to "swallow" the GDR. To be sure, West Berlin never had the intention to do so, nor did Hu himself have that impression. Based on his own experience, Hu judged that "revanchist forces" in West Germany did not seem to have

²³ For details see Information über die Beratungen mit dem Stellvertreter des Ministerpräsidenten des Staatsrates der Volksrepublik China, Genossen Li Peng 25.5.1985; SAPMO-BArch, ZPA JIV 2/2A/2758; and Vermerk über ein Gespräch des Generalsekretärs des ZK der SED und Vorsitzenden des Staatsrats der DDR, Genossen Erich Honecker, mit dem stellvertretenden Vorsitzenden des Ministerrats der Volksrepublik China, Genossen Li Peng, am 20.5.1985; SAPMO-BArch, ZPA IIV 2/20/22.

²⁴ See Niederschrift über das Gespräch des Generalsekretärs des ZK der KP Chinas, Genossen Hu Yaobang, mit Genossen Gerhard Schürer am 10.7.1985 im Sitz der Partei- und Staatsführung der VR China, Zhongnanhai; SAPMO-BArch, ZPA JIV 2/20/22

great influence. On a conciliatory note, Hu again confirmed that China would not do anything in its relations with West Germany to damage relations with the GDR. However, talk was cheap at the time, and by essentially denying the existence of what East Berlin claimed were “revanchist forces” in West Germany, Hu made it unambiguously clear that Beijing valued economic and trade relations with West Germany over political and ideological relations with a country that had very little, if not next to nothing, to offer in terms of badly-needed technology and know-how.

V. Honecker, Self-Declared Mediator-in-Chief

In 1985, worried that ongoing hostilities between Moscow and Beijing would continue to yield geo-strategic disadvantages for the Warsaw Pact countries, Honecker decided to assume a role as mediator between Moscow and Beijing, eventually visiting China from October 21-26, 1986.²⁵ Honecker decided that this visit would be the first test case of his alleged “mediation skills” to help Beijing and Moscow improve relations for the sake of the socialist cause. While that sounded good on paper, his plan to mediate between China and the Soviets produced very little, if any, tangible results. Honecker and his propaganda apparatus, of course, would interpret the quality and output of the talks with his Chinese counterparts very differently.

Honecker was received with all honours in Beijing and his Chinese hosts seemed indeed prepared to exchange views with the man, whose eyes according to the Chinese magazine *Liaowang* displayed “wisdom” and “self-confidence.”²⁶ General-Secretary of China’s Communist Party

²⁵ See Joachim Scholtyseck, *Die Aussenpolitik der DDR Enzyklopädie Deutscher Geschichte Band 69* (R. Oldenbourg Verlag, München 2003), 42-44.

²⁶ See *Der Spiegel*, “Blick nach Oben,” October 27, 1986. <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-13521735.html>.

Hu Hu Yaobang meanwhile called Honecker's visit a "big event." Returning the compliments, Honecker praised the "diligent Chinese people" and the "beautiful country." By Honecker's own account, his visit to China was not coordinated with Moscow and was—at least as far as Honecker was concerned—an expression of the GDR's foreign policy independence and the ability to act as a mediator and "honest broker" between Moscow and Beijing. To be sure, this interpretation of what Honecker had achieved in Beijing in October 1986 was Honecker's alone. In retrospect and against the background of what would occur in the GDR in the very late 1980s, one can indeed conclude that his visit to China was also borne out of desperation and the need to look for a new ally and "best friend" who would, like Honecker, remain staunchly opposed to the kind of allegedly "regime-threatening" political and/or social reforms Gorbachev was advocating and adopting in the Soviet Union.

In 1986, Honecker had not yet concluded with confidence that Moscow under Gorbachev would decide to leave Honecker and the collapsing GDR to their own devices as citizens began their regime-changing protests and marching in the late 1980s. Consequently, Honecker and the GDR propaganda organs portrayed his visit to Beijing as the result of Honecker's year-long—and in his view successful—efforts to overcome the "Sino-Soviet Split" that occurred in the early 1960s and pave the way for normalization between the two countries. Indeed, Honecker praised himself in 1989 as the "forerunner of normalization" ("Wegbereiter der Normalisierung") between Beijing and Moscow.

While Honecker clearly overstated the positive impact of his trip to Beijing and the consequences for the GDR's relations with China, however, it did—at least according to Günter Schabowski, member of the SED's Politburo—help to encourage other socialist countries to seek to improve relations with Beijing at the time.²⁷ Yet such a conclusion was not so much a realistic assessment of what the Honecker visit to Beijing did for the GDR and other socialist countries but more a result of Erich

Honecker's tendency to overstate his personal influence on global politics; he had little to offer to China beyond high-sounding rhetoric regarding "brotherhood between socialist countries" and a joint "struggle against the imperialist or revanchist West." Finally, Honecker claimed that his talks in China were an impetus for intensifying bilateral trade and business relations. This, too, is simply not accurate. Shortly after the visit, for example, Beijing announced it would reduce the annual export of Chinese commercial vehicles from 10,000 to 6,000 in the years ahead and in turn East Berlin denied the Chinese request to establish a joint venture to build a carbo-chemical industrial complex in the Chinese city of Wuhai.

VI. The View from China

Honecker's Chinese interlocutors in Beijing put on a brave face and promised that Beijing would maintain relations with both Germanys based on the principle of "peaceful co-existence." Beijing's continued support for the idea that West Berlin never be allowed to reunify Germany by force might have sounded reassuring to Honecker during his visit, but that was probably nothing more than something the Chinese leadership said to ease Honecker's anxiety about his economically collapsing GDR being "swallowed" by West Germany, not least because West Berlin or the West in general never had any intention to reunify the two German states by force.

Honecker and Chinese Supreme Leader Deng Xiaoping agreed during a bilateral meeting that Honecker's visit was not about resuming

²⁷ Günter Schabowski, *Der Absturz* (Berlin, Rowohlt Verlag, 1991), 210; Günter Schabowski was a former high-ranking GDR official and member of the Politburo. Hence, he was on top of a system, which he has (in more than one book authored by himself) strongly criticized. The credibility of former officials of authoritarian states writing and commenting on the authoritarian system they were very much part of is arguably very limited.

but instead continuing relations as Beijing, even amid the Sino-Soviet border conflicts in the 1960s, had never closed its embassy in East Berlin. However, Honecker's (timid) initiative to promote Gorbachev's idea of improving Sino-Soviet relations as suggested during the Reykjavik Summit in October 1986 was censored and not reported by the Chinese media. Meanwhile, Beijing suggested to Honecker not to rely too much on the two superpowers and instead conduct policies more independently from the Soviet Union.

What was also remarkable about the visit was that Beijing spoke of the "nation of the GDR," which led the West German Ambassador in Beijing Per Fischer to call China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in protest, clarifying that there was only one "German nation," e.g. the people who live both in East and West Germany. While the East German delegation on the other hand was delighted about Beijing talking about the "nation of the GDR," Beijing chose to play down the alleged political significance of the term and declared it to be an "idiomatic" concept rather than a declaration that there were two German nations.

More importantly, however, Beijing sought to use the visit for its own purposes in the context of what the German scholar Joachim Krüger calls a "Policy of Differentiation" (also "Policy of Diversification"). Specifically, Beijing attempted to improve relations with the GDR at the expense of relations between the GDR and Soviet Union,²⁸ driving a wedge between East Berlin and Moscow, in other words. Thus, as Eberhard Sandschneider argues, Beijing never considered the possibility of seeking to patch-up relations with the Soviet Union.²⁹ The meeting

²⁸ See Joachim Krüger, *Zu Gast in Peking. Die DDR und die VR China in der 80er Jahren*; Conference Paper *Deutsch-Chinesische Beziehungen in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Ostasiatisches Seminar Free University of Berlin July 1994.

²⁹ See Eberhard Sandschneider, "Die DDR und die VR China. Bilaterale Beziehungen im Schatten Moskaus," in *Das Profil der DDR in der sozialistischen Staatengemeinschaft. Zwanzigste Tagung zum Stand der DDR-Forschung in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland June 1987*, Conference paper (Koein: June 1987).

between Honecker and Hu Yaobang, then Secretary-General of China's Communist Party in Beijing, however, suggested that Beijing was not interested in offering to improve relations with East Berlin at the expense of East Berlin's relations with Moscow. In fact, Hu said that China would never do anything to undermine relations between socialist countries and the Soviet Union: "We fully respect the particular good relations, which have over decades developed between the socialist countries and the Soviet Union. We will not declare or do anything that might negatively influence the relations between Eastern European socialist countries and the Soviet Union."³⁰

In a second conversation with Hu, Honecker expressed his interest in seeing improved relations between Beijing and Moscow, once again portraying himself as a mediator and Moscow's "messenger." Hu told Honecker that Deng Xiaoping would be willing to consider the possibility of visiting the Soviet Union if Vietnam (at the time provided with financial and political support from Moscow) withdrew its troops from Cambodia.³¹ Hu, however, complained in the same conversation with Honecker (in Nanjing) that Moscow had seemingly no intention whatsoever to meet that Chinese request. Furthermore, Hu complained that Gorbachev had not addressed the Cambodia issue in a speech in Vladivostok in July 1986. During a bilateral meeting between the Chinese and Soviet Union vice-foreign ministers in October of the same year, it was again Hu who lamented the fact that Moscow had not addressed Chinese concerns about the Soviet Union's ongoing support for China's archenemy Vietnam.³² Honecker in turn sought to assure

³⁰ See Niederschrift über das Gespräch des Genossen Erich Honecker, Generalsekretär des ZK der SED, mit Genossen Hu Yaobang, Generalsekretär des ZK der KP Chinas, am 22.10.1986; SAPMO-BArch, ZPA JIV 2/2/2191.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 351.

³² Conversation between Hu Yaobang and Erich Honecker, October 24, 1986, Nanjing; cited in Meißner, *Die DDR und China*, 381-82; document accessible in "Stiftung Archiv der Parteien- und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv" (SAPMO-BArch, ZPA JIV 2/2/2191).

China that Gorbachev was not only to be fully trusted but someone prepared to meet the Chinese leadership any time:

Make no mistake, comrade Hu Yaobang, I know comrade Gorbachev as a man whose word can be trusted and who has a sincere interest in improving relations between the communist parties in China and the Soviet Union. We, I told Gorbachev, are interested to see improved relations between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China and the best way to do that is to talk to our Vietnamese comrades. I know that comrade Gorbachev is at your disposal to meet anytime. We would be very happy to see outstanding problems resolved and I am saying this as a Communist.³³

Hu Yaobang, on the other hand, told Honecker during his first meeting with him that China would no longer speak of "US imperialism," "Japanese militarism" and "Western German revanchism." The message was clear: Deng Xiaoping's economic pragmatism accompanied by policies to attract as much Western foreign direct investment as possible had priority over an ideological confrontation with the West in general and the U.S. in particular.

VII. The Visit's Sobering Aftermath

When Mikhail Gorbachev became Secretary-General of the CPSU in 1985 Honecker and other SED officials realized and indeed feared that the kind of political reform he announced (and later adopted) in the second half of the 1980s would become a threat to the entire socialist system. Indeed, anxiety about Gorbachev's perceived "system-threatening" reforms shaped Honecker and the GDR's domestic and

³³ Ibid.

foreign-policy thinking from the mid-to-late 1980s, leaving very little or no room at all for a GDR mediating role between Moscow and Beijing. Already in November 1986 Gorbachev decided to completely abandon the so-called “Brezhnev Doctrine” through which the Soviet Union had been authorized to intervene in popular protests and demonstrations against the socialist regimes in Warsaw Pact nations (and the Soviet Union’s Eastern European satellite states) since 1968.³⁴ The end of the Brezhnev Doctrine must have set off the alarm bells in East Berlin, which also feared that the doctrine’s termination would perpetuate Moscow’s strategy of rapprochement with West Germany driven by economic and financial necessities. At the time, however, East Berlin pretended not to notice that Gorbachev pursued very fundamental political and economic reforms and even to be independent enough to dismiss Moscow’s plan to fundamentally renew the contents and goals of the decade-old style of Moscow’s version of socialism as irrelevant and as no threat to the GDR’s regime survival. As it turned out, the East German regime could not have been more wrong about that: Honecker’s defiant attitude toward Gorbachev’s Moscow and his refusal to follow Gorbachev’s advice to consider economic and social reforms confirmed to Gorbachev that he could not be counted on as reformed-minded partner.

Beijing was of course fully aware that the majority of policymakers in East Berlin wanted improved relations with Beijing in order to strengthen the GDR’s position in the context of its bilateral relations with Moscow and enable Honecker to conduct a foreign policy less dependent on Moscow. However, Chinese policymakers must also have been aware that East Germany in 1986 had entered a state of permanent economic crisis and that the GDR had very little (if anything) to offer what Beijing

³⁴ The doctrine was also adopted to retroactively justify the Soviet Union’s invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 during the “The Prague Spring,” in which the Soviet military intervened in Prague’s pro-democracy and anti-regime protests.

wanted in terms of know-how and technology. China's economic policies in the mid-1980s needed to display economic pragmatism, which called for the intensification of relations with West, not East, Germany. All of that, however, did not seem to matter to Honecker who called his 1986 visit to Beijing an "extraordinary success" upon his return to East Berlin.

Reality turned out to be different. From the Chinese perspective the GDR was probably simply no longer important enough to justify being an "ally" against the Soviet Union (that would change, albeit briefly, after June 1989, as described below). To be sure, in retrospect it remains difficult to assess the "real" quality of the meeting and the "real" intentions China had when receiving Honecker in Beijing at the time, not least considering that the meeting was accompanied by high-sounding political rhetoric and mutual declarations of friendship, solidarity and confirmations to jointly fight for the "socialist cause." However, while Honecker presented his visit to Beijing as a stunning success to the public, the reality of what the visit did and, more importantly, did not accomplish was very different.

The first two years after the Honecker visit to China made it very clear that the bilateral encounter in Beijing did not turn out to be the "big bang" of GDR-Chinese relations of the mid-1980s. Indeed, from the second half of the 1980 onwards, East Berlin had very little to offer in terms of know-how, technology and products that China could not get elsewhere (above all from East Berlin's arch-enemy, Bonn). For example, Beijing announced as early as 1987 that it no longer felt bound by the agreement of the 1980s to buy 10,000 GDR-made commercial vehicles by the 1990s, deciding to buy only 2,000 instead. Beijing thus clearly put commercial interests before ideology and communist "comradeship" at the time, opting for technology and equipment from West Germany instead.

Consequently, from Beijing's perspective an official visit to East Berlin was probably not enough "added value" in times when Beijing was much more interested in expanding trade and investment relations

with the “other” Germany. Furthermore, it can also be assumed that Beijing did not fully trust East Berlin to take on its self-declared role as “honest broker” between Beijing and Moscow. From Beijing’s perspective, Moscow and East Berlin had over decades been too close and too united in its antagonism toward Beijing to be perceived as the kind of “mediator” Honecker presented himself to be at the time. What is more, China in 1986 surely did not feel obliged to pay too much attention to the economically collapsing GDR.³⁵ Finally, Beijing—like East Berlin in 1986—was probably not yet concerned enough about Gorbachev’s reform drive to turn to the GDR as an “ally” against a Soviet Union ready to adopt the kind of political reforms Beijing was determined to oppose at all costs.

As mentioned above, East German propaganda portrayed Honecker’s trip to and talks in China as the long-awaited breakthrough in ties with Beijing. But China’s top leaders, as it turned out, did not entirely share such enthusiastic assessment of what the visit stood for. While Chinese “semi-retired” Supreme Leader Deng Xiaoping found time to meet Honecker during his visit to Beijing, he did not show any particular interest in discussing in-depth international politics and the state of bilateral relations, instead referring to Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang as interlocutors with whom to discuss politics and bilateral ties. “I am no longer taking care of such concrete issues. My task today is to meet you and my second task is to invite you for dinner,” Deng told Honecker.³⁶ Not only did he explicitly limit his role to hosting the comrade from East Berlin for dinner, but he also showed no interest in reciprocating Honecker’s visit to Beijing with a visit to East Berlin. The

³⁵ Beijing’s policymakers were without a doubt aware that it was West German economic and financial assistance keeping the GDR from collapsing.

³⁶ See Niederschrift über eine Begegnung des Generalsekretärs des Zentralkomitees der SED und Vorsitzenden des Staatsrats der DDR, Genossen Erich Honecker, mit dem Vorsitzenden der Zentralen Beraterkommission der KP China, Genossen Deng Xiaoping, am 23.10.1986 im Gebäude des NVK der VR China; SAPMO-BArch, ZPA JIV 2/2/2/192.

SED Central Committee in turn put up a brave front and referred to the conversation between Deng and Honecker as an “encounter”³⁷ as opposed to “talks,” possibly to play down the importance of a meeting that was in terms of substance and results fairly superficial. The other meetings Honecker had with Zhao Ziyang and Hu Yaobang were instead referred to as “talks.”³⁸ This represented a subtle but nonetheless important difference and in this case most probably a decision taken by the East German authorities in order to avoid the impression that Deng Xiaoping did not really take the meeting with Honecker seriously and that he had very little to discuss with Honecker as regards the substance of bilateral Chinese-GDR relations (which in fact was the case as the protocol and summary of the encounter demonstrates: a lot of nice-sounding diplomatic and casual niceties as opposed to anything resembling “real” substance).

Finally, if Honecker’s visit to China really had been the kind of success Honecker portrayed it to be, then Deng Xiaoping, Chinese President Li Xiannian, and Hu Yaobang would probably have decided to reciprocate Honecker’s visit with a visit to East Berlin (as Honecker must surely have expected). None of them, however, expressed any interest in, let alone enthusiasm for, visiting East Berlin and it was only CCP Secretary-General Zhao Ziyang who later accepted an invitation to East Berlin and met with Erich Honecker in June 1987.³⁹

³⁷ “Begegnung” in German.

³⁸ “Gespräch” in German.

³⁹ See Niederschrift über das Gespräch des Generalsekretärs des Zentralkomitees der SED und Vorsitzenden des Staatsrats der DDR, Genossen Erich Honecker, mit dem amtierenden Generalsekretär des Zentralkomitees der KP China und Ministerpräsidenten des Staatsrats der VR China, Zhao Ziyang, am 8. Juni 1987 im Hause des Zentralkomitees; SAPMO-BArch, ZPA JIV 2/2A/3030.

VIII. Applauding the Violence in Tiananmen Square

The GDR's final and dramatic policy blunder before its collapse was undoubtedly Honecker's decision to support the Chinese leadership with respect to its orders to open fire on the unarmed students in Tiananmen Square in June 1989. At the time, the GDR's political leadership described in parrot-style what the Chinese called the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square: a 'counter-revolutionary disturbance by a small group of people determined to topple the country's political leadership.'⁴⁰ What Beijing and East Berlin agreed were a 'small group of misguided counter-revolutionaries' were in fact up to 100 million Chinese people all over China, who in 1989 protested for what the government promised in the 1980s and did not deliver: political and social reforms in China.

In complete denial of the reality of what happened in Beijing in May and June 1989, East Berlin's Allgemeiner Deutscher Nachrichtendienst (ADN, General German News Service) declared on June 5, 1989 that China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) had suppressed a "counter-revolutionary upheaval," thereby adopting Beijing's terminology as to who the students in Tiananmen Square allegedly were and what they did in May and June 1989. On June 8, 1989 East Berlin's parliament followed the leadership's order to declare its unconditional solidarity with the Chinese leadership and its decision to end peaceful demonstrations with military force on June 4, 1989.⁴¹ That declaration was announced at a time when the large majority of Eastern European countries and most importantly the Soviet Union did not express any such support, indeed condemning Beijing's violent response during the night of June 4, 1989. The declaration concluded: "[Beijing

⁴⁰ See *Der Spiegel*, "Am Leben Bleiben," June 12, 1989. <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-13493717.html>.

⁴¹ See 9.Tagung der Volkskammer der DDR am 8.Juni 1989; SAPMO-BArch, ZPA JIV 2/2/2231.

had been] obliged to re-establish order and security through force. Unfortunately this led to a number of casualties and deaths.”⁴² While such a declaration made it unambiguously clear how far East Berlin’s leadership was detached from reality and good political sense, it also could be understood as a desperate attempt by the GDR leadership to align itself with China out of fear that it could be next in line after Beijing to be confronted with protests and demonstrations aimed at toppling the regime (as indeed happened in late 1989).

As East Berlin lost no time at all in pronouncing its support for Beijing’s violent response in Tiananmen Square in June 1989, there was even talk of an “East Berlin-Beijing axis” aimed at counterbalancing Soviet Union liberalism. But the impetus for such an “axis” rather turned out to be East Berlin’s cynical support for Beijing’s decision to shoot into the crowds in Tiananmen Square in June 1989. Indeed, the SED leadership lost no time and spared no effort to justify what the Chinese armed forces were allegedly “obliged” to do in Tiananmen Square in June 1989. With East Berlin clearly in denial a report by the SED Central Committee on June 23, 1989 even claimed that the Western media had produced “horror news” concerning what happened on June 4 in Tiananmen Square. It thus proceeded to inform itself of what “really” happened through declarations and reports published by the CCP. Based on that information the SED concluded, just as the CCP had in China, that “counter-revolutionaries forces” turned a peaceful demonstration into an event to topple the Chinese government. Also like its comrades in Beijing, the SED maintained that what happened in Beijing in June 1989 was strictly an internal affair and not for outsiders to interfere in.⁴³ What is remarkable about all this is the fact that the SED thought it would be plausible to cite the CCP as opposed to outside sources to explain what

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ See *Neues Deutschland*, “Aus dem Bericht des Politbüros an die 8. Tagung des Zentralkomitees der SED,” June 23, 1989.

had happened and why in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989.

Even the outside sources the SED cited to allegedly “explain” what happened during that night in Beijing came to the very same conclusions. But the SED first and foremost referred to official Chinese sources, the same which authorized opening fire on unarmed students on the square, at a time when the public in the GDR was protesting against the SED and was no longer willing to take government propaganda and lies at face value. The GDR’s ill-fated and cynical solidarity with Beijing in and after June 1989 was interpreted in the GDR that demonstrators would be presented with a “Chinese solution.” Beijing for its part showed incredible gratitude for East Berlin’s solidarity and dispatched its Minister for Foreign Affairs Qian Qichen to East Berlin roughly one week after the Tiananmen massacre. Notably, the violent events in Tiananmen Square did not even make it onto the agenda of his visit to East Berlin. Instead, East Berlin and Beijing spoke about further expanding relations and confirmed their solidarity against alleged Western attempts and policies to drive a wedge between the communities of socialist countries.⁴⁴

East Germany’s public on the other hand reacted very differently to Beijing’s violent response to the student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. Two weeks after the crackdown the protestant church in Saxony published a note protesting the violence against the peaceful protesters during and after the events of June 4, 1989: “With great consternation have we heard and later seen how a non-violent movement was crushed with violence, events followed by the persecution of involved people.”⁴⁵ In July 1989 the protestant church published another report protesting

⁴⁴ See *Neues Deutschland*, “Oskar Fischer Empfing Qian Qichen/Hoher Stand der Brüderlichen Beziehungen,” June 13, 1989.

⁴⁵ See *Bestürzt über China: Erklärung der Synode der evangelischen Kirchenprovinz Sachsen vom 18.Juni 1989*; cited in, Gerhard Rein, *Die Protestantische Revolution 1987-1990. Ein Deutsches Lesebuch* (Berlin: Wichern- Verlag, 1990),180.

against the state's response to attempts to deliver a protest letter to the Chinese Embassy in East Berlin. Those who attempted to deliver that protest note to the embassy were arrested along the way and shortly detained. Another attempt to deliver that letter two weeks later (this time by roughly fifty protesters) again ended in beatings and arrests. The protestant church, however, did not give up and instead continued to organize events protesting against Beijing's brutal response in June 1989. It also organized services during which it protested against the violence in Tiananmen Square. One service in the Samariter Church in East Berlin was attended by 1,500 people, made up of churchgoers as well as civil and human rights activists in East Berlin. This event occurred in July 1989 when the SED and the GDR leadership were irreversibly weakened and indeed already on the verge of collapse. At the service it was stated:

The SED's cynical justification of the Chinese armed forces' violent response to China's democracy movement, the morbid solidarity with the Chinese leadership, with which we are presented in the mass media every day, have only increased the anger and mourning of critical young people. Never was the discrepancy between official SED opinion and how common citizens viewed reality so immense. The SED's message to the GDR population was clear: this is how we will treat counter-revolutionaries. Those who think this is an exaggeration may refer to a neo-Stalinist statement of Minister Margot Honecker during the Pedagogical Congress carried out around the same time. Margot Honecker, wife of the SED Secretary-General, urged the country's youth on June 13 to look for "enemies," "traitors" and "counter-revolutionaries."⁴⁶

Unsurprisingly, the GDR leadership ignored the protests and

⁴⁶ Ibid, 180.

continued to pretend that it was still in control. A few days after the shootings in Tiananmen Square Egon Krenz, a member of the Politburo in charge of the GDR's internal security, told the German politician Oskar Lafontaine⁴⁷ during a symposium in the Western Germany city of Saarbrücken that China's political leadership had merely taken the necessary steps to restore order in Beijing and China. Krenz dismissed the Western German television coverage of the Tiananmen massacre as vicious "propaganda." This was the same Egon Krenz who in September 1989 was dispatched to Beijing to "congratulate" his Chinese comrades on their successful policy of having crushed "counter-revolutionary" elements among the peacefully demonstrating students in Tiananmen Square. Krenz's mission in Beijing was to express East Berlin's solidarity with the Chinese leadership. Krenz and Qiao Shi, then member of China's Politburo's Standing Committee (PSC),⁴⁸ jointly agreed on who was to blame for the violence in Tiananmen Square in June 1989: the U.S. and the West in general together with "reactionary forces" in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao, all intent on toppling socialism in China. Qiao maintained that any Western-sponsored attempts to introduce capitalism in China were bound to fail, to which Krenz replied with a platitude about how it is impossible to challenge what he referred to as the "power of the people" (to be sure, what he really meant was the power of the ruling SED).

Anything else but expressing cynical solidarity with Beijing while blaming the West for what happened in June 1989 in Beijing would obviously have been a surprise during that visit. In fact, the literature suggests that both Krenz and his Chinese interlocutors really believed

⁴⁷ Then a member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), he is currently a member of the political party Die Linke, the SED's successor party.

⁴⁸ See Bericht über den Aufenthalt der Partei- und Staatsdelegation der DDR unter Leitung des Mitglieds des Politbüros und Sekretärs des ZK der SED, Genossen Egon Krenz, Stellvertreter des Vorsitzenden des Staatsrats der DDR, vom 25. September bis 2. Oktober 1989 in der VR China; SAPMO-BArch, ZPA JIA 2/2A/3247.

their interpretation of the causes of the events on Tiananmen Square in June 1989 was accurate. In retrospect, however, such a conclusion is hardly plausible as it must have been very difficult for politicians like Krenz and Qiao, both at the top of their respective political systems, not to understand what really caused the student protests. When they discussed the internal problems China was confronted with, they seemed to have been in perfect agreement regarding the “imperialist” West and its campaign to topple the Chinese state. Shi confirmed to Krenz that China would not change policies and positions and that Western economic and political sanctions would not be able to exert pressure on the country. Krenz’s encounter with then newly-appointed CCP Secretary-General Jiang Zemin struck the same tone and what was said during that meeting was so completely out of touch with reality that it cannot be assumed that Krenz and his Chinese interlocutors did not realize that their description of events and trends in international politics at the time must have, to say the very least, sounded completely and utterly implausible to anybody outside of East German and Chinese policymaking circles. When Jiang Zemin thanked Krenz for the GDR’s solidarity after the events in Beijing in June 1989, Krenz went out of his way to flatter Jiang Zemin saying that East Berlin’s support for Beijing’s was a ‘matter of honour and duty’ for fellow socialist countries.⁴⁹

Indeed, Krenz was determined to shower Jiang Zemin with praise for all the alleged Chinese achievements related to the promotion of global socialism. Krenz’s characterization and praise of a country’s leadership which had only a few months earlier shot possibly thousands of its own citizens during (largely) peaceful demonstrations was as repulsive as it gets from a humanitarian point of view. This became even more true when after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the

⁴⁹ See Vermerk über das Gespräch des Generalsekretärs des ZK der KP China, Genossen Jiang Zemin, mit Genossen Egon Krenz am 26. September 1989 in Peking.

GDR Krenz (falsely) maintained that it was thanks to his orders not to shoot on peacefully demonstrating East German citizens during and after the summer of 1989 that no violence broke out in East Berlin, Leipzig, Dresden and other East German cities at the time. While that turned out to be false and something Krenz said to present himself as the one who made sure that protests in East Germany in 1989 did not result in bloodshed, his conversations with his Chinese counterparts did indeed suggest that he not only endorsed what Beijing did in June 1989 but also that he would have considered acting in the same way if the people in the GDR demonstrated against the state. “The counter-revolutionary forces claimed to want freedom and democracy, while their real objective was to topple the Communist Party and the State,” Krenz maintained.⁵⁰ Ironically, Egon Krenz had a point, although from the students’ point of view the connection between freedom and democracy and the Communist Party was distinctively different: the Communist Party and the oppressive state stood in the way of the kind of freedom and democracy the students were demonstrating for.

On various occasions during his talks with his Chinese interlocutors Krenz maintained that nobody should be allowed to ‘play with the power of the people’ when he elaborated on why China’s armed forces were allegedly obliged to end the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square with violence. Such a statement is void of any sense, good or common, and what Krenz must have really meant was that the people (he spoke of the Chinese people but he obviously also had the East German people in mind) must not be allowed in any way to challenge the monopoly of

⁵⁰ See Vermerk über das Gespräch des Mitglieds des Politbüros und Sekretärs des ZK der SED, Genossen Egon Krenz, Stellvertreter des Vorsitzenden des Staatsrats der DDR, mit Genossen Qiao Shi, Mitglied des Ständigen Ausschusses des Politbüros und des Sekretariats des ZK der KP Chinas, Sekretär des Disziplinarkontrollkommission beim ZK der KP Chinas, am 25. September 1989 im Gebäude des Nationalen Volkskongresses; SAPMO-BArch, ZPA JIV 2/2A/3247.

power of the Communist Party.⁵¹ Indeed, demonstrators taking part in demonstrations against the regime in East Berlin and Leipzig in October and November 1989 were in constant fear that Egon Krenz (who by then had toppled Erich Honecker at the top of the SED) would opt for what was referred to as the “Chinese solution”: ending peaceful demonstrations with military force and violence.

IX. Finding a Scapegoat

An inner-SED report on the student demonstrations in Beijing in May and June 1989 sought to analyse, to a certain extent, the real causes of the student protests in Beijing. Naturally, according to the report Washington together with other “foreign conspirators” were responsible for the escalation in Tiananmen Square and hence Beijing had every right to respond with violence to end the students’ alleged “counter-revolution.” Furthermore, the GDR leadership also joined their comrades in Beijing by putting the blame onto then CCP Secretary-General Zhao Ziyang. Beijing needed a scapegoat and the CCP Secretary-General, who went into Tiananmen Square at the time and urged the demonstrating students to interrupt their hunger-strike and go home, was that scapegoat. Since Zhao had talked to the students, it was decided by Beijing, this had displayed division and disagreement among Beijing’s policymakers on how to deal with the demonstrating students. “Responsible for the uncontrolled and snowballing escalation of anti-socialist forces is the former General-Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party Zhao Ziyang and other party officials, supported by parts of the

⁵¹ Krenz said so on at least two occasions during his visit to China; see, e.g., Vermerk über das Gespräch des Mitglieds des Politbüros und Sekretärs des ZK der SED, Genossen Egon Krenz, Stellvertreter des Vorsitzenden des Staatsrats der DDR, mit Genossen Wan Li, Mitglied des Politbüros des ZK der KP China, Vorsitzender des Ständigen Ausschusses des Nationalen Volkskongresses der Volksrepublik China, am 26. September 1989 im Gebäude des Nationalen Volkskongresses; SAPMO BArch, ZPA JIV 2/2A/3247.

mass media and other institutions,” the report concludes.⁵²

However, the SED report also concluded that the violence escalated in Tiananmen Square on June 4 because of the Chinese leadership’s misjudgement of the significance of the demonstrations, its reluctance to act earlier and because China’s armed forces were ill-prepared for what the leadership was asking them to do on that tragic and violent night in Beijing. Furthermore, the report pointed out that the leadership was divided on how to respond to the protests and concluded (correctly) that during the night of June 4, 1989, due to divisions within the army’s leadership, there was a possibility of armed clashes between different army units.

X. Everything under Control, Beijing Says

Against the background of Egon Krenz assuring the Chinese leadership in September 1989 that the GDR was in full control of the state and more importantly its marching and protesting people, the GDR’s collapse only a few months later took many Chinese policymakers and party officials by complete surprise. However, those in China’s policymaking circles who were surprised or indeed shocked by the fact that peacefully demonstrating East German people brought down a dictatorship must have chosen to ignore reality at the time. Alternatively, they may have chosen to take Erich Honecker’s assurances in early October 1989 amid the celebrations of the fortieth anniversary of the GDR that the GDR would hold on to socialism come what may at face value. It may have been believed that the GDR, in other words, would overcome its current problems and weaknesses.

When thousands of GDR citizens sought refuge in the West German embassies in East Berlin, Budapest and Prague in late 1989,

⁵² Bericht für das Politbüro über die Lage in der VR China; SAPMO-BArch, ZPA IV2/2.035/33.

Beijing for its part chose not to report on any of this to the Chinese public. The response of the Chinese government to spread completely false information on the situation in the GDR arguably reached its climax when the newspaper *The People's Daily* portrayed on November 11 the opening of the inner-German border as a sovereign decision taken by East Berlin's political leadership.⁵³ The paper must not have understood—or rather was obliged not to understand under political pressure—the historical importance of the opening of the inner-German border. Instead of reporting on the historical dimension of what was taking place in the GDR, then, it warned that East German refugees would become competitors for West German citizens in terms of jobs and housing. This was investigative reporting Chinese-style, e.g. reporting not backed up by any evidence and detached from reality. This type of coverage, however, did not stop there. Another article published in the same *People's Daily* on November 5, 1989 reported that two East German citizens who decided to move to West Germany in September 1989 did not find the conditions they hoped they would and eventually decided to move back to the GDR only a few months later. The *People's Daily* cited an interview with the two German citizens featured in the GDR newspaper *Junge Welt* (“Young World”), in which they said that they were not able to find well-paid employment, were confronted with high living costs and were unable to afford decent accommodation. Allegedly, they then concluded that life in West Germany was ‘chaotic’ and decided to leave when it turned out that the GDR authorities would allow them to return ‘home’ to the GDR.⁵⁴

By the time the Chinese leadership finally realized and acknowledged that the GDR was about to become history, a newspaper article in the *Guangming Ribao* maintained—obviously on behalf of the leadership in

⁵³ See *Renmin Ribao*, “Minzhu Deguo xuanbu kaifang bianjie,” November 11, 1989.

⁵⁴ See *Renmin Ribao*, “Minde liang gongmin tan zai Xide de zaoyou/meiyou ziji zhusuo/meiyiu guding gongzuo/shenghuo meiyou baozhang,” November 5, 1989.

Beijing—that the end of the GDR did not stand for the end of global socialism as such. Socialism, the newspaper insisted unsurprisingly, was still superior to capitalism. Oddly, despite the fact that the GDR was about to collapse, the article concluded that an analysis of the history and development of both German states over the decades had revealed that “the contradictions within the capitalist system have in West Germany become evident and stronger while the socialist system (in the GDR) has over the course of the years solved problems efficiently.”⁵⁵ Arguably, this was the very definition of reality-distorting state-led journalism.

XI. Conclusions

If Beijing and East Berlin had fully realized that Gorbachev was planning to adopt fundamental political and economic reforms in the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s, they each would possibly have found more common ground during their bilateral encounters in the mid-1980s and, out of necessity and fear of being forced by their respective populations to enact Gorbachev-style reforms, invested more resources and political capital into intensifying bilateral relations in a more substantive manner. However, it is probably accurate to conclude that neither Honecker nor the Chinese political leadership could have imagined the scope and quality of Gorbachev’s fundamental reforms at the time. While China’s political leaders had next to no contact with their political counterparts in the Soviet Union, Honecker, like other dictators before and after, failed to understand the reality outside his direct sphere of influence and refused to acknowledge that the political and, more importantly, economic foundations of the GDR were bound to collapse. At least twice in the early 1980s East Berlin was confronted with default and was

⁵⁵ See *Guangming Ribao*, “Liangge Deguo de bijiao neng shuoming shehuizhuyi shibaima?” November 6, 1989.

obliged to ask West Germany for massive loans. In 1983, the GDR was granted one billion deutschmarks by Bonn and the deal was brokered between Alexander Schalck-Golodkowsk,⁵⁶ a corrupt East German politician and head of “Kommerzielle Koordinierung” (“Commercial Coordination”), a department within East Germany’s Ministry of Trade, and the equally controversial Bavarian politician and former West German Minister of Defence Franz-Josef Strauß. If East Berlin had not been on its path toward certain collapse in 1989, the regime’s above-mentioned cynical support for Beijing’s violent response to the students’ demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in 1989 could perhaps have been the basis for a “best-friend” relationship between East Berlin and Beijing at a time when the West (and Japan) were imposing economic sanctions on Beijing. However, that was not to be as peacefully marching East German citizens made it very clear through the course of 1989 that they were no longer willing to be locked up and terrorized by a collapsing dictatorship.

The last chapter of the GDR’s undignified reaction to the Tiananmen massacre in June 1989 was a late apology published by the DDR’s Volkskammer in June 1990.⁵⁷ The parliament apologized for the declaration regarding the events in Tiananmen Square it had published in June 1989 and announced its intention to mourn for the victims. That apology, however, came precisely one year too late and many of those parliamentarians who apologized in 1990 were the same who had endorsed the above-mentioned Volkskammer statement of June 1989 congratulating Beijing on its violent response to the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. This was far too little and far too late for a sincere and credible apology.

⁵⁶ Schalck-Golodkowski systematically misused ministry funds over years, which made him flee East Berlin in December 1989. He settled in Bavaria where he died in June 2015.

⁵⁷ See Tagung der Volkskammer der DDR am 7.Juni 1990; Volkskammer der DDR, 11. Tagung, 07.06.1990.

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⁵⁸ Sources from this archive: "Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisation der DDR im Bundesarchiv," cited in this article as "SAPMO-BARch, ZPA."

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