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The USSR and The GDR: Mutual Collapse

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The USSR and The GDR: Mutual Collapse

Abstract

The Soviet Union had a number of satellite states, where communist puppet regimes were propped up in order to serve the interests of the Soviet Union. The Eastern Bloc was established with the goal of spreading the Soviet style of government, regardless of its unpopularity. The only reason that the communist regimes in these states were able to survive was because of Soviet support. This meant that the decline of the Soviet Union and the individual bloc states fed into each other. This is examined through the case of the German Democratic Republic and its relations with the Soviet Union.

Keywords

Soviet Union, East Germany, USSR, Eastern Bloc, Berlin Wall

Disciplines

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Comments

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The USSR and The GDR: Mutual Collapse

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HIST 216

Dr. Bowman

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Following the Second World War, the Soviet Union sought to exert its influence in eastern European states and supported a number of communist regimes. Decades later, as the Soviet state began to decline, it lost grip of the Eastern Bloc puppet states. The internal collapse of the Soviet Union contributed to the fall of the communist states in the Eastern Bloc. In addition to rebellion against communist regimes sweeping throughout the region, the internal problems of the Soviet Union and the policy stance it took towards Bloc states led to the downfall of the Soviet Union and the independence of the Bloc states. This can be seen in the case of the German Democratic Republic and its relations with the declining Soviet Union.

The German Democratic Republic was the communist, totalitarian regime in East Germany. Soviet practices played a highly influential role in the East German government.¹ The citizens of East Germany were largely not in favor of the government, so there was significant tension between the government and the people over the lifetime of the German Democratic Republic.² This meant that the only way that it could be maintained was with no free elections and heavy restrictions on the press. East Germany was one of the Soviet Union's attempts to export its ideologies and practices elsewhere in Europe. Secret police forces, the Stasi, played a vital role in controlling both the ordinary citizens and the party, providing frequent updates to Moscow, and providing the Soviet government a high level of control over the German regime.³

Culturally, East Germans experienced censorship that was similar in manner to what the Soviet people experienced. Propaganda claimed that the West Germans were the inheritors of the

¹ Melvin Croan and Carl J. Friedrich, "The East German Regime and Soviet Policy in Germany," *The Journal of Politics* 20, No. 1 (February 1958): 52.

² Elizabeth Wegner, "Speak, Memory? War Narratives and Censorship in the GDR," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 96, No. 4 (October 2018): 645.

³ Richard J. Popplewell, "The KGB and the control of the Soviet bloc: the case of East Germany" in *Knowing Your Friends: Intelligence Inside Alliances and Coalitions From 1914 to the Cold War*, ed. Martin S. Alexander, (Abingdon, England: Routledge, 1998), 257.

Nazi system, and therefore the East and its communist system was morally superior.⁴ Literature in the East became focused on anti-fascism and pro-Marxism. Some East German authors used capitalism to explain the past Nazi fervor, which served to legitimize the communist government. This was advocated for by the government censors.⁵ Intellectual circles of debate existed, however, they were closely monitored by the state, and several intellectuals were even expatriated for being “troublesome.” The Lutheran Church was a cultural institution able to survive through the regime and served as a balancing force to the regime, whose Marxist ideology was heavily anti-religion in nature.⁶

Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union in 1985. He had much more of an inclination towards democratic ideals than his predecessors. Gorbachev, unlike his predecessors, was young and looking to reform the system.⁷ Gorbachev’s plans for the USSR consisted of uskoreniye, perestroika, and glasnost- policies consisting of acceleration, restructuring, and openness. These internal Soviet developments also encouraged further democratization within the Bloc states.⁸ However all of the reforms enacted to give the Soviet Union new strength politically, socially and economically, both domestically and on the world stage, directly contributed to the breakdown of the Soviet state and its “empire.”

When Gorbachev inherited the position of General Secretary, the Soviet Union was in an unhealthy condition, facing social and economic stagnation. In response, many groups

⁴ Popplewell, “The KGB and the control of the Soviet bloc: the case of East Germany,” 257.

⁵ Elizabeth Wegner, 643-6.

⁶ Stephano Bottoni, *Long Awaited West: Eastern Europe Since 1944* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017), 148.

⁷ Gregory L. Freeze, “A Modern ‘Time of Troubles:’ From Reform to Disintegration, 1985-1999,” In *Russia: A History*, ed. Gregory L. Freeze (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 452.

⁸ Bottoni, *Long Awaited West: Eastern Europe Since 1944*, 158.

throughout the country sought change. He worked to eliminate corruption within the politburo as well as in Soviet society, as alcoholism and poor labor productivity had become severe problems. In the decade and a half leading up to the Gorbachev era, the Soviet economy had been heavily dependent on the exportation of raw material such as oil. In the mid-1980s, gas prices dropped and the Soviets had nowhere to go. State funds were already being allocated for the uskoreniye plans, so the government debt was growing. The agricultural industry's inability to meet certain goals contributed to the debt as well.⁹

In the 1980s, an economic crisis swept through the socialist nations of Eastern Europe as well. This included the German Democratic Republic, which had previously had one of the best economies in Eastern Europe.¹⁰ Because the Soviet system was falling apart, Gorbachev granted the satellite states autonomy to determine ways to modify their own political systems. This was because the Soviet Union could not financially afford to keep up the level of support in Eastern Europe that they had previously promised.¹¹ The East German population was in favor of changes, as displayed by a number of popular uprisings against the regime. However, the Socialist Unity Party, with Erich Honecker holding the position of General Secretary, was unwilling to enact any progressive change.¹² The German Democratic Republic was one of the only countries in the Bloc that maintained the original ideologically planned economy. Despite the regime's hardline beliefs, the state benefited economically from West Germany's Ostpolitik policy, and was one of the most modern societies in the Eastern Bloc.¹³ The collapse of the

⁹ Freeze, "A Modern 'Time of Troubles:' From Reform to Disintegration, 1985-1999," 451-6.

¹⁰ Bottoni, *Long Awaited West: Eastern Europe Since 1944*, 140.

¹¹ Bottoni, *Long Awaited West: Eastern Europe Since 1944*, 159.

¹² Popplewell, "The KGB and the control of the Soviet bloc: the case of East Germany," 279-80.

¹³ Bottoni, *Long Awaited West: Eastern Europe Since 1944*, 144-7.

communist regime in the case of East Germany was, in part, the product of a government that went against Gorbachev's reforms and against popular will.

Gorbachev drastically decreased Soviet presence in the German Democratic Republic and in the rest of the Eastern Bloc. In 1988, Gorbachev announced that the Soviet Union would renounce the right to intervene in the international affairs of Eastern Bloc states, allowing them a new level of freedom. He referred to this policy as the "Sinatra Doctrine," allowing states to "do it their way."¹⁴ This was the first time since the Second World War when the Soviet occupation had just begun that a leader of the Soviet Union referred to Eastern Bloc sovereignty and the states' freedom to choose their own systems.¹⁵ This same year he gave an address to the United Nations General Assembly that further established the more independent nature of the Bloc states. In his speech, Gorbachev acknowledged the security dilemma theory, which states that the actions a state takes to become more secure often leaves it insecure. He said that demilitarizing international relations was the most logical direction for the future, as the world had become highly interdependent.¹⁶

Gorbachev provided proof that he would stand by these statements, and announced the following:

Today I can report to the General Assembly that the Soviet Union has taken a decision to reduce its armed forces. Within the next two years their numerical strength will be reduced by 500,000 men. The number of conventional armaments will also be substantially reduced. This will be done unilaterally, without relation to the talks on the mandate of the Vienna meeting. By agreement with our Warsaw Treaty allies we have decided to withdraw, by 1991, six tank divisions from the German Democratic Republic,

¹⁴ Popplewell, "The KGB and the control of the Soviet bloc: the case of East Germany," 278.

¹⁵ Bottoni, *Long Awaited West: Eastern Europe Since 1944*, 158-9.

¹⁶ Gorbachev, "Address to the 43rd U.N. General Assembly," in the Provisional verbatim record of the 72nd meeting, held at Headquarters, New York, on Wednesday, 7 December 1988: General Assembly, 43rd session, *United Nations Digital Library*, 11-22.

Czechoslovakia and Hungary and to disband them... Soviet forces stationed in those countries will be reduced by 50,000 men and their armaments by 5,000 tanks.¹⁷

The decision was also in part due to the impact that the military's budget had on the Soviet economy. Defense took up a large portion of the state's budget, which included a large standing military as well as aid to satellite states. It was no longer sustainable with the USSR's declining economy.¹⁸ The new foreign policy posed a threat to the stability of the regimes that the Soviet Union had propped up, as there was no longer a guarantee to the communist parties in Europe that the Red Army would back them up.¹⁹

Because of how open Gorbachev and the Soviet government were to revising the Eastern Bloc systems and willing to accept change, the revolutions in Europe were for the most part of a peaceful nature.²⁰ Honecker and the Socialist Unity Party, however, were not very willing to change the system, as was demanded by the people, and give up some of their power. It was this combination of imposed democratization and popular revolution that led to the independence of the German Democratic Republic from Soviet ideology.²¹

In addition to a level of democratization occurring in the Soviet Union and its satellite states, domestic problems were occurring in the Soviet Union at the same time as demonstrations and revolutions began sweeping across the Bloc states. Protests in East Germany peaked in 1989. East Germans, as well as other residents of the Eastern Bloc, saw the free press in the Soviet Union that resulted from the glasnost policy. The bloc states followed suit and similar conversations began to take place there. The communist puppet states were more openly

¹⁷ Gorbachev, "Address to the 43rd U.N. General Assembly," 28.

¹⁸ Freeze, "A Modern 'Time of Troubles:' From Reform to Disintegration, 1985-1999," 456.

¹⁹ Popplewell, "The KGB and the control of the Soviet bloc: the case of East Germany," 278.

²⁰ Bottoni, *Long Awaited West: Eastern Europe Since 1944*, 159.

²¹ Popplewell, "The KGB and the control of the Soviet bloc: the case of East Germany," 277-9.

criticized. This was the year that all of the small-scale opposition groups combined to become a political movement against the communist regime. In September of 1989, the opposition held its first Monday Demonstration in Leipzig, and authorities became alarmed at how rapidly the size of the demonstrations grew over the following weeks. These demonstrations were held with the same goal of many of those in the Soviet Union: to obtain a more liberal and democratic government. The East German regime, led by Erich Honecker, made the decision to not use force against the protestors as these demonstrations increased in size and intensity, as the costs associated with it were deemed to be too high. To the rest of the world, this was a sign of the weakening regime and weakening connection to the Soviet Union.²²

When Gorbachev visited East Germany in October 1989 to celebrate the German Democratic Republic's fortieth birthday, he called on Honecker to resign, as he believed that Honecker's policies were not radical enough. Gorbachev needed Honecker to be less of a hardliner and implement policies similar in nature to glasnost and perestroika in order to show support for his reforms in the Soviet Union. Honecker did not want to relax his policies, as free speech was dangerous to a largely unpopular regime. The act of Gorbachev bringing down Honecker sparked a strengthening of the uprisings, as this was seen as an opportunity to push for a more liberal government.²³ The East German leadership went against the will of the Soviet Union as well as the interests of its own people by maintaining a hardliner government. These two factors pushed the German Democratic Republic towards collapse.²⁴

The collapse of the Berlin Wall was representative of the fall of the communist regime in East Germany, and, on a larger scale, of the fall of the Soviet Union and its influence. By the

²² Bottoni, *Long Awaited West: Eastern Europe Since 1944*, 166-7.

²³ Popplewell, "The KGB and the control of the Soviet bloc: the case of East Germany," 277-80.

²⁴ Popplewell, "The KGB and the control of the Soviet bloc: the case of East Germany," 277-80.

autumn of 1989, Gorbachev was convinced that the East German regime was on its final legs and would not survive much longer. He was aware of the demonstrations occurring within the country and chose to not move against the course that popular will would take the German Democratic Republic. He was aware that it would likely be costly and unsuccessful. His decision not to prop up the unpopular, declining regime was a significant move.²⁵

On November 9, 1989, Günter Schabowski in a press conference stated to reporters that the border between the East and West was to be opened immediately. The actual call made to open the borders was a bureaucratic mistake, but it was happening at the same time as popular uprisings, and seen as the result of such actions. Schabowski did not have time prior to the press conference to review the notes given to him, and made the mistake of saying “immediately” when he could not find the start time of the open borders in his notes. A few days prior to the fall of the wall, East Germans had been staging protests by the border. The German government thought that if it lessened the border control, the protests would calm down. Instead of partially opening the border as intended, the border was almost completely opened- citizens could apply for private travel outside of East Germany without needing a specific reason for traveling.²⁶ The same night that this communication mistake was made, the physical structure of the wall began to be torn down.²⁷

Within the Soviet Union, Gorbachev’s popularity was declining among both the party and the general population. Opposition within the party saw the glasnost policy and the democratization of the government as eroding the power and privilege of the Communist Party.

²⁵ Freeze, “A Modern ‘Time of Troubles:’ From Reform to Disintegration, 1985-1999,” 462.

²⁶ BBC, Fall of Berlin Wall: How 1989 Reshaped the Modern World,” published November 5, 2019, accessed April 7, 2020.

²⁷ Bottoni, *Long Awaited West: Eastern Europe Since 1944*, 167.

A new wave of independent journalism was taking advantage of the free press, now allowed to expose crimes and misdoings of the communist government, in particular during the Stalinist era. Gorbachev's reforming policies were being used against him, and providing information to fuel popular uprisings. People were now being made aware of the failings of the economy and of the party structure.²⁸ By 1990, Gorbachev was struggling to hold everything together. Anatoly Chernyaev, Gorbachev's advisor on foreign affairs, recorded his observations of the General Secretary in his diary: (March 3, 1990) "There is confusion in my heart. Society is falling apart; so far the rudiments of a new society are nowhere in sight. Judging by my latest observations, Gorbachev is losing a sense of control over the processes." This observation of Gorbachev was after failed attempts to find a middle ground with more conservative politicians, which showcased the rift that had formed in the Soviet Union.²⁹

Among the Soviet population, discontent often materialized in the form of popular uprisings among ethnic minorities in border regions. Stalin's home country of Georgia, for example, lashed out strongly, as it disagreed with the new freedom of press that allowed journalists to criticize Stalin. The glasnost policy brought about a new wave of journalists, who critiqued both Gorbachev and the Soviet system itself. The economic restructuring plans did not bring about enough benefits to outweigh the negatives that came along with it, such as inflation, debt, and the decrease in individual incomes. Due to the freedom of press, these failures were broadcasted, and further damaged the governments popularity.³⁰ The success of people in the

²⁸ Freeze, "A Modern 'Time of Troubles:' From Reform to Disintegration, 1985-1999," 458-60.

²⁹ Chernyaev, "The Diary of Anatoly S. Chernyaev, 1990," trans. Anna Melyakova, *The National Security Archive* (Washington DC: George Washington University, 2010), 16.

³⁰ Freeze, "A Modern 'Time of Troubles:' From Reform to Disintegration, 1985-1999," 454-9.

Eastern Bloc moving against their governments made Soviet citizens realize that they had the opportunity to achieve the change they were protesting for.

Gorbachev allowed popular elections to take place in the Soviet Union as another attempt to restructure the Soviet system into a more democratic one. This, like other attempts, backfired on Gorbachev. In elections for the Congress of Peoples Deputies in March 1989, members of the Communist Party were defeated by non-party candidates and oppositionists.³¹ The results of this election were what the East German regime feared would happen to them, had there been elections with parties other than the Socialist Unity Party represented. Gorbachev's power declined due to the opposition and confidence was lost in him as a leader. The fall of Gorbachev served to fuel nationalist and revolutionary fervor further. If change was happening in the central state, that meant that it was possible to achieve change in the periphery states.³²

The collapse of the communist system in the Soviet Union meant that the German Democratic Republic lost legitimacy as a state because it came into existence solely to be a model of Soviet style government. As more Eastern Bloc states collapsed, the region became more and more unstable.³³ Following the opening of the border, the East German government was forced to take some kind of action, as their population was fleeing to the West. The reunification process began with the East German adoption of the West German currency. In March 1990, the German Communist Party was crushed in an election, and the new free democratic government began to negotiate a reunification treaty. The treaty was ratified in September, and went into effect in October.³⁴ In December 1991, the USSR was formally

³¹ Freeze, "A Modern 'Time of Troubles:' From Reform to Disintegration, 1985-1999," 458-9.

³² Freeze, "A Modern 'Time of Troubles:' From Reform to Disintegration, 1985-1999," 459-61.

³³ Bottoni, *Long Awaited West: Eastern Europe Since 1944*, 167-8.

³⁴ Encyclopedia Britannica, "The Reunification of Germany," accessed April 23, 2020.

dissolved and became Russian Federation, as Soviet territory was broken down into a number of states.³⁵ Changes that occurred in both the Soviet Union and its satellite states fed into the collapse of the other. The Soviet Union and its bloc states had a co-dependent relationship. The bloc states would not have existed if it were not for the policies of the Soviet Union, and were unable to exist without the Soviet Union. Therefore, the decline of the central state pulled the periphery states down along with it.

³⁵ Freeze, "A Modern 'Time of Troubles:' From Reform to Disintegration, 1985-1999," 464.

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Wenger's article explores how the GDR chose to interpret the Second World War. The GDR, being a communist state, distanced itself from the actions Hitler and the former Nazi state. Control of media, literature, and war narratives was achieved through an extensive censorship office.