I

Introduction

1 THE EAST GERMANS AND DETENTE

On 11 December 1970, a leading figure in the Politburo of the East German Communist Party (SED), Erich Honecker, prepared his countrymen for an imminent confrontation with their enemies. At this juncture in history, Honecker explained, the Western capitalist powers were banding together to launch a new offensive against the German Democratic Republic (GDR), by defaming the state's Party leadership, heating up their mass media in order to spread the hysteria of anti-communism, and taking advantage of every opportunity to disseminate imperialist ideology. The chief threat among these powers, it seemed, was the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), the capitalist half of the old German nation, which was prepared to use every means possible, including sweet-sounding slogans and seductive talk about detente and improved inter-German relations, in order to achieve its long-held goal of subordinating the GDR to its command and then finally liquidating the East German state. 'Nevertheless,' Honecker defiantly declared, bracing his population for the assault, 'nothing has come of this in the past, and likewise, nothing will come of it in the future.'[1]

Only a decade later, however, on 12 December 1981, the East German leader struck quite a different pose. Now General Secretary of the SED, Honecker exuberantly exchanged toasts with the visiting West German chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, in the GDR. Far from decrying his adversaries' intentions at this point, Honecker actually revelled in both Germanies' mutual responsibility for safeguarding European peace, and he took pains to assert

that war should never again be allowed to spring from German soil. 'Whatever differences may exist between our countries,' Honecker now proclaimed, 'either politically or socially, we cannot and must not permit ourselves to be pulled away from this responsibility to the people of Europe and to history itself.' As far as inter-German relations were concerned, the implications of this position were clear. His government would do everything that it could, Honecker vowed, to assure that the GDR retained close ties with West Germany in the future.[2]

By all accounts, this was a remarkable transformation. East Germany's leaders, including Honecker himself, had once been among the greatest critics of the idea of detente between the Germanies, and at one time, their actions had practically wrecked the chances for a lessening of tensions on the European continent. But by 1981, if one were to take Honecker seriously, they seemed unabashedly predisposed to opening themselves to closer contacts with their old enemies in the West. What was it that transpired in the interim to bring about such a pronounced change in the attitudes of the SED leadership, indeed, one of the more radical shifts in the behavior of any communist government in postwar Europe?

The simple answer to this question is: East Germany's involvement in the process of inter-German detente itself. The circumstances created by the reduction of East–West hostilities in the late 1960s and early 1970s forced the GDR's leaders to deal with their West German adversaries on a regular basis, and then to learn to live with their enemies as well. As numerous writers have pointed out, the advent of detente between the Germanies almost instantaneously resulted in the GDR's recognition by most states in the world, something that the country's leaders had striven for unsuccessfully for over two decades.[3] East Germany's new ties with the FRG also led to the inclusion of both German states in the United Nations in 1973, not to mention other international organizations.[4] Then, too, the GDR's leaders found detente quite valuable in economic terms, because of the improved access to foreign markets which their heightened international visibility availed.[5] These economic gains were particularly pronounced in East Germany's relations with the FRG, where on numerous accounts, including the country's greater ability to acquire foreign exchange and its capacity to extract all kinds of special fees from the West Germans, East Berlin clearly profited.[6] Finally, observers have also under-

scored the GDR's new-found worth for the Soviet Union as a result of its enhanced maneuverability internationally. Here, too, the East Germans gained a great deal, for they were no longer forced to submit themselves to the role of a lowly satellite within the socialist bloc but could now assume an enviable position as Moscow's 'junior partner.'[7]

With all of these manifest gains to be made as a result of improved inter-German relations, however, the first thing that one wants to ask is why the GDR's leaders did not open themselves up even sooner to the FRG. Indeed, why was it the case that the coming of detente, as most observers would agree, generated something of a crisis in the SED, with the then Party chief, Walter Ulbricht, leading the way in raising obstructionist barriers to any kind of increased contacts with the West?

Generally speaking, Western analysts have tended to offer two types of answers to this question. One response, which suffuses almost all of the literature on East German politics, has been to argue that the GDR suffers from a systemic 'legitimacy deficit' as the weaker of the two German states, that it is a polity without any kind of independent national base or popular mandate, and as a result has been consistently incapable of selling its citizenry on its merits.[8] As one writer has described the problem, in the eyes of its own population, as well as the entire Western world, this was 'a state that ought not be.'[9] As a consequence of this inability to engender a sense of popular legitimacy, East Germany's leaders were quite predictably reluctant to open up their country to any kind of sustained ties with the FRG. In particular, the idea of renewed contacts between East and West German citizens was especially frightening, because it conjured up images of the threat of societal 'contamination' with Western values and the resuscitation of long submerged pan-German sentiments.[10]

At the same time, other scholars have approached the GDR's behavior more historically, pointing to the record of East Berlin's repeated efforts to get Bonn to give ground on key issues resulting from Germany's postwar division. Above all, these observers have stressed that as the prospect of a lessening of East–West tensions loomed over the East German Party elite, the SED gave new weight to its demands that Bonn abrogate its historic pretensions to speak for the interests of the whole German nation. In the place of these claims, the West Germans were expected to consent to a total

recognition of East German sovereignty, something they had steadfastly refused, and then to agree to everything that went with it, including the exchange of fully accredited ambassadors between the two German capitals. Additionally, the GDR's leaders also demanded that Bonn abandon its efforts to maintain an active presence in the enclave city of West Berlin, which lay glaringly in the center of East Germany and which was the most profound reminder of the fragility of the postwar division of Germany.[11] Given these preconditions, it was no surprise, therefore, that when the West Germans refused to budge on these concerns, the SED's resolve to inhibit the course of detente hardened. Only at the last minute, as Western chroniclers have noted, when East Germany's leaders were virtually forced to come to terms with the FRG by the Soviet Union, did they finally consent to their state's inclusion in the detente process and a regularization (if not a normalization) of inter-German relations.[12]

All of these points about the pros and cons of detente are accurate, and all are undoubtedly critical elements in any attempt to account for the GDR's initial aversion to a relaxation of East–West tensions. Yet, aside from the fact that they highlight many of the reasons that motivated the SED leadership to oppose the country's opening to the West, do these points really constitute an explanation for the way that the East Germans acted or, later on, for their radical transition into unpredictably agreeable advocates of detente? It is certainly true that the issue of the GDR's legitimacy played a central role in shaping its leaders' negative reaction to the prospect of enhanced contacts with the FRG in 1970. But if one wants to appeal to a legitimacy deficit alone to explain the SED's behavior, then it is also necessary to show why this same problem did not militate against a similar opening to the West ten years later. One may argue, as have many experts, that the Party's leaders simply treated their involvement in the detente process as a straightforward trade-off between the risks of exposure to their adversaries and the economic and political benefits of a more active international role. But this is to suggest that the GDR's rulers merely accommodated themselves to detente. What really demands explanation is the fact that they became enthusiastic supporters of the process. Clearly, something about the state's traditional concern for its domestic legitimacy changed by 1980. It is necessary to identify precisely what this change was.

This study offers an alternative explanation of the GDR's experience with the detente process which seeks to account for East Berlin's changed behavior by focusing on the East German elite's ongoing efforts to devise strategies suitable for asserting its internal authority. Rather than trying to comprehend the state's negative reception to the prospect of greater East–West contacts by beginning with the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, as most analysts have done, we shall see that it is necessary to go back at least a decade before the regularization of inter-German ties. This will enable us to see that the idea of any kind of detente with the FRG was so profoundly disturbing to East Germany's leaders not only because it exposed their legitimacy deficit or merely because it introduced unprecedented opportunities for official and unofficial contacts between the two states, but because it threatened to undermine the leadership's entire approach to the cause of building and then maintaining domestic authority during the 1960s.

What East Germany's leaders experienced at the end of the decade was nothing short of a crisis of identity, of the regime's self-conception and of its manner of relating to the East German populace. Not only were these leaders' standard definitions of political reality abruptly challenged by the new international conditions, but in a very concrete way, the Party was forced to rethink many of the ideological, institutional and policy emphases – what one writer has labelled the state's 'political character'[13] – that had governed its decision making during the years that the GDR had practically no relations with the FRG.

Only with an understanding of this crisis and with an appreciation of the SED's domestic response to the challenges before it, can one then begin to address the transformation of leaders like Honecker into apparently convinced advocates of stronger ties with the West. Detente's effect on the GDR was truly paradoxical. Without the uncertainties presented by the abatement of East–West tensions in the first place, East Berlin might never have been able to face the prospect of a new relationship with the FRG with the confidence that its leaders displayed by the beginning of the 1980s. Detente forced the East German Party leadership to come to terms with problems relating to the unresolved German question that it had been able conveniently to ignore during the years that the GDR was cut off from its adversaries. Moreover, the expansion

of routine contacts with West Germany compelled the SED to test its ability to preserve its citizens' loyalties at a time of presumably intensified vulnerability to disruptive influences, both outside the GDR's borders and within. Only under these conditions, we will find, when it was clear that the East German social order would survive the country's opening to the West, were the GDR's leaders able to avail themselves of the political and economic opportunities entailed by their state's improved international standing.

Finally, before venturing into this study, it is necessary to add a few cautionary words about detente itself, because in many respects, this book is as much about detente as about the experience of a single communist state. The East German record shows that the concept of detente, of a purposeful relaxation of tensions between the blocs, between communism and capitalism, can only be meaningful to the extent that it takes into account each side's shifting conceptions of its interests, whether they be political, economic, ideological, or even psychological. At one point, as we shall see, the leaders of the GDR were wary of the idea of any kind of detente with the West because it seemed to undermine their efforts to generate domestic authority; but by the 1980s, they seemed to welcome the process precisely because it *served* those same ends. This shift has been hard for many Westerners to comprehend, most likely because they resist the idea of viewing the GDR as a state in the process of development.

One lesson of East Germany's experience, therefore, is that the elusive notion of detente must be viewed from an historical perspective, and not merely as an abstract policy, if we are ever to understand how individuals like Erich Honecker might have changed their views about the value of regular contacts with their adversaries over time. This does not necessarily mean that the GDR's commitment to its core values was in any way altered as a result of its experiences, but only that the way in which its leaders calculated their interests and the attainment of their goals changed (and, presumably, will continue to do so) both with the fluctuations in their surroundings and with their increasing confidence about their ability to prosper in those same surroundings.

The other point to keep in mind about the developments that we will consider has to do with the limitations on what any conception of detente between the blocs can mean. If we expect that the lure of

ever-better relations with the FRG could ever have induced the East German leadership to compromise its loyalty to socialist principles and to foster in its place a real rapprochement of the two German states, then there is every reason to think that we will be disappointed. It is practically a truism that the Soviet Union can be counted upon to resist any such drift toward the West. But it is also important to note that the SED itself has always had very deliberate ideas about the ends of its foreign policy. In the Party's view, today as in the past, detente is at best only a mutually beneficial arrangement with the GDR's opponents. Far from distancing itself from its key political and ideological commitments, in fact, East Berlin consistently maintained throughout the early 1980s that the purpose of improving its relationship with the FRG was simply to further the cause of socialism by peaceful means, now that the nuclear age made it impossible to carry on the class struggle on the basis of military confrontation. Detente and conflict with capitalism are not only compatible concepts, but such norms constitute what one East German text informs us is a 'dialectical unity': 'The dialectic of detente and class struggle consists of the fact that the goals of detente (that is, the securing of the peace and international cooperation) and the class goals of the international working class to obtain social progress are intimately related.'[14]

That such maxims inform the SED's policymaking should be enough to caution any onlooker about the extent of significant internal change that can be expected from a country like the GDR. But at the same time, the fact that detente was once viewed as anathema by this same Party elite should at least give us reason to wonder just what happened to the way that the East German leadership chose to perceive its interests and why it is that international exposure should have taken the place of relative isolation.

2 WHERE TO BEGIN?

In contending that the East Germans' experience with detente cannot be understood by directing our attention solely at the late 1960s when inter-German contacts first began to proliferate, we need not, of course, commit ourselves to a close recounting of the GDR's entire history. Instead, it is only necessary to begin with the foundations on which the SED's image of society and politics rested.

This founding symbol, which the East Germans themselves have championed as 'a visible example of the manner in which the armed power of the working class secures the peace and protects socialism,' is nothing less than the Berlin Wall.[15]

2

Die Mauer 1961

With the measures of 13 August 1961, the borders of the socialist world system were reliably defended against the main forces of world imperialism in Europe and the sovereignty of the GDR was secured.

Geschichte der SED (1978)

1 THE WALL

On Sunday, 13 August 1961, residents of the city of Berlin awoke to find that a startling event had decisively changed their lives and transformed the character of their already beleaguered city. Early that morning, armed contingents of East German troops, factory militia, and *Volkspolizei* had assembled on the boundary line dividing East and West Berlin. A ring of tanks was rolled up to the Brandenburg Gate, the symbolic point of entry into East Berlin. Then, under the supervision of Erich Honecker, the man who would one day preside over the East German Communist Party, shock workers erected barbed-wire fences and rough concrete barriers along the city's line of demarcation, effectively cutting off all means of transport and communication. Within a week, these actions culminated in the erection of a more extensive, permanent structure. This was the Berlin Wall.

This barrier, or *die Mauer*, as it is known in West Berlin, supplemented and fortified in following years by steel girders, watchtowers, tank traps, death strips, and sophisticated electronic gadgetry, has since become one of the most famous and infamous symbols of East–West confrontation and conflict. Aside from numerous polemical treatments, most accounts of this barrier have been primarily historical, centering on the day-to-day events lead-

ing up to and following its construction. Still other studies have focused on the barrier's general significance. One approach has been to treat the Wall as a key event during a period of potentially disastrous conflict between the superpowers.[1] In other accounts, in contrast, the Wall is taken to represent a deescalation of conflict and tempering of Cold War hostilities, since the East German fait accompli eventually led to the stabilization of power relations in central Europe.[2]

But for our purposes, the Wall will be viewed in terms of its significance for those leaders who erected it. For not only does the barrier provide us with a provocative illustration of the tensions, fears, and dilemmas that one communist state experienced as a result of its sensitive location in a hostile environment, the Berlin Wall was also the formative experience for the East German ruling elite. Its construction marked these leaders' first opportunity to establish their authority on a lasting basis, and as such, it must be seen as the first step in the GDR's pursuit of a unique national identity, a macabre symbol of long-sought permanence and stability.[3]

To understand the barrier's significance, however, we must recognize that when East Germany's founding father and Party chief Walter Ulbricht and his colleagues took their initial steps in concretizing the division of East and West Berlin, they were largely responding to the immediate pull of events around them. The Wall was not the logical and predictable product of some grand design or elaborate scheme, but rather an initially desperate act, a sign of gross weakness and not strength.[4] Critical to an understanding of the Wall is the fact that the East German leadership was taking a terrible risk in acting as it did. After all, no one could have known for sure how the world would react to the events of August 1961. The building of the Wall was at minimum a technical violation of Berlin's four-power occupation status. How would the Western powers respond? What about the response from West Berlin's fervently anticommunist population? Could the Wall therefore serve as the catalyst by which Berlin would become the new Sarajevo? There were also important long-term considerations. Even if conflict were avoided, would not the Wall be a major propaganda defeat for the communist East?

No doubt, the Ulbricht leadership also had weighty domestic concerns. How would the East German population react? The GDR