

# Breaching the Wall

**F**or years they had been saying the Cold War was over - but when sections of the Berlin Wall crashed in the first week of November everyone knew a fresh political era had finally begun.

Throughout Europe, political certainties are changing.

Hardly noticed in the tumult of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) has been the downfall of Todor Zhivkov, Bulgaria's party leader and president, and the legalisation of some opposition groups.

In Poland a non-communist party rules, and the former governing party is trying to come to terms with its failure; Hungary's Communist Party has dissolved itself to become a self-declared social-democratic party.

All this has left many people wondering: What happened to the Iron Curtain?

'Burial parties' were quickly formed by Western pundits and politicians, who foresaw the death of the GDR's policy of 'real existierende sozialismus'.

But they were also anxious: could this mean a reunified Germany with a population of 70-million dominating the rest of Europe? Yesterday's burning issues concerning a common European currency in a more integrated West European market looked irrelevant.

The larger strategic map of Europe, of Nato and the Warsaw Pact, of the superpowers behind them, is also shifting. And elsewhere in the world political stand-offs given shape by the Cold War - including Southern Africa and the region - are taking place in the context of an altered balance of forces.

The single most important catalyst for change in the GDR was not, as some sections of the Western media have put it, a yearning for capitalist lifestyles. Rather, it was the desire for freedom of movement. This was evidenced by the fact that fully a sixth of the population had applied for travel visas within days of the Berlin Wall

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Eastern Europe's map is being redrawn almost weekly, with major changes in state control.

**SOUTHSCAN FEATURES** looks at the developments and the implications for socialist parties in other parts of the world.

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coming down.

This was widely interpreted in the West as a desire to move permanently - but it has already become clear that this is not the case. A survey by the country's Institute for Sociology and Social Policy, for example, found that 87% of the population had no intention of leaving permanently.

Since the '60s the youth of Western Europe have travelled more widely than ever before - it has become a part of culture, both a rite of passage to adulthood, and part of a generational rebellion. These are issues well beyond the immediacies of consumerism which have been denied to the GDR's people.

An ossified leadership - widely criticised as isolated from the people and drawing privileges which contradicted their espoused values - refused to realise this (or genuinely believed the security interests of the state would not allow it).

They described the Berlin Wall as a 'wall of peace' - and while it stabilised relations between the states in central Europe and between the superpowers at a time of acute tension, it was also needed to prevent the draining of the economy by its powerful Western neighbour.

But for the GDR youth, it was an unbearable imposition - watching the West on its television, in the distance, over the wall. Consumer goods achieved an allure, even though the consumer culture was still despised.

The presence of the Wall also humiliated people: one poster carried on the marches read, 'We have come of age'; they were fed up with being treated like children, needing to be

penned in and unable to take decisions.

The need for economic reform has been acknowledged in the GDR for some time (it was political pluralism that was never accepted). Before the tumultuous events of the past weeks, it was widely reckoned that ageing Socialist Unity Party (SED) leader Erich Honecker would be ousted at the party congress scheduled for May 1990, and that some market measures would be brought in to improve the consumer goods situation. The pace has been massively forced since then and the congress has been brought forward to December.

Controlled market forces would give more flexibility to the supply of consumer goods; technological development would serve partly to deal with the chronic labour shortage. The economists are now discussing greater use of economic instruments such as prices and banking.

They have levelled criticisms at the giant combines which have integrated supply and production in one giant concern, and are blamed for reducing flexibility of response to demand.

**G**DR economists believe they have been complacent by far: the hundreds of thousands who have come out on the streets will not be content with a reform managed from the top, until they are satisfied they can trust the managers. Politics comes first. The economic reformers have in front of them a situation of unprecedented complexity - an open border with the most powerful capitalist state in Europe, speaking their own language, and welcoming their citizens with open arms.

Their currency will be forced onto a market rate on West Germany's streets. But many things have changed since 1961 when the Wall was built: the GDR has had 28 years to develop a firm economic base of its own, and it has a population which has grown up in a particular ethos, not just of secret



***Juggling with Germany: East Berlin border guards watch as street performers toss lit batons to entertain the crowd in front of the Brandenburg Gate.***

police and paternalistic tyrants, but with extensive social services and collectivism at local workplace and community level. This, by all accounts it does not want thrown over - as yet.

As the opposition casts round for appropriate political parties to crystallise out the social forces within it, some are talking about reviving the old Social Democratic Party which existed before the Second World War.

The ruling SED was formed after the war from the remains of the SDP and the Communist Party, and had the task of purging the state of fascists, and of building up a new society in the Soviet zone.

It mobilised a demoralised and defeated people to rebuild, literally using the rubble of its cities. It was a gigantic task, of which the GDR people - the masses who are today demonstrating

against their government - remain proud.

For the Communists, the present mass movement does not signify defeat - yet. The socialist project has always involved moving from the level of 'real existing socialism' to the next level, and then on. 'Real existierende sozialismus' carried within it the notion of a toehold on the wall of world capitalism, not a utopia on the plateau above.

Commentators in the West have looked in vain for elements of a new Solidarnosc among the millions of demonstrators walking the streets of the GDR's cities, walking its government out of office. They found individuals, intellectuals, gradually coalescing blocs of interest - but also party members among the demonstrators.

In party demonstrations they found reform banners. As one party official

said in the week before the crash of the Berlin Wall: 'Hundreds of thousands of party members have worked for this'.

Already it is possible to detect voices of interest in the West which, together with forces in the GDR, might begin to chart a direction for an advanced industrial society which challenges the ideological sway of capitalism - and might even become a renewed focus for the West European Left, at present lacking aim or definition.

It is the political awareness of the GDR's people that will make or break it as a state. After all, the GDR is a socialist state or nothing - what determined its existence from day one was its socialist political orientation. As one GDR politician said, there cannot be two capitalist Germanys in Europe.

Although many of the youth have

regarded party membership as a sign of moral bankruptcy - mere career advancement - the moral pull of the party has stayed strong.

The party in the East has remained the bearer, through its anti-fascist history, of the credentials which enabled Germans to come to terms with their past.

So many still joined the SED for the best of reasons and - unlike in other East European states - many thousands of members in the 2-million-strong organisation were seeking over years to loosen the hands on the wheel and to begin reform.

However, inner party control was too weak to correct its leadership, while outside there was also too little democratic control on the government.

Unlike in the Soviet Union, with its single party, four smaller parties were allowed, representing certain social

forces; they could raise issues and qualify legislation, but could also be ignored. The SED's leading role was built on the constitution. Now, with the announcement of free elections, that will have to change.

Some voices in the reformist New Forum - built around a core of the intelligentsia - are speaking of a 'third way' between socialism and capitalism. Inside the Party many are repeating that reform was always on the agenda, and only held back by the ossified structures, allowed a longer life by the threat from the West and the Cold War.

The advent of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in recent times has been widely welcomed in the party ranks in the GDR, where it was felt that he could unlock the country's frozen energies. From these quarters what is

happening now represents a repeat of 1968, the 'Prague Spring' - but in new and favourable circumstances, and more intelligently done.

'Reform' therefore has not been the discovery of the West. All of it has been known by European socialists. Writing in the late '60s, the British marxist economist Maurice Dobb said: 'It is hardly likely that the new technological and higher living standards can be contained within the old administrative mould inherited from Stalin's day. Economic problems sometimes acquire a compelling logic of their own.'

'One may well see some rapidly changing alignment and landmarks in the socialist world in the decade that lies ahead'.

The 'burial parties' of the West may have to turn back, their task again unfulfilled.

## Putting internationalism into practice

**A**mong progressive forces, particularly in the third world, another kind of anxiety about events in Europe is growing: will the new developments affect the anti-imperialist foreign policy of the GDR?

'Internationalism' has been part of the GDR's makeup and, as in Cuba, was built into the political education of its people. It has provided large-scale support to struggles in many countries. It has given refuge and training - military and civilian - for many political exiles from South Africa. It has helped the wounded of Swapo, Angola and Mozambique.

After the fascist coup in Chile, hundreds of political exiles were brought in to live and work in the GDR; during the Vietnam war shops and department stores kept collection boxes next to the tills and the citizens gave freely. Vietnamese have been brought in, for training initially, but are increasingly being used to fill the labour gaps.

Will this foreign policy also go under in the demand for democracy and pluralism? Inside the GDR there has been unpublicised dissent as the

hard pressed and extensive social services came under more pressure from foreigners, and as the housing question proved itself more intractable than forecast. At the same time East Germans are aware of liberation struggles in the way that Westerners are not.

What gave its foreign policy weight was the GDR's economic strength - a fact hardly noticed in the present clamour of criticism. GDR citizens have had the highest standard of living in eastern Europe, and it ranks tenth on the league of industrial powers (with West Germany fourth).

But the economy is not moving, with structural problems exacerbated by the recent exodus of substantial numbers of its workforce.

The social services and many factories are now grossly understaffed and troops have had to be called in. The 'gastarbeiters' (workers from other countries) already there will become indispensable.

Many of these workers are Mozambicans. After the Portuguese revolution in 1975, the GDR took responsibility for training the new security police.

GDR cadres were also sent to help in Mozambique's bandit-ridden coal mining areas, where they stay and work as trainers for months at a time in barbed wire compounds.

In 1979 the Mozambican government signed the first protocol to send 2 000 workers to the GDR for training in coal mining, textile manufacture, and other industries, with GDR finance and technical assistance for similar new projects in Mozambique.

The scheme was of practical value and an example of non-exploitative relations between states.

But the security situation in Mozambique changed and the projects were hit by the Mozambican National Resistance rebels. Only one textile plant is operating today.

A 'gastarbeiter' system was agreed on instead. It still has value for Mozambique, with more than 18 000 of its citizens operating as a migrant labour supply to sectors in the GDR economy such as light industry, fishing, chemicals and electronic assembly - earning millions of rands in valuable foreign currency.