

## **Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany**

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**Reviewer:** Anne Deighton

There is a sense in which, in the twentieth century, the history of Europe is the history of Germany: German history cannot be isolated from war, cold war, superpower conflict, European integration, and the developments of Germany's European neighbours to the west, east, north and south. For the twists and turns of its history have shaped the major moments in European history. Since 1990, there has been an outpouring of work that has sought to address the latest turn of its history, as the German Democratic Republic (GDR) has been dissolved into a new, unified Germany. Eye witness accounts and instant histories, the works of creative writers, diplomatic historians and political scientists exist in abundance. European integration is often compared to a laboratory that provides the data for political scientists interested in how and why and how far states will cooperate. How much more true is the laboratory analogy for the GDR, where each factor and moral assumption that underpinned social relationships, political-power relationships, ideology and identity have now been exposed to the public eye. Pride and legitimacy, retribution and retrospective justice, the problems of identity and nation-building have emerged as delicate questions that resonate in many other countries. The economic and political ideology of unifying Germany has further been meshed with debates about the economic and political reconstruction of all post-communist Europe, and how states and regions can best cope with, and manage large-scale economic change. And, if this was not enough, a mass of new documentary and archival evidence is appearing which enriches, but complicates these already complex questions. It is further clear that there is still much to be learned about the history of the GDR itself.

Charles Maier, the Krupp Foundation Professor of European Studies at the University of Harvard, must be as well placed as any to offer an interpretation of events. His numerous books and articles on Europe in the twentieth century, his knowledge of economics, of European languages, and his capacity to look at European history not simply through the prism of American diplomacy and American power make him well suited to undertake a book on the collapse of the GDR. Moreover, he spent much of his time 'in the field' as events were unrolling, and he was on the board of the Potsdam Centre after unification - of which more later. *Dissolution* is intended as a synthetic history rather than as an elaboration of a particular view or thesis. Much of the book is a chronological account of the diplomacy of the dissolution of the GDR, although Maier's emphasis upon the East German dimension is quite different from that of Zelikow and Rice, or Pond. Without rehearsing here the whole 'dissolution' story, it is worth recounting two moments in particular of Maier's account. They tell a great deal about the inflexibility of the established leaders of the GDR, and the structural weakness of the GDR in the international system, and go a long way to answering the question of

whether the GDR's dissolution was inevitable, and why its collapse happened so quickly.

The first moment that Maier describes occurred before 1989, but after Gorbachev had achieved power and was beginning his experiment of domestic reform, and was starting to re-think the role of the Soviet Union in Europe and the world. Domestic change in the Soviet Union posed a profound problem for the GDR leadership, a country that had remained the most orthodox of the Eastern European bloc. As the discussions on perestroika and glasnost were pursued in the Soviet Union, Honecker took the decision to prohibit German language editions of Sputnik and New Times, and to ban the term 'perestroika' from official Soviet documents distributed in East Germany. The reason? 'We are against the practice of the slander of the CPSU history and socialist construction in the USSR. We are surprised by doubtful economic experiments, not to speak of the information sphere. For years we educated GDR citizens about the example of the CPSU and the heroic struggle of the Soviet people. Now we learn, however, that it was all a string of failures.' (220) Thus whilst Gorbachev was prepared to experiment with domestic reform, Honecker retreated into stasis. Real change in the Soviet Union exposed the core weakness of the GDR: its very existence was premised upon its ideology. Although Honecker may only have sensed this subconsciously at the time, the truth was that the traditional Soviet model was the only *raison d'être* for the status quo in the GDR. When, at last, reforming leaders came to power in the GDR, it was too late to change and survive, although the chances of a successful reform would always have been slight.

That this was so is shown by another striking moment recalled by Maier. This occurred in the early summer of 1990. By then the GDR Foreign Minister was Markus Meckel. After the June 2+4 meeting finished in Paris, Maier cites Meckel as admitting that, with respect to foreign policy, there was now nothing to do but wind up the GDR. The GDR had no diplomatic leverage, no room for manoeuvre, no voice in the international diplomacy of unification. 'Unification had overtaken them. The effort to use the time until unification to conduct an independent foreign policy had failed; the government possessed no real authority. They had reverted once again to become if not mere objects of history, at best bystanders.' (279-80)

But did the GDR ever have the scope for independent action, which would have enabled it to prevent its dissolution, or at least have a greater input into the frantic diplomacy of 1989-90? The answer, as Maier explains, was probably not. Until the 1980s, the Soviets had actively discouraged any GDR/FRG contact, stipulating that a triangle of diplomatic relationships did lie between the three, but in a way that was controlled by the Soviet Union itself. But after 1986, the drive for perestroika and glasnost within the Soviet Union was paralleled by new Soviet strategic thinking, which was to downgrade the importance of the GDR in the search for a 'common European House'. Relations with the West took an increasingly important role, and this was at the price of downplaying 'demonstrative friendship' with old style despotic Communists like Castro, Ceausescu - and Honecker. (221) After 1986, Honecker thought that he had been granted greater latitude of diplomatic freedom, and relished his state visit to Bonn in 1987. But this freedom was illusory, as it had only come about because the Soviets had begun to think that German unification might be the price of better relations with Bonn and the West.

After November 1989, Maier argues that the last chance for the East Germans to play a diplomatic role arrived, although he also quotes Kvitinsky's remark that the 'death sentence of the GDR was signed in the moment when it was decided to open the border.' (282) Modrow, in particular hoped for a confederally structured 'Treaty Community' (227). He anticipated that, with the belated reforms of 1989-90, the GDR would have an enhanced status in any unification talks; assumed that the West German CDU's previous commitment to Ostpolitik would ensure a voice for the GDR; and further thought that the Soviet Union would insist upon a role for its loyal clients. But the GDR leadership was thwarted by the speed of negotiations, by the increasing weakness of the Soviet Union, and by the decision of the West Germans themselves to bypass the GDR, and deal directly with the Soviet Union.

Wolfram Hanrieder has talked of the FRG as a penetrated state. This was even more true of the GDR. Neither in its ideology, nor in its diplomacy, had the state any room for manoeuvre. It depended ultimately upon its ideological underpinnings, and its geo-strategic relationship with the Soviet Union. Change to the

status quo was a threat, for the East Germans had virtually no cards to play to prevent change or to influence the fast moving developments in Soviet policy. Maier's account also implies that, in the end, it was, the policies of Gorbachev that destroyed East Germany. Yet Gorbachev was himself a victim of the general disarray that had overtaken the Communist system. (282) If Gorbachev could not take the old East German leadership with him in his quest for reform, the Eastern bloc as it had been constructed for forty years would become ideologically and strategically meaningless; if he would not continue to value his Eastern bloc allies more than Bonn and Washington, he could not ensure that the bloc itself would survive as a loyal partner.

However, *Dissolution* is more than a diplomatic history from the perspective of the GDR. Maier has been motivated by two themes which weave their way through the book. The first, in the language of the political scientist, is the agency-structure debate, in which Maier highlights the role of agency. Or, to put it another way, he is fascinated by the way in which the people can shape their own history. He asserts that, 'the East Germans, when they came to act collectively, had a decisive impact on their own history' (xiii), but that this was short-lived. He charts the extraordinary events of the escape from the GDR of an alienated people - by the time the Wall was opened, over 30000 had left (131); the sieges of the embassies of neighbouring countries; the candlelit processions and prayer meetings; the growing divisions between those who wanted to change the GDR, those who wanted unification with the FRG, and those who simply wanted out. Meanwhile, the political authorities tried, but failed, to ride the tiger. Maier writes movingly about the sense of 'peaceful compassion', of the bravery of the citizens who did not know how the authorities would react, the demand for an alternative public sphere, of mobilisation, of the debate about civil society. But he concludes that this was all essentially oppositional - the force of the people n including the Communists - was quickly dissipated as organised parties recaptured the political arena from civic movements.

What was left after 1990 for the German people were the deeply perturbing civic consequences of unification, and the need to come to terms with their past and to put the old regime on trial. Not only did Germans have to explore the legitimacy of what had happened in the East over the previous forty years, but had to do so amidst passionate discussion about the Third Reich. Maier, writing, as he says, as a comparative historian, argues that this comparison is not valid, and that it obscures the radically different regimes, and, indeed, that the comparisons with the Third Reich were sometimes used as a strategy for 'normalising' the Nazi regime. (315) He is particularly interesting on the academic purges of the former GDR, examining the impact of unification upon the university and research sector, which was an area in which he had some direct involvement. This makes gripping reading, not only because he says that, whilst the universities were being cleansed of those tainted by contacts with the Stasi, or with a reputation for dismissing dissenting students, even those who were not politically tarnished but who 'did not seem worth retaining' were removed. (305) Age and rank also came into the equation, as did research output. The Academy of Science, which had no West German equivalent, was decimated. It was a day of judgment for the politically compromised, the intellectually lazy, for the Mittelbau. As Maier remarks, the changes to the university and research system were became a way of slashing expensive white-collar labour. This section is essential reading for those in open societies who nevertheless hope that academic endeavour will of itself sanctify donations from dubious sources; for those whose 'academic' work may involve contracted-out research that could compromise their independent academic judgement. The speed at which these changes happened in the former GDR was terrifying, and this section is a reminder that, while the Stasi-culture was of course particular to the GDR, moral choices cannot simply be put to one side by academics in the quest for funds and research output.

The second theme that runs through this book is an analysis of the economic environment of the GDR, of why the economics of the Eastern bloc had gone so badly wrong by 1989, and of the subsequent attempts at economic reconstruction. Writing now as a comparative economic historian, he dates the beginning of the end to the 1970s. What is particularly interesting here is that he does not deal with the GDR alone, but sets the GDR into the wider changes in the global economy, arguing that 'the Communist collapse came about as a reaction to forces for transformation that gripped West and East alike, but which Western Europeans (and North Americans) had responded to earlier and with less cataclysmic an upheaval. In their divergent responses to the seismic pressures of the 1970s lay the subsequent history of the 1980s.' (91) This collapse was postponed, though, first by the Eastern subsidisation of prices, and then by Western credits to the

Eastern bloc in the 1980s. Orthodoxy and conservatism, and continued concentration in the Eastern bloc upon what Maier calls the 'archaeology of coal and steel' (97), prevented the modernisation that the Western world undertook in the aftermath of the economic crisis of the early 1970s. The dissolution of the GDR thus followed on from the disabling difficulties that overtook the Communist planned system. Maier's assessment here is measured, but stark: 'Both sides in the cold war had to cope for almost two decades with a set of fundamental transitions in the world economy and the ideologies that supported their respective ways of doing business. The harsh pressures of relative backwardness brought down the Soviet system in the 1980s and helped to liquidate the East German State that incorporated Russia's claim to have shared post-1945 leadership with the West. The pressures encroaching on the capitalist world from the 1970s to the 1990s led to the end of full employment, an acceptance of increasing inequality, and increasing dissension over economic integration.' (329) In the Eastern bloc, it brought complete collapse. Through this prism, it would seem that the East Germans themselves were victims, first of the global economic pressures of the 1970s, and then of the very economic orthodoxy that underpinned it. We should hear more from Maier on this theme. In the sections on economic collapse, he takes forward the debates about the role of large-scale economic change upon politics, and uses his expertise as an economic and comparative historian to best advantage.

These two big themes - the role of peoples, and that of grim economic pressures - that run through Maier's book can be considered as complementary; but they do jostle against each other. He is the first to admit this dissonance as he argues that 'political action in its own right first beckons and then certainly only succeeds when long-term conditions permit. Conversely, the same events reveal that political activity, at least if pursued with stamina and persistence, helps shape the causal environment critical to its own success'.(xv) Thus he allows himself to accept the uncertainties and difficulties of identifying the mainsprings of historical change, and does not try to squeeze the evidence into one particular theoretical or ideological model. This subtle historical approach certainly enriches his story, although, as the dust really settles on 1989, a more decisive ordering of the hierarchy of causality may be yet possible.

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