

The Soviet Union and the GDR as seen by the BND 1985-1990

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I. Introduction

1. In 1985 it was established wisdom of the Western Intelligence community that the Soviet Union continued to stick to the traditional lines of its communist ideology determined geopolitical global objectives supported by formidable nuclear and conventional power. Translated into the German situation it meant to seek human relief projects to make the consequences of the division of the country which was considered to continue to exist for a very long time, less burdensome for the citizens of the GDR. The German question at large was considered to be a taboo, because such unification was not wanted by many Western countries - if not by all. Also within Germany a sizeable segment of the political class did not want German unification because of the re-emergence of a potentially dominant Germany in Europe. Already the FRG with 62 million inhabitants had created the third largest economy on the global scale.

2. My views on the Soviet Union were formed by my continued professional exposure to that part of Europe and the world – let it be on the Soviet desk or the desk for German and Berlin related affairs in the Foreign Office, or in Washington in the context of the Washington Quadripartite Ambassadorial Group from 1960-1965 (US, FR, GB, GER), let it be on NATO and Defence Affairs as the director of the Planning Council in the Federal Ministry of Defence(1970-1974), let it be as Ambassador in Moscow (1977-1980),or as the Representative of the FRG to the North Atlantic Council (1980-1985). In 1985, I could not reject the wish of the Federal Government to “run the BND” - a suggestion which I had rejected twice before. I could not reject it now, since the Federal Government had to replace instantaneously my predecessor Heribert Hellenbroich who had mishandled a security risk case at the Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz.

II. Personal Assessment of the Soviet Union 1980

1. I had been Ambassador in Moscow in the late seventies: The system was at its worst – the country found itself in circumstances of total stagnation. At the conference of the ruling communist parties in East Berlin in 1976 the leaders of the satellite countries’ communist parties insisted on their own route to communism and Brezhnev could only remind every one on the occasion of his return to Moscow that Moscow remained the path finding nation for communism in Europe and elsewhere. However, specialists from the institutes conceded that the Soviet Union had lost the battle for the hearts and minds of the population in these countries, and I responded by saying “Under such circumstances your tanks cannot last very long in these countries”. In Moscow, I registered high appreciation for the economic performance of the (West) German economy and for what was to be expected from Germany in the future. That kind of language constituted a substantial deviation from the official attitude towards one of the worst ideological and military opponents of the Soviet Union in Europe – a country disqualified in public statements as revisionist in character if not worse. On my return

from Moscow I reminded the audience of my lecture on my experience in Moscow to the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik in November 1980 of the continued high esteem of the Soviet Union – of the Russians for that matter - for the German nation and for what is to be expected from the country in the time to come. During my years in Brussels as the Permanent Representative to the North Atlantic Council I followed closely the NATO consultations of the intelligence family on the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact countries including the GDR. A rather gloomy picture of the economic situation in the Soviet block countries prevailed. From time to time I talked to Soviet journalists whom I knew from Moscow times. The Afghan campaign was a disaster and further alienated the regime from the population – they said. This and other information led me to the conclusion that the Soviet regime could replace the questionable and eventually unsuccessful political and military submission of Central and South Eastern Europe as major component of its own defences by international agreements with the USA and other NATO Countries on the reduction of nuclear and conventional forces in Europe on both sides of the divide and let the countries in between enjoy a larger degree of self-administration. You can read this in my article published by the NATO Brief in March 1984 (NTO Brief 2/1984, p. 26), quoted also by Hermann Wentker in his introduction to the interview with me on the BND reporting on the GDR during the period of 1985-1990 (Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte 2/2008).

2. I decided to introduce my after dinner speech on the BND reporting on the Soviet Union and on the GDR with reference to these personal and professional antecedents, because this background let me pose many questions – time and again – to the assessment department of BND and to introduce new questions as well as methods of work, for instance the use of a questionnaire on the German issue in debriefings of visitors from East Germany – which had never been done in the decades before. The answers to this questionnaire brought all the information needed to understand the peaceful revolution in the fall of 1989. The assessment emerging from the answers taught us this: About 75 percent wanted unification because of the living standard to be obtained. Half of the remaining 25 percent wanted in the first instance the democratic reform of the GDR because they either did not want German unification or were fearful that democratisation could not be introduced if tied to the issue of the German unity. Of course, the remaining 12,5 percent represented the position of GDR state and party apparatus, called nomenclature).

In his memoirs the former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl refers to these opinion polls once and adds the observation “Could you trust these polls, since their methodology could not be sound in scientific respect”. I presented the results of these polls more than once to the Chancellor in writing and orally. Each time he expressed great satisfaction and agreement. So did Foreign Minister Hans Dietrich Genscher. The reports were received with some degree of mental reservation in Washington, Paris and London. At least, no one was left in any doubt about the groundswell of opinion among the Germans on the other side of the divide.

III. BND views on the Soviet Union 1985-1990

1. On the occasion of the Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in March 1986 Gorbachev revised the fundamentals of the Marx/Engels teaching on capitalism and communism, on historical materialism. He declared that the capitalist system has turned to become viable and that it is – due to its reforms – not doomed to succumb. Therefore the socialist system has to develop in such way that it can compete with the capitalist system. The outcome of the competition is open. His thinking and that of his advisors

was influenced by the phenomenal recovery of free Western Europe, in particular Germany including firm commitment of these states and societies to the social dimension of modern society as well as by the continued technological renewal and innovation in the military technology of the USA (Star War). Thanks to French secret intelligence we were aware what kind of technology the Soviet Union tried to acquire by secret operations from the West. NATO also “produced” regularly comparative surveys on technical achievements in the West and in the Soviet Union. Other studies indicated that Moscow - from 1996 onwards - would no longer be in a position to maintain – in parallel – improvements of the living standard of the population and modernisation of the armed forces

The ideological revolution – as introduced by Michael Gorbachev - as well as the ideological and political weakness of the Soviet position in the Satellite area and the weaknesses of the Soviet economy (insufficient infrastructure including energy supply, inferior position in all areas of innovation and new technologies) explained - in the judgement of BND - the initiation of the reform policy, which in turn would mean in particular negotiations on disarmament with the USA (Reykjavik, Washington and finally Paris 1990) and a greater degree of freedom of movement for the Satellite countries. Gorbachev encouraged them in this respect and was worried if such initiatives were not taken.

2. Apart from the primary attention of BND on the issues related to the negotiations of the USA with the Soviet Union on disarmament the Intelligence organisation paid particular attention to the question of the strength and weaknesses of the position of Gorbachev within the Soviet Union:

Would his position be at risk? Indeed, he could not win over the communist party for his reform program and had to shift to the project of a constitutional reform in order to advance reforms. He abolished the monopole of the Communist party (article 6 of the Constitution), which in the end turned out to be fatal, since – without a strong political party behind him - Gorbachev could not proceed on anything and had to give in more and more on pressure from the republics and their respective nationalism, which had emerged as the winner of the power struggle: Russia Ukraine, Armenia Georgia, Baltic republics and Belarussian nationalism not to speak of the Central Asian countries. A great deal of BND reporting dealt with the struggle of reformers and conservatives in the context of the constitutional reform and with the emerging nationalism in several member states, in particular Armenia, Georgia, the Baltic countries and eventually Ukraine and Russia proper.

3. So far as Europe was concerned, Gorbatschov aimed at negotiations on his favorite subject of the Common House of Europe - a concept that would not involve - at least not initially – negotiations on Germany. Given his readiness to let Eastern European countries determine to a larger degree their own future than until recently, he strengthened reform groups in the countries and tried to have the hardliners be replaced (Honecker, Husak). He made it known to each of the countries, as we could establish evidence thereof, that the Brezhnev doctrine was dead. The BND reported about a go-in-between role of Markus Wolf between Moscow and potential alternatives to Honecker in the GDR. Moscow wanted to prevent coalitions of hardliners in Moscow with those in some satellite countries. – as Honecker was trying to do. Poland and Hungary were the vanguards of the reform process, with Prague and East Berlin hanging on to their socialist authoritarian regimes, however challenged by growing dissident movements in both countries - truly democratic reformers, who pushed their way

through peacefully in order to prevent bloodshed by mistake or at a moment of chaos and disorder. Governments had been in touch with each other – for instance in connection with emerging refugee problems (Hungry, Czechoslovakia, Poland).

During this period some overtones were registered indicating a greater degree of flexibility on the German issue.

4. In the end – so far as the Gorbachev–position was concerned - it watered down to the question, how long he could hold on to power – without being able to push forward substantive administrative, economic and other reforms. The internal reform process initiated by Gorbachev lost momentum and faltered – due to the growing economic and social dissatisfaction of the population. Emergency supply organizations from Germany and other countries were organized. The European Union as well as World Bank and Monetary Fund entered the scene to assist in the management of the economic and financial crisis, which had gone out of control.

IV The GDR through the glasses of BND 1985-1990

1. At all times, developments in the GDR were of utmost interest to Bonn. BND was busy to explore the live of institutions and of society in all fields – so did the media to the extent possible. Until 1961 communication between the two parts of Berlin was open – so the intelligence community had no great difficulties to recruit collaborators and to receive the information directly without any great risk. Things turned more difficult after the erection of the wall in 1961. However the Final Helsinki Act of 1975 changed framework conditions to the advantage of the FRG again – notably due to the growing number of persons being allowed to visit the FRG and to the growing number of Übersiedler, persons who left the GDR for good.

2. The GDR was a player in West Germany and did everything possible to discredit the BND – successfully into the upper ranks of the political spectrum – not so in NATO. Not only the military reporting – as we now know thanks to the book of Wagner/Uhl on “BND contra Rote Armee”, (Mfs and BND files accessible in the fields of military and economics to scientific studies now). Also the reporting on the economics and the financial sector of the GDR was highly appreciated.

Strangely, recently the acting BND President made available to one journalist/Spiegel a selected number of files on the BND reporting prior to the collapse of the wall and of the GDR. What was the purpose, the objective? That is an open question to me. At least the public now knows that the BND told the Government: The Soviet Union has abandoned the Brezhnev doctrine of intervention and the BND reported on the basis of opinion polls correctly about the political mood of the population in the GDRF in the years 1996-1990. This was reflected in the outbreak of the peaceful revolution in the GDR in the fall of 1989.

3. Due to the fact that all political democratic forces of the FRG had reduced their handling of the German question to the objective of improvement of human conditions for the population in the GDR and to seek practical cooperation with the regime (the SPD searched for substantive political dialogue and common programmes) there was no BND reporting on the mood of the population regarding the highly political issues of unification. Was unification no longer an item on the agenda of the FRG? The

department of the Chancellors office dealing with the GDR stayed at arms length distance from the BND and its reporting. They would not come for briefings to the BND headquarters.

In 1969, the social-liberal coalition decided to base the GDR-part of the annual report on the state of the Nation to Bundestag no longer on BND reports but on the statistical data of the GDR proper. Thus the myth of the GDR as the twelfth largest economy of the world could be circulated and be established with the assistance of the FRG.

4. On the other hand the BND department looking after STASI potentials and activities, which were well known, had a very small distribution list, when I came to Pullach. I had to instruct them, to prepare a paper for largest possible distribution in West Germany. That applied also to the apparatus of Schalck-Golodkowski (Kommerzielle Koordination), who was charged to acquire COCOM listed technology.

5. Due to professors for economists and professors of the Sciences from the Universities and from industry the BND knowledge of the GDR economy and finances was exhaustive. It was known that state companies had to generate profits, even if they had not so done that they could be taxed – then they asked the Central Bank for credits and could put money into the account of the state. Later on the FRG Finance Minister did not nullify these false credits and they became part of the opening balance sheet of the company. What a shame!

6. The Chancellor received more or less regularly BND briefings on the Soviet Union (also disarmament) and the GDR in which also specialists took part. He knew about the poor state of the GDR economy - not the least also through his talks with Modrow who urgently asked for credits. The fact that Bonn authorized the 1 bill.-Standby credits (DM) in the eighties of the banks and that Bonn offered to finance numbers of ecologically important projects constitutes strong indication that the knowledge about the poor state of the economy was widely spread - also at the top of the FRG government.

The break down of the GDR economy after unification was caused by the inclusion into the most competitive economy in Europe from one day to the other and due to the fact that the Soviet Union as major trading partner of the GDR collapsed and had already earlier converted to hard currency trade – replacing the soft currency system of the COMECON block with artificial, with administrative pricing to which the GDR economy was geared.

7. The dissident movement was of course well known to the BND. After the success of Solidarnosc in Warsaw – the Round Table and the election half free in mid Summer 1989 – the dissident movement in the GDR become more daring in the streets and in their demands for democratic reforms and the rigid state structure started to disintegrate – at first in Dresden and Leipzig where the representatives started to talk with the dissidents. Changing the slogan from “We are the people” to “We are one people” resulted from the masses of the population that started to join the smaller dissident demonstrations. We were asked from Bonn, whether any NPD inputs could be observed. So these people in Bonn had not read our reports on the psycho-political situation in GDR.

8. We are also asked in these days, why we could not prognosticate the fall of the wall. Answer: the situation was ripe for the unconditioned opening of the wall – with all the consequences for the issue of Germany – however, there are events that happen – out of a situation not planned - but rich in consequences. This event lifted the last nail or screw that had kept the system together. The last but one event was the demonstration, the event on November 4 on Alexanderplatz – organised by the artists of the East Berlin Theater stage. Schabowski and Markus Wolf took part and were bowed. Helmut Kohl who writes with distance on the reports about the groundswell opinions in the GDR did not hesitate one day to develop his policy on the German issue exactly on the capitalization of the undercurrent opinion among the majority of the GDR population as reported by BND even if some of the dissidents would have preferred two German democratic states.

9. Thus – contrary to the great bulk of our nation in West Germany and their political leadership who tried to sell the public the security and peace advantages of a permanently divided Berlin and Europe – twenty years after the unwanted events, all of Europe – even Moscow, Paris and London - celebrate united Europe, united Germany, united Berlin.

BND had taken Gorbachev seriously in the pursuit of genuine improvements of the Soviet Union's relations with the West including the abandoning of the Brezhnev doctrine at times when the Western capitals took his reforms as a pause in the pursuit of Soviet imperialism.

BND assured the Bonn Government of the end of the Brezhnev doctrine and informed Berlin as well as the three Western Berlin Powers of the pro-unity mood of the bulk of the East German population, when almost no body wanted to listen to it or believe it. When this mood emerged in the public with the slogan "We are one people" – still people in Bonn thought this to be a product of NPD propaganda!

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