

THE CONTEXT: AMERICA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE GDR

Robert Gerald Livingston

For nearly two-thirds of its existence, the German Democratic Republic (1949–90) as a state was a nullity for United States policymaking. Even after GDR-US diplomatic relations were established in 1974, that state remained of but tangential importance to Washington.¹

The GDR's role for the US was a strategic-military one, stemming from its location on the frontline of a worldwide confrontation between the two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the United States. A risk of escalation into armed conflict there between the two was always present, sometimes acutely so.

East Germany, the GDR, enveloped Berlin, the most exposed US position abroad. The city was occupied in 1945 by the Soviets, Americans, British, and French, becoming during their occupation a Four-Power administered city — a view that after 1949 conflicted with that of the GDR, which regarded Berlin as its capital. In 1948–49, the Soviets launched a land blockade of the access routes from West Germany to Berlin, which the U.S. and British countered with an American-organized airlift of supplies to Berliners. Intensively covered in the media, this event focused Americans' attention on the city and generated strong support for brave Berlin, thus linking U.S. political fortunes in Europe with it for the following decades.

Between 350,000 and 500,000 Soviet Army troops were garrisoned in the surrounding GDR from 1947 to 1989, far more than in any other Soviet-dominated country in Europe.² The headquarters of this Western Group of Soviet Forces was originally set up in the Karlshorst quarter of eastern Berlin (it was later moved to Wünsdorf); and the formidable and threatening military presence was from the mid-1940s a priority target for American military espionage. A US Army Liaison Mission stationed since 1946 in Potsdam, just outside Berlin, patrolled East Germany. There was a tunneling project from the American sector, and a signals site in the British sector intercepted Soviet military communications.

During the entire forty-one years of the GDR's existence, the United States dealt with GDR matters on two separate tracks, bypassing it. The first track concerned all matters relating to Berlin and access to the city and dealt directly with the Soviet Union. This was based on the Soviet capacity, proven over and over again, to control the GDR

1 This chapter is based on the following sources: Anne Applebaum, *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe* (New York, 2012); Catherine Epstein, *The Last Revolutionaries: German Communists and Their Century* (Cambridge, 2003); Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship: Inside the GDR, 1949–1989* (Oxford, 1995); *ibid.*, *German National Identity after the Holocaust* (New York, 1999); Burton C. Gaida, *USA-DDR: Politische, kulturelle und wirtschaftliche Beziehungen seit 1974* (Bochum, 1989); Jürgen Grosse, *Amerikapolitik und Amerikabild der DDR 1974–1989* (Bonn, 1999); Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, Armin Minter, and Stefan Wolle, *Der Tag X: 17. Juni 1953* (Berlin, 1996); Norman M. Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945–1949* (Cambridge, 1995); Christian Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany 1953: The Cold War, the German Question and the First Major Upheaval behind the Iron Curtain* (New York, 2001); Angelika Timm, *Jewish Claims against East Germany: Moral Obligations and Pragmatic Policy* (Budapest, 1997). The chapter also relies on interviews with four American diplomats with service in the GDR and recollections of the author, who served as deputy head and then head of the Eastern Affairs Section (responsible for GDR affairs) of the US Mission in Berlin, 1964–68.

2 Naimark, 17.

and constrain its autonomy in decision-making. Broadly speaking, the state of US-GDR relations reflected the state of US-Soviet relations. Whenever Washington's relations with Moscow soured, so did its relations with the GDR.

Second, in most other matters relating to East Germany the United States deferred to its essential and sturdy ally, the Federal Republic of Germany, where, at times, over 200,000 American soldiers were stationed to help protect it from a potential Soviet invasion from the GDR across the northern German plains or through the Fulda Gap.

1945-53

In May 1945, the Soviet Union moved quickly to impose a communist regime on its zone of the conquered Third Reich. A group of communists, most of whom before 1933 had belonged to the German Communist Party (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands or KPD), was flown in to take over. It was headed by Walter Ulbricht, a former member of the Reichstag and a leader of the pre-Hitler KPD, which had been the biggest communist party in Europe other than the Soviet one.

Working closely with the Soviet military and with the NKVD (the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) and MVD police (Ministry of the Interior of the Russian Federation, later to become the KGB), the German communists quickly put a repressive police state in place, one more brutal than in any of the other Soviet satellites.³ In the first years of Soviet occupation, some 240,000 Germans and Russians were imprisoned in special camps; most of them, like Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen, were the very same ones that had served Hitler's SS as concentration camps. As many as 96,000 prisoners died.⁴ Close collaboration between the East German security and intelligence organizations and their Soviet counterparts began in 1945 and continued until the GDR's end. The communist party absorbed the Social Democratic Party in the Soviet Zone in 1946, creating the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, SED), which ruled until early 1990.

Shortly after the German Democratic Republic was established on October 7, 1949, the three Western military commandants of Berlin issued a communiqué denouncing it as "an artificial creation." The US tried to treat it as such until the 1970s. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, when anti-communist McCarthyism was at its height in the United States, relations with such a grim and rabidly communist state as the GDR were unthinkable.

3 Applebaum, 49-50, 56, 58-59, 66, 154-55, 157, 175-76, 305.

4 Naimark, 276-78.

Even after the GDR's establishment, Stalin remained flexible on German issues, hoping to obtain war reparations for Moscow from the Western occupation zones and to prevent their integration into Western European institutions. In 1952, he sent a tempting offer to end occupation and create a united but neutral and demilitarized Germany; West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, as well as the United States, however, rejected Stalin's note as a deception. His immediate but short-lived successor Lavrentiy Beria also hinted in the spring of 1953 that Moscow might be willing to sacrifice the GDR.

Suddenly, on June 16 and in the week thereafter, over a million East Germans poured out onto the streets in all GDR cities on strike, demanding reduced work norms and then free elections. The uprising, the first in the Soviet-dominated bloc, caught US and West German intelligence organizations completely by surprise. RIAS (Radio in the American Sector), a Berlin station under US control that at least 70 percent of the East German population listened to, played a key role, but not one approved by the American occupation authorities. Its broadcasts spread news of the strikers' demands. The station's broadcasts may have heightened their expectations of American help.

None came. During the US election campaign of 1952, the Republicans, especially the hawkish John Foster Dulles, who was to become Secretary of State in President Eisenhower's cabinet, had urged the "liberation" and "rollback" of communism. Eisenhower, however, took a cautious approach in June 1953, just as he did three years later when Poles and Hungarians rose up against Soviet domination; he was concerned lest such uprisings escalate, bringing on East-West conflict. Washington issued no high-level statements at all during the weeklong uprising. Even Dulles wanted to avoid American identification with it. The inaction of the United States signaled its acceptance of the status quo in Europe, including the division of Germany that had resulted from World War II.

Ignoring the GDR, the United States now concentrated on integrating West Germany into its military alliance, NATO, and into Western Europe's economic grouping, the European Economic Community (which would eventually become the European Union).

Tensions between the two superpowers over Berlin, the chief crisis point in their global confrontation, rose dramatically again

in 1958, when the new Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev renewed Moscow's effort to get the US out of Berlin. He issued an ultimatum in 1958 demanding an end to four-power status and the creation of a "free city" instead. The Soviet Union also pushed for international recognition of the GDR and sought to generate new approaches to the German Question. However, another four-power conference in Geneva a year later ended by preserving that status. This time the US had to take some small notice of the GDR, whose diplomats along with those of the Federal Republic, sat at small "kitty tables" (*Katzentische*) (rather than the big ones) in the conference room.

Berlin remained, however, the chief US-Soviet crisis point on into the 1960s. At the time of the Cuban missile crisis, in October 1962, President John F. Kennedy initially assumed that Khrushchev was deploying strategic missiles on the island as a way of trying to pressure the US out of Berlin.

Although the Soviet Union had stopped exacting reparations from its industrial plant, the GDR's economy was in an increasingly parlous state as the 1950s wore on. About 11,000-23,000 citizens were fleeing each month via Berlin to West Germany, whose booming economy offered jobs aplenty. Unable to afford the loss of the fleeing engineers, technicians, machine toolmakers, medical doctors, teachers, and skilled workers, East Germany's labor market faced collapse. Persuading Khrushchev, who was reluctant at first, Ulbricht ordered the Berlin Wall built on August 13, 1961, thus closing the exit route to the West. Without the Wall, the GDR's stricken economy would not have survived.

Again, American intelligence was caught by surprise. Again, the US did nothing. Again, it signaled its acceptance of the status quo, the division of Europe and Germany, and whatever measures the Soviet Union might undertake to shore up and keep the GDR and its other satellites under control. "Better a wall than a war," declared President Kennedy. It seems doubtful that Adenauer or indeed Berliners living in the Western sectors of the city would have wanted JFK actively to challenge Ulbricht's Wall.⁵ In any case, they welcomed and hailed him with cheers two years later when he paid his triumphal visit to Berlin on June 26, 1963 — certainly the high point of Cold War America's love affair with the city.

5 Fred Kempe, *Berlin 1961: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Most Dangerous Place on Earth* (New York, 2011), 491-506, is critical of Kennedy for failing to take action against the Wall and believes West Berliners wanted him to.

1963-74

Bogged down in a war in Vietnam during the 1960s and early 1970s, the US wanted peace and quiet in Europe. The GDR sought to assert its sovereignty and underscore its position that Berlin was its capital by periodically trying to interfere with the rail, road, and waterway access routes to the city from West Germany. American responses were to stress quadripartite responsibilities for Berlin, which in 1971 resulted in negotiations and finally a four-power agreement with the Soviet Union. The agreement more or less ended Berlin as a problem for Washington thereafter.

Moscow's control over its East German satellite seemed intact. It did not consult the GDR about the quadripartite negotiations. Earlier in 1971, it arranged for Erich Honecker to replace Ulbricht as SED chief. In 1961, Ulbricht had charged Honecker, who had been a KPD member since 1930 and begun his party career in the GDR as the founder and first head of the SED's youth organization in 1946, with organizing preparations to build the Wall.

The 1971 quadripartite agreement represented early fruit of the détente foreign policy of President Nixon's administration, which began in January 1969, to ameliorate Soviet-American tensions. At the same time, a similar détente effort was launched by the West German chancellor since September 1969, the Social Democrat Willy Brandt. His Eastern policy (*Ostpolitik*) produced treaties between the Federal Republic and the Soviet Union, Poland, and Czechoslovakia, as well as in 1972 a Basic Treaty with the GDR.

1974-90

Whereas, in the 1950s and 1960s, West Germany had insisted on its constitutional position that it was the sole state representing Germans in succession to the Third Reich (*Alleinvertretungsrecht*), Brandt's Basic Treaty with the GDR essentially acknowledged the state, whose citizens were also Germans. At that point, the United States could hardly withhold recognition any longer. Indeed, first informal discussions with East Germany about a US embassy took place at the time of the 1971 quadripartite agreement.

Still deferring sedulously to West Germany, where conservatives continued to object to Brandt's policies in the East, the United

States deliberately delayed opening its embassy until September 1974, almost a year after its allies Britain and France had opened theirs.⁶ In its diplomatic documents, it clung to formulae protecting its legal stance on the four-power status of Berlin, referring to its embassy, which was located just off the city's main street, Unter den Linden, as being its representation *to* the GDR, not *in* the GDR.

A few brief years after relations were established, they reached their zenith, but a low one. A consular treaty was signed in September 1979, although no US consulates were set up in any GDR cities outside Berlin. By that time, however, US-Soviet détente had deteriorated following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the failure of another round of US-Soviet negotiations on strategic nuclear weapons (SALT II), NATO's decision to deploy American intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Western Europe, and Soviet support for revolutionary regimes in Africa and the Near East. Reflecting this renewed tension, relations with the GDR likewise turned downward. President Jimmy Carter, who accorded human rights a high priority in his foreign policy agenda, came to Berlin in July 1978 and denounced the Wall.

During the 1970s and 1980s, as greater protection against openings to the West that resulted from Brandt's Ostpolitik became necessary, the Honecker regime strengthened its security ministry, the Ministerium für Staatssicherheit, labeled Stasi for short by East Germans, a term that has become as well known among historians in connection with Germany as Nazi. The Stasi was as highly efficient in surveilling and suppressing discontent at home as its espionage arm, the Hauptverwaltung A, or HV A, was in spying in the Federal Republic.⁷

During the 1980s, there was no progress on issues between the United States and the GDR. The US held firmly to its position that Berlin was not the GDR capital but under four-power administration, which prevented Chancellor Helmut Kohl in May 1988 from making an official visit to the GDR. This would have involved Honecker, who had paid a state visit to West Germany's capital Bonn in 1987, receiving him in East Berlin. (Kohl took a private trip to other East German cities instead.)

US-GDR issues included 2,000 claims by American citizens for such property as homes, savings accounts, or businesses confiscated or lost during the Nazi period, claims that were originally set at \$78

6 August 25, 2012, interview with Brandon Grove, chargé d'affaires of the US Embassy to the GDR from September-December 1974.

7 The HV A was a very effective spying outfit. See Benjamin Fischer's essay in this volume.

million, along with Jewish restitution claims set at \$100 million. The GDR's chief goal in its relations with the U.S. was to obtain from the American Congress most favored nation (MFN) status in the hope of increasing its trade with the United States. On both the property and Jewish claims, the GDR proved unwilling to make more than token offers (\$1 million on one occasion and \$5 million on another) and made those only informally. Its ideological position was that as an "anti-fascist state" it had no moral obligation toward Jews persecuted by the Nazis; whatever obligation it might have, Honecker and his colleagues angrily maintained, it had fulfilled by extirpating fascism and racism on East German soil. The GDR's leaders further argued that it had fulfilled its duties under the 1945 Potsdam Agreement among the United States, the United Kingdom, and the USSR by paying extensive reparations to the Soviet Union and Poland.

East Germany could hardly expect sympathy from the Jewish community in America. It never recognized Israel. Instead, it established relations with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and helped train PLO militants. Commemorative plaques in former Nazi concentration camps on East German territory where Jews had been murdered headlined the communist victims and focused very little attention upon the Jewish ones. Few Jews lived in the GDR, perhaps 6,000 or so, but only about 400, mostly in East Berlin, were registered as such.

Exploration by Washington about possible linkage of MFN prospects with settlement of the property and Jewish claims in a "package solution" went nowhere, even when Deputy Secretary of State John C. Whitehead tried to initiate serious negotiations on visits to East Berlin in 1987 and 1988. Not only anti-fascist ideology but also a desperate shortage of hard currency accounted for the GDR's reluctance to sign up to such a package.

No cultural agreement was ever signed either. Even though the West German government encouraged US-GDR cultural exchanges, the State Department made little effort to promote them in the 1980s. German culture — its art and its music — seemed potentially a selling point of the GDR to Americans. A magnificent exhibition of baroque art from East Germany, "The Splendor of Dresden," went on display in Washington's National Gallery in the spring of 1978, but most American viewers failed to associate it with the communist German state. Ironically, West Germany's embassy was inundated

with congratulatory messages about the exhibition from American art lovers.

Other than Whitehead's trips and a three-hour visit to Potsdam in December 1989 by Secretary of State James Baker, there were no top-level official exchanges between the US and the GDR. The first congressional delegation to visit did not arrive until 1983, nine years after diplomatic relations had begun. Honecker had a short conversation with President Gerald Ford at the Helsinki conference in 1975. After Honecker's state visit to Bonn in 1987, his Politburo colleague Hermann Axen came to Washington a year later in what proved to be a fruitless effort to wangle an invitation for Honecker. The only head of GDR government to come to Washington was the only non-communist one, the Christian Democrat Lothar de Maizière, who came in June 1990, by which time the SED had been voted out of power in East Germans' first free election, in March, and the GDR was on its deathbed.

Perhaps it may be said the only US-GDR intercourse at the highest level was — if the FBI was right in suspecting her of being a GDR spy — between President Kennedy and one of his several mistresses, the sexy 27-year-old East German Ellen Rometsch. The FBI and JFK's brother Bobby (also acting as the US Attorney General) eventually persuaded the Federal Republic's embassy in Washington to send Rometsch back to West Germany. (She was married to a non-commissioned officer in the West German air force.)

Incentives and Impediments

The GDR's objectives in its relations with the United States were simple: until 1974, it sought recognition as a state and full-fledged membership in the international order; thereafter, it aimed for the expansion of trade and, secondarily, for the approval of the American public. America's were even simpler: it wanted to avoid problems for its position in Berlin and observation of the large Soviet military force stationed in the GDR.

While the incentive for East Germany was enhancement of its international status, which dealings with the US superpower might bring, there were few incentives for the latter to better its relationship with the SED regime. Only about one hundred American citizens lived in East Germany. Little was to be gained for the U.S. economically. There was no American investment in the GDR's

nationalized economy, of course. Participation by American firms in the annual Leipzig Trade Fair was listless. Trade with the GDR accounted for less than a thousandth of total US trade, amounting to less than two-tenths of a percent of US trade with the Federal Republic.

Impediments to improving the US-GDR relationship, on the other hand, were many. Primary among them was the nature of the East German regime, which adhered firmly to and unceasingly propagandized its anti-fascist, communist (or socialist, as the SED regime called it), anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist ideology. For the SED, the United States was the “main enemy,” an “imperialist, capitalist aggressor.”

Communist ideology was vital to the GDR’s ability to distinguish itself from West Germany. It hardly dared deploy nationalist sentiment as it feared that doing so would promote reunification of the two Germanys, a policy to which the Federal Republic was constitutionally committed. This was a major weakness for the GDR compared to other Soviet satellites including Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. Communist regimes in those countries could, albeit carefully, call upon, traditional national feeling; in the case of the GDR, however, there was an alternative — right next door in fact.

In its very early years, the GDR’s appeal as a fully denazified and, accordingly, “better” German state than the Federal Republic, where ex-Nazis were in the cabinet, served to attract leftist writers and intellectuals who had emigrated to Western countries from Nazi Germany. Famous literati such as Bertolt Brecht and Anna Seghers took up residence in East Germany. But with the continuing flight of thousands of its citizens westward each month and the bloody suppression of the 1953 uprising, that “better” image soon faded away.

From 1953 until nearly the end of the GDR in 1989, there was little evidence of dissidence among the citizenry, on the one hand, or of liberalization and protection of human rights by the regime, on the other, as seemed to be developing in Soviet-dominated countries such as Poland or Czechoslovakia. US missile deployments in West Germany in the early 1980s gave birth to a peace movement close to the Protestant Church in the GDR, but no broad popular movement like Poland’s Solidarity ever appeared that might have attracted the sympathetic attention of Americans.

Except for the deposal of Ulbricht in 1971, the same SED leaders, for the most part, remained in place from 1945 until late 1989. Turnover at the top among these veteran communists was rare. The views of Honecker and Erich Mielke, Minister of State Security for over thirty-two years, and their colleagues had been formed while they were young KPD members before Hitler came to power. They clung to them fiercely after the war. For example, the father of Markus Wolf, who headed the HV A from 1952 to 1986, was a staunch KPD member beginning in 1928; Markus was schooled in Moscow.

Such East German leaders supported Soviet policies across the board, actively and fervently. The state's HV A delivered Moscow reams of intelligence on the Federal Republic and other Western countries and, along with the East German military, in the late 1970s and early 1980s assisted anti-American countries such as Nicaragua and Cuba and leftist regimes in Africa inclined toward Moscow, such as Ethiopia and Zimbabwe.

With such rigidly ideological leadership, it is not surprising that the GDR was the Soviet Union's most loyal satellite, with a fidelity that often bordered on subservience. Likewise, it was not surprising that the GDR-US relationship almost always reflected that between the Soviet Union and the United States.

Paranoia underlay the GDR's ideological rigidity. That paranoia in turn impeded its willingness to enter into agreements with the "main enemy," the United States.

The 1953 uprising continued to haunt the GDR leadership right down to the very end, even though the Stasi's effectiveness, among other things, prevented any repetition. East Germany felt under constant if latent threat from the neighboring Federal Republic, where the population, four times its own size, was free, democratic, and prosperous. East German radio listeners, television viewers, and the elderly, who in the 1980s were more frequently permitted Western visits, were well informed about these features of life in West Germany. Being on the Cold War frontline, the GDR worried too that it might be overrun were war to break out. From 1982 until the mid-1980s, it shared with the Soviet Union a fear that NATO might launch an offensive. President Ronald Reagan's early rhetoric about the "evil [Soviet] empire" and his increasing military buildup, including the stationing of American intermediate-range Pershing-2

and cruise missiles in West Germany, generated this war scare, during which the HV A stepped up espionage efforts in the West.

Another fear, never articulated, also prevailed: that the Soviet Union, which had in the early 1950s been ready to sacrifice the GDR to its greater interests, might do so again. Even before Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985 and increasingly thereafter, the Soviet Union turned to the German state which had so much more to offer economically, the Federal Republic. Along with Gorbachev's reformist domestic course, which he urged the GDR, to emulate, this behavior reinforced the habitual paranoia in East Berlin.

A great impediment to the betterment of relations was the image of the GDR in America. The flight of three and a half million citizens between 1945 and 1961, the erection of the Wall at the end of that period, and the hundreds killed thereafter trying to escape stigmatized East Germany as the "Wall State." Congressional delegations visiting in the 1980s inevitably brought up the Wall and other violations of human rights only to be rebuffed. As with its disadvantages compared to other Soviet satellites concerning nationalist sentiment, East Germany also suffered the absence of a sympathetic ethnic or national constituency in the United States, such as Polish Americans or Hungarian Americans. Such groups, out of a lingering love for their original homeland, supported favorable US government treatment of their countries, even though they were under communist rule. Except for a very few far left sympathizers such as "red diaper babies" of 1930s American communists or the communist activist Angela Davis, the GDR lacked such a constituency. Americans of German lineage, who in any case identified less with their *Heimat* than did Hungarian or Polish Americans, took pride in West not East Germany.

When President Reagan paid his visit to Berlin in June 1987, he called upon "Mr. Gorbachev [to] tear down this Wall" — not Mr. Honecker, the GDR's leader and the man whom Ulbricht had charged twenty-six years earlier with organizing its erection. Reagan's call was in keeping with American policy since 1949 of dealing with the Soviet Union on matters relating to Berlin and East Germany. Three years later, the GDR collapsed, with the Soviet Union withdrawing its support and relinquishing control — in effect selling out its most faithful ally — and the Federal Republic taking it over. Proof positive again that America had been right in dealing with the GDR on two tracks separate from it.

Robert Gerald Livingston is a Senior Visiting Research Fellow at the German Historical Institute in Washington, DC. He worked for two decades in the U.S. diplomatic service, once holding a position as deputy head and head of the Eastern Affairs section of the U.S. mission in Berlin from 1964 to 1968. In 1974, he became vice president and later president of the German Marshall Fund. In addition, “Gerry” Livingston was the founding director of the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies at the Johns Hopkins University, the leading think tank related to German-American issues. He has also worked as a columnist and political analyst for decades.