

20 years since the reunification of Germany: What was the GDR?

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The 20th anniversary of the reunification of Germany is not only a historical landmark, it also stands out in another respect. The two decades that have passed since 1990 represent half the life of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany). The GDR was founded on October 7, 1949. One month before the Berlin Wall fell on November 9, 1989 the GDR celebrated its 40th anniversary. One year later, it had disappeared from the political map. The Berlin Wall, erected in August 1961, stood only eight years longer than the period that has elapsed since its collapse.

In view of the considerable time that has passed since the GDR's demise, one could have expected that the anniversary of German reunification offered the chance to undertake a sober and objective assessment of what the GDR really was. However, nothing of the sort took place. The numerous anniversary speeches were characterised by the same ideological fervour that dominated in the period of the Cold War. Instead of receiving an answer to the question of "What was the GDR?" the public was served up hollow slogans and swear words.

The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) called upon the services of Helmut Kohl, who is wheelchair-bound and hardly able to speak, to remind an audience of party functionaries that the GDR was characterised by the "rule of injustice." Whoever claimed anything else had "learnt nothing, absolutely nothing." Ironically, the former chancellor spoke at a meeting celebrating the 20th anniversary of the CDU's merger with its East German counterpart, which, as a so-called bloc party, was an integral component of the Stalinist regime.

German President Christian Wulff, speaking at the official celebration in Bremen, praised the quest for liberty on the part of the people "who freed themselves from dictatorship without shedding blood." Chancellor Angela Merkel, in a contribution for *Bild am Sonntag*, while expressing her appreciation for the "lifetime achievements of former GDR citizens" insisted that this was something completely different from the "state structure of the GDR." US President Barack Obama in a message of greetings described

the "courage and convictions of the Germans who brought about the collapse of the Berlin Wall" as a contribution "to a joint vision of a united and free Europe."

If the political establishments in both Germany and the US are reluctant to seriously address the nature of the GDR, it is because this state had its origins in great historical crimes—the Second World War and the Holocaust.

Responsibility for these crimes rested not just with Hitler and his cronies, but with a broad layer of the economic and political elite in Germany: industrial magnates like Thyssen, Krupp and Quandt, who bankrolled Hitler and increased their own fortunes by means of forced labour; generals and officers who organised the war of destruction in the East; academics and jurists who worked out and implemented the race laws; and many more.

The role played by the capitalist elite in initiating war and genocide was so evident at the end of the war that the prevailing anti-capitalist sentiments even found their reflection in the postwar Ahlen programme of the CDU. This state of affairs was not only a source of concern for the governments in Washington and London, but also for the Stalinist rulers in Moscow. Stalin, whose power rested on a privileged bureaucratic caste and who had persecuted and murdered the leaders of the October Revolution, feared that a socialist mass movement in Europe would jeopardise his own rule.

Consequently, the US, the Soviet Union and Great Britain reached an agreement at the conferences held at Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam to divide up Germany and Europe into different spheres of influence. Stalin was assigned a buffer zone in Eastern Europe and in return he pledged to help in suppressing any anti-capitalist movement in Western Europe. This was to prove of decisive significance in countries like France and Italy, where the Moscow-oriented Communist Parties were in the leadership of armed resistance movements.

The fate of Germany—divided into four different occupation zones—was finally decided four years after the end of the war. In May 1949, the Federal Republic (West

Germany) was founded within the three zones controlled by the Western powers. The GDR was founded five months later in response. Although the CDU, led at the time by Konrad Adenauer, used the division of Germany for its own propaganda purposes, the party had deliberately decided in favour of the division in order to align itself economically and militarily with the Western powers.

As the Cold War intensified, the prosecution of former Nazi war criminals in the Federal Republic came to an abrupt halt. Convicted industrial magnates were released from prison, Nazi secret service and army officers were reemployed, and former members of Hitler's Nazi Party elevated to the highest political posts. Not a single Nazi jurist was held to account for his crimes. This made the GDR, which was more consistent in prosecuting Nazi war criminals, attractive for many workers, artists and intellectuals.

Under the growing pressure of the Cold War, the GDR regime also carried out major inroads into capitalist property relations. In 1945, the Soviet occupation authorities had already confiscated without compensation all land holdings exceeding 100 hectares, turning the land over to half a million farm workers, re-settlers and small farmers. This removed the material base of the Junkers, who had formed the bedrock of political and military reaction in the Wilhelmian Empire and the Weimar Republic. Following the founding of the GDR, capitalist enterprises were also nationalised.

Although the GDR Stalinist regime functioned as the extended arm of the Kremlin bureaucracy and suppressed the working class, it was compelled to implement a considerable number of social concessions. State-owned property became the basis for an extensive education, health and social system guaranteeing workers a high degree of social security.

In short, the GDR had a contradictory character, which cannot be captured by simple slogans such as "rule of injustice" or "dictatorship." It was not a socialist state, but neither was it a capitalist state. Socially owned property represented an advance, but its potential could only have been realised on the basis of workers' democracy and the spread of such social relations to other countries. As Trotsky and the Fourth International had insisted, this required a political revolution by the working class to overthrow the Stalinist regime and institute workers' democracy. In the final analysis, the contradictory character of the GDR was part of the unresolved contradictions of world capitalism, which had not been resolved, but merely covered up, by the postwar economic boom.

Since the reunification of Germany and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, these contradictions have erupted to the

surface ever more openly. Twenty years after unification, the Federal republic increasingly resembles the Germany of the 1920s and 1930s, while capitalism all over the world is in profound crisis.

Instead of the "flourishing landscapes" promised by Chancellor Helmut Kohl in 1990, poverty and unemployment are spreading in both eastern and western Germany. Some 6.7 million Germans are dependent on Hartz IV welfare payments, while another 5 million are employed in low-paid, precarious forms of work. The country's pension and health systems are being whittled away bit by bit.

Nationalism and racism are once again finding support in ruling circles. In his anniversary speech, President Wulff spoke out in favour of a "relaxed patriotism" and warned immigrants who refuse to accept "our way of life" that they must "reckon with decisive resistance." He also defended the profound social gulf that has opened up during the past 20 years, declaring, "Too much equality suffocates individual initiative and can only be achieved at the cost of losing freedom."

On the world stage, German imperialism is returning to its former arrogance. German troops are once again fighting and killing in Afghanistan and other parts of the world. The German finance ministry is dictating terms across Europe for drastic austerity measures and attacks on the working population.

If there is one central lesson to be drawn from the 20 years since the reunification of Germany, it is that none of the problems that made the Twentieth Century the most violent in human history have been resolved. Workers must prepare for class confrontations. They must learn to distinguish between Stalinism and socialism and understand the real nature of the GDR.

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