TITLE: Politics Unhinged: The Formation of the Communist Party of Germany and the Collapse of the German Democratic Republic

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NCSEER NOTE

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The revolutions of 1989-91, dramatic everywhere, achieved their most stunning contours in the German Democratic Republic. Though the breakdown of the East German regime came rapidly and unexpectedly, the origins of the collapse lay far deeper than the immense changes in the international order initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms. Ultimately, the collapse of the GDR stemmed from the long-standing popular hostility to the signature policies of the regime--strict central direction of the polity and economy and sharp demarcation from the "bourgeois" systems of the west, notably the Federal Republic of Germany. These policies, in turn, were not merely Soviet strains forcibly planted in German soil in the years after 1945. Rather, they were rooted also in the political strategy and culture that had enabled the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) to become in the 1920s the first mass-based communist party outside of the Soviet Union.

Among the major European communist parties that achieved mass status in the epoch of communism, only the KPD accomplished its popular breakthrough with a "classically" Marxist-Leninist strategy. Despite intense factional conflicts and frequent leadership changes, the KPD through most of the Weimar period promoted a view of revolution as a singular event in which the proletariat, acting under the leadership of the vanguard party, would destroy the existing state apparatus, seize the reins of power, and establish the dictatorship of the proletariat. The KPD's strategy thereby emphasized the voluntaristic element in the revolutionary transformation, the active and conscious participation of the party and its supporters in surmounting existing conditions, and the critical role of central state power in the construction of the new social order. The strategy entailed an utter
rejection of the view, common to social democrats generally and to communists in the popular front era, that an escalating wave of reforms could lead to the creation of socialism. Instead, the KPD promoted an unrelenting opposition to all the organs of bourgeois society and a highly masculinized conception of political violence as the means of social transformation.

This political strategy, so successful in building a mass movement in the Weimar Republic, is most often attributed to the ever deepening extent of Soviet and Comintern influence on the German party in the course of the 1920s, and it would be pointless to dispute this. But the political strategy with which the KPD became a popular movement and its successor, the Socialist Unity Party (SED), a ruling party had both ideological and social-historical origins, and their geographical fount lay in Germany as well as in Russia and the Soviet Union. Rosa Luxemburg provided much of the ideological orientation of the KPD through her unwavering hostility to the institutions of bourgeois society, commitment to class struggle as the means of political progress, and rhetoric of militant confrontation. In the course of the Weimar Republic, the KPD joined--joined, did not replace--these positions, common to Luxemburg and Lenin, with Lenin's emphasis on a disciplined party organization and a powerful central state. By the late 1920s, the Luxemburgist-Leninist hybrid was increasingly subject to Stalin's particularly authoritarian interpretation of Leninism, but major elements of Luxemburg's orientation, shorn of the democratic sensibility with which she endowed them, retained their vitality in the KPD and the SED. Far from being erased from historical memory in the KPD/SED or misappropriated in the service of party rule--the impressions left by the standard western German histories of the party--Luxemburg's legacy was mobilized in eminently recognizable ways even while aspects of her ideas were distorted.

But popular movements are not made by movement ideologues alone. The KPD was founded in the most revolutionary period in European history since 1848. It developed amid the intense, if sullen, political, economic, and social conflicts of the Weimar Republic. Alongside the ideological dimension, the KPD's politics and culture were forged amid the contestations over the shaping of the Republic, which ended only with the Republic's demise on 30 January 1933. The KPD was formed by the intersection between popular and specifically party activism, and by the largely successful efforts to contain left-wing efforts to
create a more radical republic or a proletarian dictatorship. Most critically, in the Weimar Republic leaders of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the trade unions, business, the state bureaucracy, and centrist and conservative parties forged a "coalition of order" whose policies resulted in the spatial transformation of labor politics in the Weimar Republic. The coalition, by marshalling the state's weapons of coercion, closed off by 1923 the option of armed revolution, while the deployment of rationalization measures in the mines and factories created high unemployment that drove the KPD from the workplace.

As a result, the streets served increasingly as the decisive place of political engagement for the KPD. There, the party marshalled its supporters in demonstrations and combative confrontations with the police, fascist organizations, and even the SPD and employed workers. As the place of political contestation, the streets carried a distinctive political logic. They helped forge a politics of display and spectacle, which encouraged ideological pronouncements and harsh physical engagements rather than the effective mediation of practical political issues. This kind of politics only accentuated the combative, masculine elements already inscribed into the party by its ideological orientation. They inclined the party to venerate still more intensely male physical prowess as the decisive revolutionary quality, a move that made nearly impossible the creation of political alliances with non-proletarian groups.

The construction of the mass party in the Weimar years on the basis of an intransigent strategy of revolutionary militancy--rather than on a strategy based on political alliances and legislative reforms, as was true of other communist parties at a later period--constituted the crucial, formative experience of the KPD, a legacy that would be cultivated and glorified and carried over into the vastly altered circumstances of the Third Reich, the Soviet occupation, and the formation and development of the German Democratic Republic. The careful cultivation of the militant legacy of the party drastically limited the KPD's and SED's openness to other political strategies and ideas. While other European communist parties, east and west, undertook major reform efforts, the Socialist Unity Party retained its affection for the hallmarks of communist politics and ideology of the interwar years, such as democratic centralism, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the demonization of bourgeois political systems.
While the KPD had been forged in the political and social history of both the Weimar Republic and the Soviet Union and in the Luxemburgist-Leninist ideological matrix, in the German Democratic Republic politics lost their grounding in the real life circumstances of society. Instead of a politics shaped and limited by societal influences, politics in the GDR became largely the means of making, or trying to make, society—politics became unhinged from society. The politics of the SED-state were, to a substantial degree, the ossified remains of the KPD's strategy and culture, the politics forged in the 1920s and early 1930s, recreated in the late 1940s, and then preserved in time.

Ultimately, however, ossified politics proved the undoing of the regime. Although the GDR's centrally-planned economy was partly successful in the 1960s and 1970s in improving living standards, it proved unable to deal with the more complex economic realities of the 1980s. At the same time, the slight easing of political repression that began in the late 1970s failed to defuse the long-simmering resentment against the stultifying political practices of the regime. When the reforms initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev offered new political possibilities, the East German citizenry grasped the opportunity to overthrow its regime and with it, the legacy of German communism as formed in the Weimar Republic and cultivated in the German Democratic Republic.

In opting for the foundation of the GDR and a state socialist system, the Soviets and their German allies abandoned the politics of gradualism and inscribed as the lodestar of communism the intransigent politics that had characterized the KPD in the Weimar Republic and that served as the solvent of German-Soviet collaboration. Without question, Soviet power functioned as the ultimate arbiter in East Germany, especially in the early years. Certainly, the GDR's location on the front-line of the Cold War and its constant competition with West Germany--over human resources as well as over the more ethereal but no less significant claims to history and nationhood--contributed greatly to the intransigence of the SED and to the system's relative imperviousness to reform.

But the policies of the SED-state had historical roots that reached far back to the Weimar Republic and even beyond to the formation of the labor movement and to the specific contours of Germany's political and social economy in the modern era. The East German state took to Stalinism with alacrity, in some instances going further than its Soviet
mentor. Its tendency gründlicher zu sein [to be more Catholic than the pope, in colloquial English], as Germans are wont to say about the character of the GDR (and many other matters as well), is not known to be a genetically inherited trait; it has to be explained historically. The significant issues, for Germany as well as for the other areas of Soviet-dominated Europe, involve delineating how Soviet power interacted with the individual parties and with the social and historical realities that the Soviets found in central and eastern Europe. Few, if any, forms of power are simply imposed out of whole cloth. When scholars like Hermann Weber explain the historical development of the GDR as resulting from the particulars of the dual-state competition and the "imposition of forms of rulership and society, namely Stalinism, that arose out of the backwardness of Russia," they are not wrong. But they fail utterly to account for the rootedness of German communism in its own social-historical setting; they move German communism—as party, movement, and state—out of the course of twentieth-century German-history, only to find its way back—the prodigal son returning—in 1989/90.

For the SED, the construction of state socialism involved not only the absorption of the language and practices of "high Stalinism," but also a reversion to the strategy and culture of communist politics in the Weimar era. Absolutely essential to the SED's politics after 1947 was the clear and conscious reassertion of the legacy of the KPD. This was, to be sure, a carefully constructed reassertion—the "invention of tradition." Luxemburg’s democratic sensibilities were silenced or condemned. Dissident communists were written out of historical memory, their living embodiments, from Anton Ackermann to Robert Havemann, purged from leading positions. But the intransigent policies of the SED state resonated with the lived experience of many German communists who had come of age in the Weimar Republic, and who then helped recreate the culture of the KPD in the altered circumstances of the post-World War II world. The politics of the SED-state endured for so long—without the alterations and reforms and challenges experienced in Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and even Rumania—precisely because they were not merely imposed from outside after World War II, but could draw upon the history of the party as a mass movement in the Weimar Republic. Moreover, many features of German communism reprised essential elements not just of the communist past. The central role accorded the
state in the construction of society is central to the entire course of German history in the modern era, and is a position that the KPD/SED shared with many other German political movements.\(^2\)

Hence, in the GDR the party brought to fruition the KPD’s elevation of central state power as the agent of socialist construction. The remaining political parties were transformed into subservient "Blockparteien." The secret police apparatus became highly developed, the extent of its reach only evident since 1989. The state, of course, retained command of the economy until the bitter end. Indeed, the construction of a centralized state over society was far more thorough in the GDR than elsewhere in central and eastern Europe. The Polish leadership resigned itself to private agriculture. Hungary after 1956 slowly introduced market incentives and a range of private-property measures. Czechoslovakia, of course, experienced its own reform process generated from within the party. The GDR experienced none of these deviations from the Soviet model. It remained firm in its commitments to the pre-Gorbachev Soviet Union and to centralist direction of the economy and polity. In fact, the final nationalizations were carried out in the mid-1970s, a feat of "real existing socialism" that had, by that point, presumably abolished all need for private property.

The language used in the "construction of socialism" recalled the discursive formation of the KPD in the Weimar Republic, with its evocations of the battlefield and the military dimension of the class struggle. "Storm the fortress of science" proclaimed the FDJ at its 1950 conference, signalling changes in higher education policies.\(^3\) "For us art and literature are weapons for socialism," trumpeted Kurt Hager, Sekretär für Wissenschaft, Hochschulen und Volksbildung, in 1957.\(^4\) When the party talked about the U.S. and its intentions to "enslave" German youth, or the plans of the American and English monopoly capitalists to enslave Germany,\(^5\) it revived the language with which communists discussed the German bourgeoisie and the western imperialist powers in the 1920s. Similarly, the calls for "proletarian vigilance" or "class vigilance," the attacks on the SPD and Schumacher in particular as a spy and saboteur\(^6\)--all of that differed in degree perhaps but not in kind from the attacks Rosa Luxemburg levelled against the SPD in 1918/19 and her calls for the proletariat to act "with all the brutality necessary" against the class enemy.
Even on gender issues the social policies of the GDR harkened back, if in ironic form, to the KPD of the Weimar period. Economic necessity led the SED to create a society with the highest formal female labor participation rate in the world. By the 1970s, this was accompanied by a well-developed system of social support, including state-run daycare centers, generous maternity leaves, and pronatalist policies that offered larger allowances to families with a greater number of children. The social benefits were considerable; they also demonstrated the long-standing German propensity to look to the central state for social solutions, whether it be the welfare states of Weimar or the GDR. These social programs echoed the claims upon the state raised by the KPD (and other parties) in the Weimar period. Still more significantly, the SED rationalized high labor participation rates by invoking the standard Marxian and Marxist-Leninist arguments that women’s emancipation would proceed in tandem with their participation in the productive sphere. As such, women’s paid employment in the GDR was seen as a sign of progress towards socialism—"socialism in the colors of the GDR," as the slogan went beginning in the 1970s—despite the labor market segmentation that consigned women to lower-paid, less responsible positions.

In cultivating its past, in honoring the tradition of the KPD of the Weimar Republic, the SED drastically limited its own ability to undertake new departures. It created its own iron cage built out of the discursive formation and political strategy and culture of communism in the Weimar era. Significantly, the SED leadership remained the most intact of any in Soviet-dominated Europe and had the longest cohesive historical experience, one that stretched back to the Comintern and the KPD of the 1920s and early 1930s. While other Soviet bloc states undertook serious efforts to modify the model of strict central direction of the polity and economy, the GDR’s history was marked by fitful efforts at reform and quick retrenchments. The party proved incapable of innovations on the order of the Czech, Hungarian, and even Rumanian parties precisely because its efforts to construct legitimacy were built upon a commitment to state domination, the leading role of the party, and a discursive formation centered on the language of militant, intransient struggle—all essential features of the KPD of the Weimar Republic.
Hence, the origins of regime breakdown in East Germany lay deep in the past, a factor often ignored in recent commentary on the revolutionary transformations in central and eastern Europe. Even historians observing the breaching of the Berlin Wall and the rapid moves toward unification have limited their analyses to reflections on such factors as the structural economic crisis that—as is now clear—developed in the GDR since the late 1970s, the stagnation of the SED leadership, the emergence of civil society and citizens' politics, the activities of the West German parties and state, and the impact of Gorbachev’s domestic and international reforms. It would be pointless to dispute the importance of these more or less immediate factors in the rapid breakdown of the GDR, or to question the realities of Soviet domination. Yet even the best of recent work has suffered from a narrowly truncated historical vision and an overly materialistic explanation for the collapse. The issues relating to the collapse of communism in Germany are far deeper and more complex than the fact that the GDR (and the other socialist economies) remained wedded to an economic system of central planning and "heavy metal" (in Charles Maier’s phrase) that could no longer manage increasingly sophisticated and interconnected economies or satisfy consumer wants.

Ultimately, the collapse of the GDR stemmed from the long-standing popular hostility to the signature policies of the regime—strict central direction of the polity and economy and sharp demarcation from the west. The politics that drove these policies were forged in the political and social history of both the Weimar Republic and the Soviet Union and in the Luxemburgist-Leninist ideological matrix. In the German Democratic Republic, however, politics lost their grounding in the real life circumstances of society. Instead of a politics shaped and limited by societal influences, politics in the GDR became largely the means of making, or trying to make, society--politics became unhinged from society. The politics of the SED-state were, to a substantial degree, the ossified remains of the KPD’s strategy and culture, the politics forged in the 1920s and early 1930s, recreated in the late 1940s, and then preserved in time.

The breaching of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent political developments closed the books on many accounts: the GDR citizenry’s claims against the regime under which it lived; some of the territorial divisions that resulted from World War II; the lingering, if only titular, claims of the four powers over German sovereignty. But these events also closed the
books on the last, direct political legacy of the Weimar Republic—the formation of a mass-based communist party committed to continual confrontation with the institutions of bourgeois society and to a political project at whose core lay the construction of a central state with massive powers of direction.
Endnotes


7. Marilyn Rueschemeyer remarks in passing that the policies of high female labor participation "were also flavored at least by ideologies of the Weimar period." See "East German Women in Transition," Program on Central and Eastern Europe Working Paper Series #12, (Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies, Harvard University, 1991), p. 3.

8. See especially Meuschel, *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft in der DDR*.

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