

The Fall of the GDR Germany's Road to Unity

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In *The Fall of the GDR*, David Childs discusses the collapse of the GDR up to unification. He begins by discussing the leadership structure of the GDR, and notes in particular the relative longevity and the geriatric age structure of the *Politbureau* in the 1980s. This is complemented by a discussion of the administrative structure of the state, its mass organizations, and the potential for opposition in the mid-1980s.

If the first chapter has set the scene for the impending collapse of the GDR, the second chapter presents an overview over the history of the GDR. The author emphasizes in particular the structural deficits that burdened the state. These deficits were compounded by the economic policies of the communist regime. As a result, the GDR was forced, in 1983 and 1984, to accept massive loans to keep the whole state afloat. This section then lists other elements in the state's 'Flawed Development': its inadequate housing stock, and the lack of a separate GDR identity and the failure to develop one in the face of the glamorous and evidently more consumerist Federal Republic. These factors can be taken as reasons why, according to studies conducted by the Central Institute for Research on Youth, by May 1988 only 28 per cent of young people asked identified themselves as proud citizens of the GDR. Those who were left identifying with the state were primarily those bound together by a 'community of fate' (p. 34), those who had descended from Weimar Communists, and those whose loyalty earned them good jobs.

The third chapter discusses the Stasi, its historical evolution and its position in the machinery of the state. Interestingly, Child goes into detail here, through individual cases such as Klaus Gysi (former Minister of Culture and Secretary of Church Affairs and father of a current Senator of the State of Berlin), and through

the cases of victims like Robert Havemann and Wolfgang Biermann. The author then goes on to note the extraordinary lengths to which the Stasi went, to create an intelligence network that had made plans for every eventuality. This is quite proper, because many accounts of that period tend to pass over the real danger faced by the protestors in the late summer of 1989.

The following chapter engages with the transformation of the external context in which GDR leaders operated. It begins by discussing the advent of Gorbachev as party leader in the Soviet Union, moves on to discuss the political transformations that led to the destruction of the fence between Hungary and Austria, and finally charts the events in Poland. It is perhaps a little odd that to this are added accounts of the revolutions in Prague and Romania, which are then followed by the revolt of Tianamen Square in China. Prague and Budapest came after the fall of the Berlin Wall, while their impact on the dissolution of the GDR is debatable. If these events are considered for a general overview of what happened in Eastern Europe, then adding Tianamen Square at the end of this is bizarre. These are minor question marks that simply highlight a bigger problem of the book, which is that its structure is not always clear.

The following chapter contains a chronological account of the events of 1989 leading up to the celebrations of the fortieth anniversary of the GDR. It notes the growing rumblings of protest in the early months of 1989 leading up to the electoral fraud committed at the local elections of 1989. It rightly emphasizes the astonishing inability of the GDR's gerontocracy to respond to the growing discontent in its fixation to celebrate the country's fortieth anniversary. This is essentially a narrative chapter, but no less important for that. Timing was everything in a drama that included the exit of East Germans via Hungary and Prague, the fortieth anniversary celebrations and the demonstrations leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Following a very brief chapter on the nascence of the New Forum and other opposition groups, the next chapter looks in considerable detail (given the length of the book) at the GDR under the leadership of Egon Krenz. Krenz and Modrow came between the fall of Honecker and the first democratic elections in March 1990. Consequently, many narratives relegate them to the sidelines. For this reason, the re-evaluation of the role of Krenz is important. At the same time, Childs makes clear that, by this point, events had developed their own dynamic and were pretty much beyond central party control. The 4 November demonstration in East Berlin, which attracted up to one million people, and the en masse resignation of the Politbureau on 8 November indicate the impotence of the ruling authorities.

This is followed by a consideration of the international events surrounding the fall of the Berlin Wall, and demonstrates quite clearly the genuine surprise of the leading politicians in Paris, London and the Soviet Union. It also highlights the dramatic levels of political improvisation performed, as leaders who could not see unification as a realistic prospect had reversed their opinions within months.

The next chapter examines the period of the Modrow government, its negotiations with the evolving political groups in the GDR, and the run-up to the GDR's first free elections in March 1990. It also charts the growing dismantling of the barriers between East and West Germany, especially in Berlin. The next chapter discusses the March 1990 elections in greater detail. It considers the programmes of the individual parties, and looks at why the Alliance for Germany, which largely consisted of the CDU, turned out to be so successful.

The final chapter takes the reader from March 1990 to the realization of German unity on 3 October 1990. There is some welcome detail here about nature and composition of the first and last freely elected People's Chamber of the GDR, but otherwise there is a fast-paced account of the domestic German and international negotiations that surrounded unification.

Before evaluating the book, it is worth considering its ambition. It is clearly not a monograph, but it is not a straightforward textbook either. The write-up at the back summarises the book's character well: 'It greatly benefits from the author's decades of involvement with East Germany, including personal friendships there, and his eye-witness account of many of the events during 1989'. Any doubts about this are dispelled in the preface, in which Childs ponders his own experience in the GDR, the events leading up to his 'highly

successful' book, *The GDR: Moscow's German Ally* (George Allen and Unwin; London, 1983), and his accurate predictions during the 1980s that the end of the GDR was not far off (pp. xii-xiii). In other words, the author is never very far from the story he tells. This is the book's strength, but it is also at the root of its weaknesses.

Among the strengths are some of the idiosyncrasies that one would not have expected in a book of this kind. On a number of occasions, there is clearly an urge to tell it 'as it really was'. This makes the book readable, it varies the pace of the narrative, and it will benefit readers who know very little about the GDR. The rather long passage about the ossification of the leadership, for instance, or the detail Childs provides about how a vote was actually cast in the GDR before 1990, is the kind of detail which is often lost in other books of this kind. In other words, the reader gets a very different 'feel' for the GDR here, compared to other books of this length. As mentioned earlier, it is also interesting to have a relatively substantial section on the leadership of Krenz and Modrow, including an assessment of their personal leadership styles.

At times, the urge to give the reader an impression of what it was like in the GDR may go a little far. The events leading up to the fall of the Wall in 1989 are introduced by a long passage in which Childs muses about what the workers must have thought in January 1989 on their way to work. As they took the 'S-Bahn' to work, they 'probably' day-dreamed about their summer vacations, and whether they would be lucky enough to go to Romania that summer (p. 64). The passage goes on in this style, and emphasises both how remote the events of November 1989 were from a perspective of early 1989, and it re-emphasises the fact that workers could not go to Greece or Spain.

Whether such conjecture belongs into a history book is a matter of opinion. It can be explained, of course, by the nature of the book as a personal-cum-historical reflection. At times, however, this goes too far. When the Brandenburg Gate was formally opened on 22 December 1989, Childs noted that the East German border guards were 'dazed by the dream-like quality of the event. The more thoughtful of them must have realised that their days were numbered.' (p. 110) This is not merely conjecture, it is also misleading. The role of the border guards was subject to intense internal discussion when Hungary opened its border. Its future was cast in doubt, privately and openly, from 9 November at the latest. The whole point of the border guards, whose mission had been to protect the inviolability of the GDR border, was undermined at precisely the moment when the border between the two Germanies had become porous.

The imaginary anecdotal style may break up the narrative, but it is problematic as such. When discussing the resignations of the old guard from the *Volkskammer* (parliament), Childs concludes: 'The remaining leaders must have asked themselves, "Where will it all end? Will I be on the next list of those to be expelled and arrested?"' This is the kind of sentence one dreads finding in undergraduate essays, but with authors using this style it is increasingly difficult to blame the students for this.

There are a number of evaluations here that are striking. Krenz gets a rather positive write-up (pp. 47-8, 73, 89). Although he has been burdened by his hard-line reputation, and was limited by his own lack of vision, he should, as the author concludes, be given credit for the peaceful transitions that took place under his brief reign (p. 90). This is an interesting argument, but it is at this point that it becomes difficult for the reader to distinguish between the account of Childs the historian and Childs the involved spectator. In this case, it is not clear whether this evaluation is based on the author's own favourable personal impressions of his conversations with Krenz, or whether this is based on hard evidence.

Hans Momper, the mayor of West Berlin, also gets a good write-up in these pages. Once again, this is surprising. Momper famously missed the public mood when he welcomed the East Germans to West Berlin as the 'people (*Volk*) of the GDR'. Despite being the mayor of unification in Berlin, Momper actually managed to lose the 1990 state elections: quite an achievement, especially given the addition of a naturally left-leaning voting public to the franchise. Once again, therefore, it is not quite clear where this positive assessment of Momper is coming from (p. 89).

A final sphere where the personal might have taken over unduly is the importance accorded to meetings and

statements made by visitors to Nottingham University (pp. 92, 148, 149). Visits by Margaret Thatcher or the GDR ambassador there were undoubtedly important events, but it is not clear that they belong to a brief account of the fall of the GDR. They do underline the author's first-hand involvement with his subject matter, however, so that once again it is difficult to decide whether these are strengths or weaknesses of the book.

There is a final comment to be made about the overall argument of this book. There is none. There is no overarching thesis, no engagement with particular historiographical debates. It starts with the military band goose-stepping its way past the GDR leaders on 7 October 1988 (p. 1), and ends with the elections of late 1990 (this is discounting a final paragraph on 'United Germany in 2000'). The author clearly has not intended to place this book into a historiographical context. Once again, if this is in part a personal account, this was arguably not necessary. This book, then, makes a contribution to our knowledge of the GDR because of the author's own experience, and not by the way in which he seeks to refine existing historiographical debates. The book will appeal particularly to those who do not have any first-hand knowledge of the GDR, and who are less interested in the historical debates surrounding it.

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