The Triumph of Reason: Inter-German Cooperation in the 1980s

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THE TRIUMPH OF REASON: ROOTS OF INTER-GERMAN COOPERATION IN THE 1980s

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors in History from the College of William and Mary in Virginia,

By

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Introduction: The Importance of 1987

Erich Honecker’s visit to West Germany lasted just five days, from September 7, 1987 to September 11, but it was the crowning moment of fifteen years of work on the part of both governments. More than Helmut Schmidt’s 1981 visit to the German Democratic Republic, Honecker’s visit was intensely symbolic: the East German flag fluttered in Bonn, both states’ anthems were played, and Honecker, with full diplomatic entourage in tow, was greeted in almost the same manner as any other visiting head of state. Honecker and Kohl appeared at joint conferences, participated in “working sessions” together, and, for all appearances, conducted a normal diplomatic visit.

The visit accomplished little tangible change in the diplomatic relations between the two states. In a joint communiqué on September 8, 1987, the two leaders agreed to “make a special effort on behalf of a peaceful coexistence in Europe” and “develop normal neighborly relations with each other on the basis of equality.” They pledged advancements in areas where the two states had recently made progress, such as in family visits, and worked to increase inter-German trade, calling it “the most important stabilizing element in overall relations.” The trip made very little difference, however, in the major issues affecting the day. Nor, in many cases, was it expected to. The West German public had limited confidence in the ability of the Honecker-Besuch to effect any real change in the status quo between the two states: before the visit, a poll found that less than one-fifth believed Honecker’s trip “would seriously promote political unity.” Few

expected relations to improve dramatically, and few expected any significant changes in the policies of the GDR or the FRG as a result of the visit. That ultimate goal for some Germans, unification, was almost completely unthinkable by the 1980s. Despite frequent public proclamations by Kohl and other CDU leaders that “der nationale Auftrag bleibt gültig und erfüllbar: … in freier Selbstbestimmung die Einheit und Freiheit Deutschlands zu vollenden,” most, likely including the Chancellor himself, believed that unification was highly unlikely. A poll taken in the same year as Honecker’s visit found only three percent of West Germans “expected to see it in the foreseeable future,” with seventy-two percent calling it “unlikely.” Expectations for tangible results during Honecker’s visit were thus quite low, and the trip itself produced little in the way of breakthrough diplomacy.

What, then, to make of it? The press was largely uncommitted on the meaning of the trip. The New York Times called the legacy of the visit a “puzzle.” The Economist mused that “Honecker hardly conquered the crowds,” Die Zeit questioned whether it was an “Ende oder Anfang,” and Der Spiegel admitted that “die Gründe für Honeckers

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Zurückhaltung kennt niemand genau. The two governments, as could be expected, took different angles on the trip. For the East Germans, it was a confirmation of their long-sought goal of political sovereignty. On September 15, the East German Politburo was briefed on the visit in glowing terms. The Politburo heard that Honecker’s visit demonstrated to “the whole world the independence and equal status of the two German states and underscored their sovereignty.” This in itself was reason enough for the trip and was the culmination of Honecker’s long career in East German politics. Since the postwar division of Germany, the GDR had sought diplomatic recognition from the FRG and the wider West. It had long felt maligned by West German policies designed to make it a sort of ‘German Taiwan,’ diplomatically and economically isolated from the rest of the world. When Honecker came to power in 1971, policies such as the Hallstein Doctrine, under which West Germany would recognize no state that gave diplomatic recognition to the East, were the basic fact of German-German relations. Sixteen years later, as leader of the East German state, he stood in front of the West German Chancellery on what was, for all practical purposes, a state visit to Bonn. This must be seen as an enormous personal and political victory for the General Secretary. His foreign minister met with his FRG counterpart, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, lending credence to Honecker’s argument that the GDR was a sovereign state. And indeed, at the time of the visit, this was seen to be the case. While Honecker publicly pronounced that with time, the German-German border could become similar in nature to the German-Polish border, the Politburo heard that his trip was “a powerful blow to all revanchist and ‘intra-German’ efforts.” They took satisfaction in the FRG’s seeming acceptance of the GDR’s

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sovereignty, especially given the current government’s conservative bent. In trade, the trip “strengthen[ed] the GDR as an equal partner in its relations with capitalist industrial countries." For Kohl, the visit was to be cast in a different light. “The visit by Mr. Honecker did not change the state of affairs in Germany,” argued West German Minister of the Interior Wolfgang Schäuble in a November 1987 speech at London’s Chatham House. “We are not abandoning the goal enshrined in our constitution…that the entire German people are called upon to achieve…the unity and freedom of Germany.” Far from putting “a seal on the division of Germany,” Schäuble argued, the visit was merely “a meeting between Germans.” Even as Kohl acknowledged the separateness of the GDR, the CDU was unwilling to make the final concessions toward East Germany, still insisting that it was not a separate nation. On Honecker’s first day in Bonn, Kohl told him that “die Bundesrepublik hält fest an der Einheit der Nation…daß alle Deutschen in gemeinsamer Freiheit zueinander finden können.” In his memoirs, Helmut Kohl wrote that the purpose of Honecker’s visit was specifically to push “das innerdeutsche Tor noch weiter öffnen.” At the same time, the importance of the visit was not lost on Kohl. Of the decision to officially extend to Honecker the invitation to visit the FRG, he wrote:

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12 Helmut Kohl, Ich Wollte Deutschlands Einheit (Berlin: Ullstein Buchverlage, 1996), 31. Translation (mine): “the inner-German door even further open.”
“Das war wohl bis zum Jahre 1989 die wichtigste innerdeutsche Entscheidung, die ich persönlich gesträubt hat,” he wrote. To Kohl, the visit, through its mass media coverage in the GDR, was also a way to directly engage the East German people and provided “die Möglichkeit...sich direct an die siebzehn Millionen Landsleute in der DDR zu wenden.” Most importantly for Kohl, the exchange showcased what he saw as the unbreakable unity of the German people. Honecker’s poignant visit to his Saarland hometown, and particularly his reunion with his sister, encapsulated the devastating effects of division and bolstered Kohl’s argument for increased visits, if not an eventual, theoretical reunification.

Finally, should the visit should not be seen in the context of a political or personal relationship between Honecker and Kohl. Honecker made no secret of his preference for the policies of the SPD over those of Kohl’s CDU; the East German Politburo was told that his visit “reinforced the process of differentiation within the government coalition” as well as “positively influenced support for the policies of the SPD.” Honecker met with regional leaders of the SPD in the hopes that “sein Besuch...der SPD helfen wird.” Likewise, Kohl continued to emphasize the demands he had made of the GDR since becoming chancellor, such as liberalization of East German restrictions on media and visitation, and economic and political reform. In addition, he continued to apply pressure

13 Ibid., Translation (mine): “That was probably the most important inner-German decision that I had personally struggled with until 1989.”
14 Ibid., Translation (mine): “the opportunity...to address the seventeen million compatriots of the GDR directly.”
15 Herbst 788-94
on Honecker’s regime after the visit and played an important role in his eventual
downfall, telling Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1989 that “we now understand
Moscow far better and feel much closer to it than Berlin” and that Honecker “show[ed] no interest” in Soviet policies. In 2006, Der Spiegel referred to Kohl’s 1988 visit to
Moscow as “the beginning of the end for Honecker.”

What was most remarkable about the visit was not, then, what occurred while Erich
Honecker was on West German soil, but rather the events that led up to the visit. As the
German and international press noted, the visit was a milestone in postwar history, one
that would not have been possible in previous years. Indeed, a Honecker visit in 1984
had been cancelled by Moscow, angry over NATO missile deployments in the Federal
Republic and what it saw as East Berlin’s overly friendly approach to the West Germans.
In terms of divided Germany’s long-term history, the visit was even more remarkable.
Until 1971, when Ulbricht was forced to resign his post as SED General Secretary, the
GDR “opposed the Soviet urging for better relations with the Federal Republic.” The
FRG, for its part, clung to the Hallstein Doctrine until the election of Brandt in 1969
brought the changes of Ostpolitik. During the 1950s and 1960s, Adenauer and other
West German politicians referred to the GDR simply as “the Zone,” as if it were some
forgotten or condemned part of Germany proper. Now, the East German flag flew over
Bonn as a Federal Chancellor stood at attention for the GDR’s national anthem. It would
have been unthinkable fifteen years earlier. But beginning with the signing of the Basic


17 Christian Neef, “Diary of a Collapsing Superpower,” Der Spiegel, November 22, 2006,
http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,449326,00.html (accessed November
1, 2009).
18 Willy Brandt, My Life in Politics (Berlin: Verlag Ullstein, 1992), 216.
19 Brandt 219
Treaty (1972) and leading up to 1987, a transformation had occurred in intra-German relations that allowed the Honecker-Besuch to become reality. The improved ties survived the fall of Schmidt’s Ostpolitik-supporting SPD government in 1982; in fact, relations continued to improve under the CDU/CSU-FDP coalition. During the 1980s, inter-German ties continued to develop despite an escalation in hostility between the United States and the Soviet Union. While the Brezhnev government of 1971 urged East Berlin to develop closer ties with the West, the international climate had turned against such ties by the mid-1980s as the détente of the 1970s gave way to an increasingly warm Cold War. By 1984, both Chernenko and Reagan expressed concern over their respective German allies’ newfound sense of cooperation.

What this indicates, then, is that the two Germanies were able to develop something of an independent course from their respective superpowers. This must be qualified; both states were secondary members of opposing military alliances whose decisions were almost entirely controlled by the dominant powers, the United States and Soviet Union. It would be farcical to suggest that the FRG and especially the GDR had a great deal of freedom to chart their own political course; their very existence as states was intertwined with the superpowers that had created them in the 1940s. Yet the actions of Honecker and Kohl suggest that the development of their “Coalition of Reason” did herald an increase in the ability of the two Germanies to plot their own course, ending, of course, in the dramatic collapse of the East German state in 1989 and ultimately unification, despite the reservations of Gorbachev, Thatcher, and Mitterrand. Their coalition was not one of close friendship but rather of mutual respect and a shared knowledge of the implications of a failure to work together. In many ways, Kohl and Honecker’s relationship mirrored
the paths their countries would take. Though they were born less than one hundred 
kilometers apart in southwestern Germany, they were from completely opposite ends of 
the political spectrum. Honecker was a lifelong communist, the son of Saarland 
coalminers. He had cut his teeth as a KPD partisan during the Weimar years and spent 
World War II in prison for it. Prior to becoming head of the SED, Honecker had 
overseen construction of the Berlin Wall, the symbol of the East German oppression that 
Kohl so vehemently denounced. Meanwhile, Kohl represented a party that was anathema 
to Honecker; his CDU was seen by many in the GDR leadership and was often portrayed 
in official propaganda as the heir to National Socialism. And yet these two men, like the 
countries they represented, realized that the benefits of limited cooperation outweighed 
those of escalating tensions. Thus, Germany emerged as an exception to the increasingly 
heated Cold War in the 1980s. Honecker firmly believed and openly remarked “that 
deteriorating relations between the World Powers need not necessarily affect the 
relationship between the two German states.” He spoke of a “German way,” 
differentiated from the policies of the superpowers by its emphasis on détente and peace. 
The German situation was unique in mid-1980s East-West relations. This was the result 
of many individual factors that aligned to create an environment in which an inter-
German détente could flourish.

Chief among these, and the most readily apparent, was the fact that East and West 
Germany were artificial constructions made from the ruins of a single state. No other 
country in Europe shared the unique situation occupied by the two Germanies. While 
members of opposing military and political alliances, they were nevertheless, as Kohl

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20 Brandt 433
liked to point out, carved out of a single nation and retained many of the ties that had bound them as a *Volk*. East and West Germany shared the same language, a similar history and a shared political identity from 1871-1945, and, increasingly in the 1980s, the same icons²¹. No other two countries straddled the divide between East and West in the way that the FRG and the GDR did, and no other two countries could have. Furthermore, as artificial constructions, the two Germanies were unusually bound to their respective superpowers, especially in the early postwar years but continuing to unification. Technically, West Germany was still occupied by France, Great Britain, and the United States until 1990. Neither state’s history, or reason for existence, was completely grounded; East Germany’s *raison d’etre* was a tenuous mix of socialist internationalism and peace activism, while the West saw itself as the continuation of the Weimar Republic that was interrupted by Nazism, and moreover the only true representation of Germany.

Yet both states had a flexible basis on which to pursue a change in relations—they were able to change the definitions of what constituted the state rather effectively from opposition to the “other” Germany to a more balanced coexistence. Finally, as inheritors of the debt of 1945, both East and West Germany felt a historical obligation to promote peace and détente in Europe. The official proclamations of both states were littered with

²¹ While East German political construction had for most of its history rejected pre-1949 non-Communist German figures as antithetical to the state, the 1980s saw a gradual reversal of this policy. East Germany moved to embrace, in a limited way, the “German” part of German socialism. While the state continued to denounce those historical figures it saw as advocating views that ran contrary to state ideology, it also began commemorating those seen as ‘proto-Communist’—figures like Luther, who had stood up to the dominant power of the day. Additionally, the GDR made a noticeable shift toward commemorating German history. A famous example of this would be the state’s treatment of Frederick the Great, whose statue was returned to Unter den Linden in the early 1980s. These changes provoked debate not only in East Germany, but also in the West, where some sought to deny East Germany the heritage of what were seen as essentially “Western” historical figures.
utterances that war should “never again” emanate from Germany. In the East, where ‘peace’ was part of the official state dogma, this theme was even more important, but the West also had a sizeable, and by the 1980s growing, movement that demanded a more pacifist worldview, beginning with rapprochement with the GDR. This pacifist movement in West German body politic and in the official chambers of East German power became more pronounced in 1983 and 1984, when NATO and the USSR announced the placement of nuclear weapons in West and East Germany, respectively. The international political climate of détente had ended with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the election of Ronald Reagan to the American presidency in 1980. Across Europe, a conservative realignment threatened to raise Cold War tensions. After the Soviet Union announced it would place medium-range SS-20 missiles in East Germany, NATO announced it would likewise place medium-range Pershing missiles on West German soil, prompting an outcry from an increasingly pacifist West German public. The ultimate fate of Germany, should a nuclear war occur, was not lost on Honecker or Kohl. It was politically expedient in Kohl’s case to oppose an international situation that might see the missiles used, but more importantly, it was necessary to the survival of Germany and its people. The German public and its government realized that nuclear war would result in the annihilation of German civilization. This concern was shared in the East and led the two leaders to seek improved ties.

A third reason for the improved relations was the increasing reliance of the East German economy on West German loans. The East German economy, like the rest of the Soviet bloc, experienced economic stagnation in the 1980s and soon fell into financial turmoil. Beginning in 1983, when Bavarian Premier Franz Josef Strauß arranged for one
billion Deutschmarks in credits for the GDR, East Berlin became dependent on Western aid to stay afloat. Continual Western loans, and the prices demanded by Bonn for its financial support, deepened the ties between the two Germanies. For East Germany, it was a matter of necessity: the state could not afford to pay its workers, maintain its high level of defense spending, operate its extensive social services, and continue to provide the consumer goods that its citizens expected without West German credits. For the West, the GDR’s woes presented what Bonn saw as a unique opportunity to inspire reform in its neighbor. By demanding that Honecker liberalize travel restrictions, promote youth exchanges, and release political dissidents, the West German leadership believed that it could leverage the East’s economic problems into steps toward its inner-German policy goals. One such goal, increasing exit visa numbers for East Germans who wished to settle permanently in the West, saw marked improvement during this period; around 40,000 East Germans were allowed to emigrate to the West following the 1984 credit extension22. Additionally, Bonn sought direct contact through expansion of visitation permits to the West. As Kohl noted in his memoirs,


23 Helmut Kohl, *Ich Wollte Deutschlands Einheit* (Berlin: Ullstein Buchverlage, 1996), 30. Translation (mine): “Franz Josef Strauß therefore procured in 1983 the million credits for the GDR, and the Federal Government took up the guarantee. Our reasoning went: since the beginning of the 1980s, only around ten thousand [GDR] pensioners per year visited the FRG. We could by 1986 show our side of Germany to more than half a million people, on top of the pensioners. The number kept growing.”
By 1987, the year of Honecker’s visit, more than five million East Germans were able to visit the Federal Republic; more than one million were youths. “Das bedeutete, daß Millionen Deutsche aus der DDR die Bundesrepublik aus eigener Anschauung, aus eigener Erfahrung kennenlernten,” Kohl wrote. The practical effect of these visitations was that East and West Germany became less “foreign” to each other, though they of course remained two extremely different states.

Despite these differences, Honecker and Kohl were able to construct a meaningful, distinct détente in the middle of an increase in international hostility. While it is easy to overestimate the ability of either leader to chart their own course within the confines of their alliance—Honecker, after all, eventually fell when he crossed too many lines with the Soviets—the accomplishments of the two governments and their leaders should not be ignored. The Honecker-Besuch was a seminal moment in postwar German history and could have never occurred without the changes that began in 1972 and continued up until the sudden collapse of East Germany in 1989-90. In 1987, no credible observer in West Germany believed that reunification was just around the corner. Instead, both governments sought practical achievements that would improve the lives of their citizens. Their ability to do this in the face of rather stiff resistance from their external alliances was remarkable.

24 Ibid. Translation (mine): “That meant that millions of Germans could become familiar with the Federal Republic, our ideas, and our way of life.”
Chapter One: Pershings, SS-20s, and the Peace Movements

On December 12, 1979, NATO foreign and defense ministers announced the placement of 108 Pershing II and 464 ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs) in Western Europe. The move came in response to the Soviet deployment of the SS-20 across the Warsaw Pact and increased anxiety over the growth of the Soviet Union’s nuclear arsenal. The United States’ arsenal was the largest in the world during the early postwar period, but by the late 1970s, the Soviet Union had surpassed the US in the size of its nuclear stockpile. In what became known as the “Dual-Track Decision,” NATO members agreed to modernize Western Europe’s missile arsenal while simultaneously supporting the removal of “one thousand US nuclear warheads…as soon as feasible.” In addition, the NATO ministers agreed that they would not deploy the new missiles if the Soviet Union agreed to remove their SS-20s from the Eastern bloc. The agreement would replace the Pershing I missiles currently deployed in Western Europe and also emphasized a transition to shorter-range missiles. Despite NATO’s “dual-track” approach, the announcement that all 108 Pershing IIs would be placed on West German soil prompted a major outcry in German society. On November 22, 1983, deployment of the Pershings began after Chancellor Kohl’s government agreed to allow it, prompting major protests again.

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2 Ibid.
3 The term “dual-track” came from the parallel aims of the policy: modernizing and expanding NATO’s missile stocks in Western Europe while simultaneously making the offer to eliminate stocks if the Soviets would reciprocate.
Why did the Pershing IIs come up against such strong resistance in West Germany? The Federal Republic had hosted missiles for years without provoking the reaction caused by the dual-track decision. It was, rather, the nature of the Pershings that upset German peace activists. The medium-range Pershings and SS-20s were designed to be operable in a shoot-on-warning scenario. Since the missiles had such a short distance between their launch site and ultimate destination, they narrowed the window of opportunity to call off a planned nuclear strike. Whereas the amount of time between an ICBM launch and impact could be measured in minutes, leaving time for a last-minute call to Moscow or Washington, the amount of time in which a Pershing or SS-20 launch would hit its target would be measured in the tens of seconds. Once launched, it would be all but impossible to call off an attack. As a result, the peace movement viewed the medium-range missiles as destabilizing and potentially damaging. Furthermore, given their limited range, both the Pershings and SS-20s were aimed at missile defense systems, troop concentrations, economic targets, and transit systems on opposing sides of the Iron Curtain; while Germans could conceivably think a conflagration between the United States and Soviet Union might send ICBMs over their heads while sparing Germany, medium-range missiles would undoubtedly bring nuclear destruction to central Europe. In fact, the opposite seemed to be the case: the superpowers could now engage in a proxy nuclear war, with Germany as the main battleground. Mutually-assured destruction was no longer a given. “We ourselves felt endangered by the SS-20s,” admitted former Chancellor Willy Brandt, no strong supporter of the dual-track decision, in his memoirs⁴.

⁴ Brandt 328
The pushback from the West German public was intense. Anti-missile activists published the so-called “Krefeld Appeal” in 1980, urging the FRG’s government to reject NATO’s missile deployment. Among other things, the Appeal sought to prevent Germany from becoming a “nuklearen Waffenplattform der USA.” It directly criticized what Krefeld’s authors saw as American disregard for the fate of Europe:

“Ein selbstmörderischer Rüstungswettlauf könnte nicht im letzten Augenblick gestoppt werden; seine zunehmende Beschleunigung und offenbar konkreter werdende Vorstellungen von der scheinbaren Begrenzbarkeit eines Nuklearkrieges müßten in erster Linie die europäischen Völker einem untragbaren Risiko aussetzen.”

Krefeld began as the appeal of a rather academic elite but soon moved into a general protest of the West German public. Some 2.7 million West Germans signed it, and in 1983, former Chancellor Willy Brandt led a Bonn rally of 300,000 Germans in support of Krefeld. The opposition to the missiles plagued West German politicians, especially the center-left SPD, which was torn between its antimissile left and its more security-oriented center, although unease over the missiles was broad-based across the ideological spectrum of the West German public. Helmut Schmidt faced challenges to his government’s missile policy twice in 1980. The most serious was the Bielefeld Appeal of December 9, 1980, in which some 150 SPD officials asked Schmidt’s government to

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6 Ibid. Translation (Allison Brown, GHI): “A suicidal arms race could not be stopped at the last moment; the increasing acceleration [of the arms race] and the ever firmer belief that a nuclear war could be limited would subject the European peoples, first and foremost, to an intolerable risk.”
reject the dual-track decision and the placement of neutron bombs in Germany\(^8\). Echoing the Krefeld Appeal, members of Schmidt’s own party openly criticized his government, calling the 1979 missile resolution “\(\text{eine verhängnisvolle Fehlentscheidung}^9\)” and saying that Schmidt’s actions had allowed “\(\text{unsere Zukunft einer amerikanischen Entscheidung ausliefern, die beinhaltet, daß ein auf Europa begrenzter Atomkrieg führbar ist}^{10}\)” The SPD officials criticized Schmidt’s government, arguing that the SPD was “\(\text{in den Sog der Politik eines Ronald Reagan gerät}^{11}\)” The Bielefeld Appeal and Krefeld Appeal were manifestations of the strong political unease that existed in the Social Democratic Party and among members of the West German public in general. Ultimately, Schmidt would be unable to survive the tensions caused by the dual track decision and the FRG’s economic climate. In 1982, a revolt by the SPD’s left over missile deployment paralyzed his government; Schmidt’s coalition subsequently fell apart as the FDP defected and joined Kohl’s CDU/CSU-led coalition. The electoral split in the SPD’s ranks and public anger over the dual-track decision also created an opening for the Greens, who entered the Bundestag for the first time in 1983 after winning 5.6% of the West German vote.

Beyond its electoral implications, the peace movement had a profound effect on West German policymaking and political culture. The German public had experienced sizeable mobilization against the interests of NATO and the US-led alliance. Frustration

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\(^10\) Ibid. Translation (Allison Brown, GHI): “We would be putting our future at the mercy of an American decision that says that it is possible to wage a limited nuclear war in Europe.”  
\(^11\) Ibid. Translation (mine): “caught in the political suction of a Ronald Reagan.”
over the government’s dithering led to mass rallies, the largest since 1945. “The strongest reservations [to the NATO plan] were found outside the political parties,” wrote Willy Brandt in his memoirs. In the end, wrote Foreign Minister Genscher, West Germany “had to accept the decision that the Pershing IIs…were deployed only in West Germany,” but both the government and many of its people worried about the implications; specifically that “once again, as West and East drifted apart, Germany would be hit the hardest.”

The missile debate, then, took place in a heated environment in which the stakes seemed to be the future of German civilization itself. The issues being debated directly affected the Germans in a very profound way given Germany’s central position in divided Europe, and the rhetoric of Krefeld and Bielefeld reflected that. The missile debate prompted levels of unrest in Germany that had not been seen since the Weimar era. Yet even as this heated debate raged, it also created an opening for détente between East and West. Perhaps most importantly, the missile debate raised questions in the minds of many Germans as to the efficacy of their alliance system. When Reagan carelessly discussed with Le Figaro the possibility of the US and Soviet Union surviving a limited nuclear war in Europe, Germans took note. During the 1970s and 1980s the number of Germans who saw peaceful cooperation between East and West as possible increased, while consistent majorities supported the somewhat vague concept of détente. At the height of the missile crisis, nearly half of Germans saw Ronald Reagan

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12 Brandt 320  
14 While the Soviet Union remained unpopular in polls, especially after the invasion of Afghanistan, Germans were less likely to connect the USSR’s policies to East Germany
as “too hard” in his political decisions; only 27% said he was “good for Germany”.15

While the US’s poll numbers among Germans would eventually recover, the damage to
West Germany’s relationship had been done. As a result, even as the superpowers pulled
apart, German support for détente remained strong.

Naturally, East German leaders initially welcomed the dissent in the West. Their
homegrown peace movements had yet to take off, and Moscow and East Berlin
welcomed the dissent that the missile decision sowed within NATO. “The peace
movement is used by Moscow whether the movement wants it or not,” one Swedish
official quipped in 1983.16 East Germany, however, had more to lose from a nascent
peace movement due to its monopolization of political expression surrounding ‘peace’
and its own image. Since its foundation, East Germany had presented its rationale for
existence as peace-oriented, among other ideological commitments. Due to the state’s
official emphasis on its peace credentials, East Germany could not tolerate an
independent peace movement. The rise of the East German peace movement could thus
be considered the beginning of the end for the East German state. It was the first
persistent, mass challenge to the state’s authority to rise up in the Honecker years, and
proved to be impossible for the state to destroy. What Honecker and Gromyko had likely
promoted in the West quickly became a stumbling block in the East, as opposition to the
Warsaw Pact’s own missiles began to take hold in East Germany. The Eastern

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15 Merkl 64. It should be noted that Jimmy Carter, who was criticized by both Genscher
and Brandt as an ineffective leader, fared even worse; only 24% thought him “good for
Germany’ (Ibid.)
movement tended to oppose both NATO’s dual-track decision and the deployment of Warsaw Pact missiles. As expelled peace activist Roland Jahn said, “Ich kenne niemanden in der DDR, der für den NATO-Raketenbeschluß ist, denn wenn ein Gewehr auf dich gerichtet ist, dann wirst du nicht dafür sein, daß es auf dich gerichtet ist. Und die Pershing II sind auf uns in der DDR gerichtet.” While the West German movement tended to focus on West German decisions, the Eastern movement was more universal, reflecting the political realities of the state. West Germans could agitate for mass policy changes, but the Eastern dissidents had much dimmer prospects. Their efforts were more often than not met by harsh reprisals and monitoring by the police and Stasi, and their activities were decidedly unwelcome amongst any portion of the political elite.

The elites had reason to worry; the peace movement formed the nucleus of a new dissident core challenging the political establishment. “As the peace movement in the GDR grew, it began asking hard questions about the situation at home,” challenging the government not only on its militarism but also on its human rights and economic record. “Es steht nicht mehr nur die Frage nach Abrüstung da, sondern die nach demokratischen Freiheiten, nach Menschenrechten,” Jahl told Die Tageszeitung. The state was forced to crack down on these activists in the same way that it was forced to crack down on all non-official political agitation because they necessarily presented a threat to the government’s authority in the matter. “Much of the unrest was apolitical, but

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17 Traude Ratsch, “Interview with Roland Jahn: ‘Ich persönlich bin kein Pazifist,’” Tageszeitung, July 21, 1983, 9. Translation (mine): “I know no one in the GDR who is for the NATO dual-track decision, because when a weapon is aimed at you, you’re not for it being such. And the Pershing II is aimed at us in the GDR.”
19 Ratsch 10. Translation (Allison Brown, GHI): “You’re no longer concerned just with disarmament, but also with democratic freedoms, with human rights.”
any challenge to the status quo was implicitly a challenge to the ruling party.\textsuperscript{20} Moreover, the challenge presented by the peace movements was especially dangerous for East Germany because it was made in the very language of the state. By opposing the government from the basis of its own stated policies, the East German peace movement undermined the basis of SED government. East German concerns over the movement’s strength led them to monitor its leaders carefully and expel many of them, which helped to create links between the Eastern and Western movements. As one expelled leader of the GDR’s nascent peace movement told \textit{Die Tageszeitung} in 1983:

"Da sehen wir eben die Widersprüche zwischen dem Militarismus im gesellschaftlichen Leben und dem offiziell bekundeten Friedenswille. Die staatlichen Stellen begreifen das so, daß sich aus dieser Bewegung dann was entwickeln könnte, was die ganzen gesellschaftlichen Strukturen infrage stellt.\textsuperscript{21}

The East German population, despite living under a totalitarian state, had ample access to West German media and ideas by the 1980s, and consciousness of the nuclear question permeated society. What made the East German peace movement so virulent, then, was its subversive nature, and the GDR’s security apparatus worked tirelessly to crush it. Nevertheless, despite the state’s harsh crackdown on activists, the movement persisted and gained considerable tacit, if not outright, support among the East German people. Part of the reason for this was that it operated primarily out of the churches, a feature repeated by the agitation of 1989. The Lutheran presence in East Germany had been given freer reign than most other independent organizations, and the authorities were

\textsuperscript{20} Curry 2
\textsuperscript{21} Ratsch 9. Translation (Allison Brown, GHI): “There we see the contradiction between the militarism in social life and the officially pronounced desire for peace. The state authorities think that this movement could produce something that calls the entire social structure into question.”
reluctant to arrest or disrupt the churches’ activities. As a result, they became the loci for dissent. It is no coincidence that many of the leaders of the peace movement—Eppelmann, Führer, Wonneberger—were pastors. Some of the first mass peace events in East Germany were prayer meetings at their Leipzig churches\textsuperscript{22}. Officials frowned upon the churches—attendance could cost an East German their job or could lead to blacklisting\textsuperscript{23}. But the peace prayers persisted, eventually mixing in with other groups of dissidents and, crucially, East Germans attempting to leave the GDR. The peace movement’s sometime uneasy embrace of would-be emigrants—many saw them as traitors to the cause of reform, while their neighbors often saw them as traitors to the country\textsuperscript{24}—helped turn “peace” into a mass movement for reform.

In 1982, a young Berlin pastor named Reiner Eppelmann published what became known as the Berlin Appeal, calling for the demilitarization of East and West Germany and an end to the arms race that had taken hold in the 1980s. Eppelmann argued from a distinctly religious perspective—he quoted the Sermon on the Mount and asked “sollten wir nicht lieber den Hungernden in aller Welt helfen, statt fortzufahren, unseren Tod vorzubereiten\textsuperscript{25}”—but his appeal quickly gained mass circulation in the GDR. In the West, this appeal would have been contentious enough—witness the reaction to the Krefeld and Bielefeld Appeals—but in the GDR it was even more so. The pastor did not

\textsuperscript{22} The direct result of this would be Leipzig’s transformation into a center of unrest in the GDR. While the drama of 1989 is primarily associated with Berlin, it was Leipzigers’ actions that were critical in punching the initial holes in the Berlin Wall.
\textsuperscript{23} Curry 2
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
explicitly call for the type of political reforms that the GDR could not tolerate, but did openly criticize the state. In a 1982 interview with *The Foreign Times*’ Frank Lipsius, he remarked, "I believe that the government is sincere in its profession of peace, but like the United States or West Germany… what they do does not always promote peace." Eppelmann was under intense scrutiny from the Stasi, which even proposed killing him in a staged car accident, but was allowed to continue more or less unbothered, with the exception of a few short jailings. “Eppelmann disclaim[ed] any revolutionary intentions other than helping his nation abide by its avowed commitment to peace,” but his movement helped spark what would become the revolutionary peace movement.

This forced Erich Honecker and the East German government into a difficult position. On one side, Berlin was pressed against a Soviet Union insistent on expanding the scope of nuclear missiles in East Germany and across the Eastern bloc. By the time of the dual-track decision, East Germany was peppered with Soviet missile installations and hosted a vast arsenal of Soviet weapons and troops, not to mention East Germany’s considerable own military forces. Despite its pacifist rhetoric, the GDR, like the FRG, was armed to the teeth. Furthermore, Honecker was in a weak position to challenge the Soviet leadership. He had taken power after the failure of his predecessor, Walter Ulbricht, to consistently heed Moscow’s line and was seen as an intensely loyal, friendly ally in the Kremlin. The missile crisis presented a unique problem, though: as public perception of the risk of nuclear war grew, so did public unease over the disparity in the

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27 Curry 1
28 Lipsius 1
GDR’s stated purpose and its militaristic reality. While Honecker did not wish to anger the Soviet leadership, he was increasingly put against the wall by a peace movement his government somehow could not stamp down and by the reality of what a nuclear war would mean for Germany. For years, the Politburo’s rhetoric and the official releases of the state continued to announce their commitment to peace while simultaneously hosting close to one million Soviet troops and thousands of nuclear missiles. Suddenly, Honecker faced pressure from the peace movement to back up the state’s rhetoric with action.

Moreover, the deteriorating international climate in Europe frightened the SED leadership. The reality of what a nuclear war would mean for Germany, especially now that medium-range missiles were stationed on German soil, coupled with the missiles’ effects at reducing the perception of mutually-assured destruction (the superpowers could conceivably now fight a proxy nuclear war), forced the SED to reevaluate its policies. On November 25, 1983, shortly after the Soviet Union forced Honecker to place SS20s and cruise missiles in the GDR, Honecker told the Central Committee of the SED that the placing of additional missiles would be an “ernsthafter Schaden” to European peace and for the FRG-GDR treaty system. While he acknowledged the need for a response to the NATO deployments, Honecker also stated that the missile deployment was “no great cause for jubilation in our country.” Moscow’s directive, three days later, that West Germany should essentially pay for its decision to host NATO weapons through

\[\text{Translation (mine): “serious detriment.”}\]

\[\text{Gerald Segal, } \textit{Openness and Foreign Policy Reform in Communist States}, (London: Routledge Press, 1992), 193.\]
worsened relations with East Germany—in essence, forcing the East to bear the brunt of the practical consequences of Moscow’s anger over NATO’s decision—did little to allay Honecker’s fears of a new freeze in European relations\textsuperscript{31}. His allegiance to Moscow began to waver, as he increasingly felt isolated by the Kremlin. In the months following the missile deployment, GDR leadership would draft a unique security plan for the country\textsuperscript{32}.

In both East and West, the direct implications of the peace movement were more limited than their romantic aspirations. While hundreds of thousands of people protested in Bonn, their actions failed to produce a radical change in the Federal Republic’s policy. The pressure splintered the center-left SPD and helped to implode the government of Helmut Schmidt, but the the conservative CDU/CSU won nearly fifty percent of the popular vote and seats in the Bundestag in the 1983 elections, despite the widespread opposition to Pershings. The newly-elected Kohl government quickly approved the missiles, which were deployed in West Germany beginning in 1983. In the East, results were even more limited. For much of the 1980s, the peace movement was an isolated, contained movement, the province of a few disaffected pastors and citizens. It was not until later in the 1980s that it gained the prominence that led toward 1989, and despite the Berlin Appeal and other documents, the movement failed to gain much tangible support from an East German public too afraid or politically removed to take part. By the mid-1980s, the peace meetings in Leipzig churches were attended by fewer than ten people—“they could hardly have been called a movement, much less a threat\textsuperscript{33}.”

\textsuperscript{31}“Überblick 1983”
\textsuperscript{32}Segal 193
\textsuperscript{33}Curry 1
Yet despite its limited impact in delivering immediate political change, the peace movement helped pave the way for the closer German cooperation of 1982-1987. It proved that large portions of the population, if not outright sizeable majorities, supported détente even in the face of growing tension between the rival superpowers. The movements raised consciousness of the threat of nuclear war both in German society and in the governments of the respective states and transformed pacifism into a relevant political issue. Governments could no longer ignore the discontent and worry that the increasingly potent missile system provoked. While a conservative government in the West meant that missiles would now be a reality, many of the CDU’s voters expressed concern that the gains of Ostpolitik not be forsaken by the Kohl administration. In the East, the growing movement led the SED leadership to become more concerned with announcing its peaceful intentions and forced it to reevaluate its commitment to the goal of disarmament and cooperation. Additionally, the movement in the West saturated the media of the FRG, which was widely available in the East by the 1980s. Although contraband, East German authorities could not, and did not have the appetite to, stop the free flow of Western ideas through the television sets and radios of the German Democratic Republic. The Eastern peace movement, despite being completely cut off from the West, thus benefitted immensely from its counterparts in the Federal Republic. Without the media attention their actions generated, it would likely have been impossible for the movement to gain footing. Many of the famous agitations of the East, such as the Berlin Appeal, first spread through the Western media, helping to fan the Eastern peace movement when it was on life support. Additionally, the presence of a strong peace movement in the West allowed the Eastern movements to deny that they were acting in
collusion with a foreign plot to undermine the state. Finally, the peace movements created a shared bond in the two Germanies. The national unity that Kohl was so fond of talking about was ironically expressed in a peace movement with which he had little connection. East Germany’s habit of expelling its most troubling activists created an opportunity for cooperation between the Western and Eastern movements, and the Western media was only too happy to assist this process. Mass media had made the border too porous to simply expel its dissidents because their voices were paradoxically much louder on the other side of the border. The peace movement was impossible to eradicate and would prove decisive in the ultimate fate of East Germany.
Chapter Two: The Coalition of Reason

The peace movements of the 1980s and the extraordinary pressure they came to apply on the governments of the two Germanies were remarkable on their own accord. They would not, however, have been enough to force a continued and increased détente between East and West Germany if the leaders of the two states were fundamentally opposed to such a progression in their relations. The peace movement in the West, while powerful, had failed to prevent the implementation of new missiles on German soil. In the East, the peace movement was constrained by the nature of East German state repression; it occupied an officially unsanctioned position in GDR society and was thus forced to operate on the margins. Leaders and activists were the subjects of intense state scrutiny and faced social and political pressure that kept all but the most dedicated from being seriously active in the movement until the upheaval of 1989. While the movement was certainly powerful, it seemed, at least in 1982, to be approaching a brick wall in the form of two opposing governments in Bonn and Berlin. Yet this barrier never materialized. To the contrary, Kohl and Honecker were able to overcome their differences based on a shared understanding of Germany’s need for progress on inter-state relations.

In 1982, the FDP abandoned Helmut Schmidt’s SDP/FDP coalition, ending his eight-year government and thirteen years of SPD rule. Their defection allowed Helmut Kohl’s CDU/FDP coalition to assume power; Kohl promptly called a snap election. Despite the SPD’s attempt to make the double-track decision and international peace the most important issue of the election, Kohl’s CDU/CSU won the party’s largest share—48.7%, plus 6.9% for the FDP—since Adenauer’s 1957 electoral victory. The SPD
slumped to 38.2%, their worst result since 1961\(^1\). The new government’s policies were the subject of public and private speculation: the last CDU politician to rule Germany had been Kurt Kiesinger (1966-69), who had established diplomatic ties with Romania and Yugoslavia but had also reaffirmed the Federal Republic’s commitment to the Hallstein Doctrine. In Helmut Kohl, Germans had elected a man far removed from Kiesinger, but one who had also pledged to move away from the policies of Brandt and Schmidt. Franz Josef Strauß, leader of the CSU, criticized Brandt’s détente-oriented policies as “wrong-headed” and “destroying all sense of values.” Missiles, he argued, would be used for “responsible pacifism;” an insurance against the Soviet “war against the freedom of Europeans\(^2\).” Strauß’ speech took a hard line against the USSR, arguing that the West had never initiated conflict.

For its part, the SED reacted to the news of Kohl’s election with reservation. The Party’s newspaper, *Neues Deutschland*, ran a single sentence on its front page about Honecker’s telegram to Kohl congratulating him on becoming FRG Chancellor. Nevertheless, external observers noted that the GDR’s leadership could not help but be displeased with the result. “The sparseness of official editorializing has not obscured the SED’s major reservations about the new ruling coalition and the consequences that the change in government might have for relations between the two German states,” noted Radio Free Europe’s Ronald Asmus on October 10, 1982, six days after Kohl was voted

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\(^1\) Psephos, psephos.adam-carr.net (accessed January 17, 2010).

into office. The East Germans feared that a return to CDU rule would mark the end of the productive period of inter-German relations that had existed from 1969-82. Specifically, they were “oversensitive on the question of recognition” and feared that the GDR “might again be treated like a second-class state.” The East Germans’ unease was somewhat allayed by the continued presence of Genscher as Foreign Minister, but nevertheless feared the uncertainty of a new government.

Kohl’s opening address to the Bundestag on October 13, 1982 focused mostly on economic issues. Of the four points of Kohl’s Dringlichkeitsprogramm, only the fourth dealt with East Germany: “Wir wollen die Grundlagen der deutschen Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik erneuern.” He did, however, reaffirm his support for NATO’s dual-track decision, which predictably angered the East. The reaction from Neues Deutschland and leaders of the East German state was swift. Honecker himself blasted what he termed Kohl’s “dangerous dreams” of a united Germany, while Paul Verner, CC Secretary for Security Affairs, told the CDU-Ost conference in Dresden that progress in inter-German relations would be in effect contingent on the FRG’s rejection of the

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4 Ibid.
5 Translation (mine): “urgent program.”
6 Kohl’s third point called for the humane treatment of foreigners and refugees, but throughout the Cold War Übersiedler, or those moving into the FRG from the GDR, were entitled to immediate German citizenship and a wide array of social services. They would not have been considered foreigners or refugees by Kohl.
missiles. Western observers tended to view the Eastern response as puzzling; in the West, Kohl’s speech “was largely interpreted as a confirmation of the broad contours of West German foreign policy…heralding…no major departures in direction.” The East Germans, however, clearly had limited expectations for Ostpolitik’s ability to survive a CDU government.

October 1982, then, appeared to signal an end to the thaw of 1969-82. The cards seemed stacked against continued rapprochement in every way. The ascension of the CDU into power meant that a party whose views were anathema to the East now governed West Germany. While official East German propaganda considered all of the Western Volksparteien bourgeois, decadent remnants of the Third Reich, the SPD had at least represented a center-left perspective, one the SED could more easily work with. The CDU, on the other hand, was a party whose leaders had once been portrayed in official GDR media as standing on the pedestal of Hitler. For the CDU, the SED represented the continued oppression of the “other half” of Germany. Despite Kohl and the CDU’s policy change during the late 1970s and early 1980s—they now openly supported the Basic Treaty and other major foreign policy landmarks of the early to mid 1970s, and had dropped the untenable Hallstein Doctrine—they still insisted on the overall unity of the German people. Furthermore, the leaders themselves were personally very opposed to their counterparts’ programs. Neither Kohl nor Honecker was prepared to make significant concessions to the other in order to promote some sense of German unity.

9 Ibid.
Yet these differences did not lead to a cooling of German-German relations. On the contrary, German relations improved during the 1980s to the point that Kohl was forced to fend off accusations of impending neutrality in NATO. Stemming from a mutual desire to see Germany chart a different course in the rapidly heating Cold War of the mid-1980s, Kohl and Honecker were able to overcome their differences to make genuine progress in several areas of East-West German relations. The policy developments of the mid-1980s were specific in nature, relating to cultural and family exchanges and financial support for the East German regime. But beyond this, the two leaders engaged in personal conversation over the period of Kohl’s chancellorship, leading up to the events of 1989. Although realistic, the two leaders nevertheless affirmed privately what they proclaimed publicly—that they were indeed committed to a special relationship between the two German states so that war might “never again emanate” from Germany. While these public statements affirmed general values, Kohl and Honecker’s conversations indicate a deeper understanding of the significance of their respective positions in securing not only German but also wider peace. On January 24, 1983, shortly after Kohl took office, the two leaders spoke by telephone on a wide range of issues. The call lasted nearly thirty minutes; the two leaders spoke about serious issues facing their two countries’ relations, as well as made small talk about the unseasonably warm weather. Immediately after the beginning of the conversation, Kohl stated:

“Wir beide in besonderem Maße auch erantwortung für die Sicherung des Friedens in Europa tragen. Und es ist unser Wunsch, auch unter diesen

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Zielsetzungen die Möglichkeiten aus dem Grundlagenvertrag weiterzuentwickeln. 11.

Kohl’s opening statement immediately set a tone of cooperation and echoed his call for the two states to “renew the foundations” their foreign policy, made in front of the Bundestag two months earlier 12. He framed the relationship with Honecker in terms of Germany’s responsibility to sustain peace, not only for its own people, but for Europe and the wider world. Honecker echoed his call, saying, “ich [bin] im gleichen Maße der Auffassung 13.” Kohl was somewhat less forceful in his stated opinions; speaking mostly in generalities at the outset. He quickly stated a desire for “das Verhältnis zwischen den beiden deutschen Staaten vernünftig und wenn möglich gut zu gestalten” and expressed his excitement over the possibility of speaking 14. Honecker, while agreeing with these statements in principle, bent less, saying that any improvement would need to be made within the existing treaty system 15. Honecker refused to budge on one issue in particular:

11 Ibid. Translation (mine): “We both, in special ways, carry the responsibility for the security of peace in Europe. And it is also our wish to perhaps further develop the Basic Treaty under these goals.”
12 Helmut Kohl, “Koalition der Mitte: Für eine Politik der Erneuerung.”
the question of GDR sovereignty. The development of improved relations, in his view, was only possible “wenn von beiden Seiten beachtet wird, daß es sich hier um Beziehungen von zwei souveränen Staaten handelt.” Surprisingly, Kohl did not object; while he did not explicitly say anything in agreement with Honecker’s desire, he also did not attack it, offering instead a simple “yes.” When Honecker raised the issue again, Kohl again failed to challenge the East German leader, even when the GDR Secretary stated that “ein solches Deutschland gibt es ja gar nicht” in response to Kohl’s “both states in Germany” rhetoric. This was one of the most explosive issues in FRG-GDR relations, one with which Kohl had publicly disagreed and one which Honecker had spent the greater portion of his political career attempting to overcome. While it could be said that Kohl was willing to treat relations with the GDR as he would with any sovereign state, but not prepared to actually admit to such a deal, his failure to reject Honecker’s statement should be seen as a fundamental change in the construction of East-West relations. Kohl did not completely bow to Honecker’s demands; the East German leader expressed his irritation at Kohl’s referral to “both states in Germany” in the January 23, 1983 telephone conversation, but Kohl continued to use the phrase in an October, 1983 letter. Nevertheless, Kohl’s failure to challenge Honecker’s rhetoric in their conversation indicates that he had conceded the basic nature of two German states’ independent sovereignty. Whether or not Kohl had privately accepted Honecker’s claim, of relations between the GDR and the FRG in the established treaty system.”

16 Ibid. Translation (mine): “From my view, the development of relations between the GDR and FRG is possible if both sides are paid attention to, that it is handled as relations between two sovereign states.”

17 Ibid, 107. Translation (mine): “There is no such Germany.”

their conversation suggests that he was willing to, for all practical purposes, treat the East as a sovereign entity.

It was a major breakthrough, and signified a huge pivot in West German conservative thinking. While outwardly maintaining the ultimate goal of German reunification, privately, Kohl had bowed to reality—German unification was extremely unlikely to occur within his lifetime, if at all. Given this likelihood, the best West Germany could hope for was to loosen Eastern restrictions on cultural exchange and visitation and work with the East on issues whenever possible. For his part, Honecker was willing to compromise somewhat with the FRG, although he tended to drive a harder bargain than the West. For one, the GDR had less to offer: economically, it was increasingly dependent on Western aid. Additionally, Honecker was wary of pressure from Moscow; the caution with which he dealt with the Soviet Union was one of the hallmarks and near constants of his regime. The General Secretary had taken power in 1970 after a Soviet-engineered coup of Ulbricht, who had been at odds with Brezhnev. Upon taking office, Honecker was immediately warned by Brezhnev to “never forget that the GDR cannot exist without…the Soviet Union.” The words stayed with him; Honecker was unswervingly loyal to the USSR until the Gorbachev era. Nevertheless, the East German leader was willing to work with Kohl on issues of shared importance and would accept exchanges and visitation permits for desperately needed credits. The two leaders agreed that their countries and systems were extremely different and that major reform to each state’s domestic and political structure was off the table. Yet they accepted a mutual responsibility to work on issues of shared importance for the East and

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West German nations—disarmament, cultural exchange, improved day-to-day relations, and commerce—whenever consent could be found. In short, they took a pragmatic course to the question of German division; they chose, when possible, sober reason over ideological divide. Against the odds, they became known as the “Coalition of Reason,” so named after a 1983 Honecker speech in which the East German leader called for world leaders to form such a group.

After Kohl accepted Honecker’s initial test in the conversation, that his German Democratic Republic be treated as a sovereign state, Honecker quickly moved on to an issue of mutual concern: the nuclear question. Here, Honecker offered a significant olive branch, stating that “wir [sind] am Zeitpunkt angelangt, in dem man sagen kann, daß mehr Rüstung keinesfalls mehr Sicherheit bedeutet.” Armaments, Honecker said, would not secure a brighter future for Germany. It was a shocking statement for the leader of East Germany to make. His state fielded the Warsaw Pact’s most advanced military after the Soviet Union’s; the RAND Corporation estimated East German military spending to be around 6-7% of GDP in 1984. This figure was the highest among non-Soviet Warsaw Pact members and had increased continuously since 1971.

Military strength was a foundation of East German foreign policy and was in many ways

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20 German: *Die Koalition der Vernunft*
22 Erich Honecker, “Gespräch zwischen Genossen Erich Honecker und dem Bundeskanzler der BRD, Helmut Kohl, am 24. Januar 1983 von 10.33 Uhr bis 11.00 Uhr,” 104. Translation (mine): “It is apparent that we have arrived at the point in time in which one can say that more armaments do not mean more security.”
25 Herspring 102
the basis of the state’s continued quest for international legitimacy, especially in regards to Soviet respect for GDR positions. East Germany attempted “to translate its military strength into greater autonomy” vis-à-vis the Soviet Union\(^{26}\); in many ways, armaments were crucial in supporting the GDR’s attempts to develop greater autonomy in its internal and external policy. Honecker’s statement was thus remarkable, especially given that it was made directly to Kohl. But in the context of Honecker and the SED’s changing position on nuclear weapons, however, it was a reasonable statement. Honecker was not saying that the East German military did not afford security; the statement instead grew out of his increasingly open opposition to the placement of nuclear weapons—a position that increasingly put him out-of-step with Moscow.

This isolation, as stated in the previous chapter, forced the East German leadership to reevaluate their foreign policy and was a leading reason behind Honecker’s willingness to cooperate with Kohl. What occurred in the GDR in the early 1980s was not a revolution—Honecker and the SED leadership remained loyal to Moscow on almost all issues, and their disobedience on the missiles issue was limited to verbal disagreement (albeit public and vociferous). Nevertheless, Erich Honecker’s mindset had changed. For the first time, he saw the Kremlin as acting in its own interests in a way that clearly endangered the Germans. The distrust that formed on his part, and was expressed through SED policy, would continue until the end of Honecker’s government in 1989; the East German General Secretary would eventually emerge as a leading critic of Gorbachev’s liberalizations in the late 1980s. With Soviet policy now in question, the GDR’s upper echelon was able to shift its perception from a purely ideological battle

\(^{26}\) Herspring 90
between the imperialist West and socialism to what Gerald Segal called “a common, all-human interest in preventing nuclear war which transcended class interest.” Though Segal tends to exaggerate the cooperation between the two states, it is a fundamentally correct assertion. Honecker did not suddenly see the FRG as a friend—but he did see the West as an ally for advancing his desire for détente in Europe. As a result, he was willing to make extraordinary offers in his personal correspondence and conversation with Kohl. Honecker’s desire to reach agreement on the nuclear question was the overriding concern in his correspondence with Kohl in the early to mid-1980s. In an October 5, 1983 letter, the General Secretary wrote that “ist es meine Auffassung, daß sich alle, die das Abgleiten der Menschheit in eine nukleare Katastrophe verhindern wollen, zu einer Koalition der Vernunft zusammentun.” He asked Kohl to reconsider his position on the stationing of NATO missiles in the FRG, although this was backed up by what Honecker termed Andropov’s “encouragement” to keep the military balance as it was. He blamed the United States’ inflexibility on the issue of nuclear dearmament (Kohl, naturally, would take the opposite view in his response) for the failure of the 1983 Geneva talks between the Soviet Union and the US, and criticized NATO for being more interested in increasing its armaments than negotiating. Nevertheless, it was a surprisingly blunt call for negotiation. Honecker concluded by stating, “[ich] erkläre die uneingeschränkte Bereitschaft der DDR, jeden Schritt zu unterstützen…die uns einem

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27 Segal 194
28 Erich Honecker, “Brief von Erich Honecker zu Helmut Kohl,” Neues Deutschland, October 10, 1983. Translation (mine): “It is my view that those who want to prevent the slide of humanity into a nuclear catastrophe, should do it together in a coalition of reason.”
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
gesichertem Frieden näherbringen\textsuperscript{31}.” to The letter was published in \textit{Neues Deutschland}, the GDR’s state newspaper and signed in the name of the German people.

For his part, Chancellor Kohl seemed somewhat more reticent than Honecker to agree to significant effort toward arms control. In their January 23, 1983 phone conversation, he stated that “wir wollen militärisch bedeutsame, ausgewogene, überprüfbare Vereinbarungen zur Rüstungskontrolle und zur Abrüstung\textsuperscript{32},” but did not offer any specific methods by which he would accomplish that, nor offer a commitment to large-scale, specific action. Kohl viewed the missile question, at least in his conversation with Honecker, as something beyond his control; he agreed to talk to the Americans about reaching an agreement with Andropov, but offered little assurance that such an approach would net results. According to the chancellor, his hands were tied; instead, it would be up to Reagan and Andropov, although he stated his hope that the two speak rationally and not resort to “Propagandatricks\textsuperscript{33}.” It seems apparent that Kohl was at first less committed than Honecker to the idea of disarmament. He was irritated by the Soviet placement of SS20s and felt that the placement of NATO missiles in the FRG was justified, if undesirable. “Das Gleichgewicht ist heute gestört,” Kohl wrote, because of the Soviet Union’s missile placements\textsuperscript{34}. Under his government, West Germany would not become “ein[e] Zone minderer Sicherheit mit allen politischen und strategischen

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid. Translation (mine): “I declare the willingness of the GDR to support every step…to bring a secure peace nearer to us.”

\textsuperscript{32} Helmut Kohl, “Gespräch zwischen Genossen Erich Honecker und dem Bundeskanzler der BRD, Helmut Kohl, am 24. Januar 1983 von 10.33 Uhr bis 11.00 Uhr,” 104. Translation (mine): “We want militarily significant, balanced, reviewable agreements on weapons control and on nuclear disarmament.”

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.

Konsequenzen der Instabilität. Instead, Kohl asked Honecker to use his influence to block any new missiles in the GDR and work to eliminate those already placed. For Kohl, the deployment of missiles was worrying but necessary, a practical Western response to Soviet military expansion. The deployment of the Pershing and cruise missiles on West German soil had cost Kohl valuable political capital, and the chancellor was not prepared to walk that back, especially in the nascent period of his chancellorship. Furthermore, he was approaching the problem from an unbalanced position. Though Kohl was disturbed by the prospect of an all-out nuclear conflagration in central Europe, the reality on the ground was that his side was placed in what he, and NATO, viewed as a tactical disadvantage. Since the Soviet Union had already placed its upgraded short and medium-range tactical nuclear missiles in the GDR, Kohl felt that he had no choice. His letters and conversations with Honecker repeatedly emphasized that he would not accept a situation in which West Germany was at a strategic disadvantage in regards to the Soviet bloc. Whether NATO actually was at a disadvantage is debatable; it was a classic security dilemma. Regardless, Kohl viewed his state as less secure than it had been before the East received SS20s, and he would not accept any situation in which they remained. Hence his request that Honecker take the impetus for peace, either by removing his missiles or pressuring the USSR to do it. Both were unrealistic, and so Kohl was direct about his intention to bolster his state’s security. “Es [ist] unrealistisch zu glauben, daß eine Seite bereit sein könnte, ihre Sicherheitsinteressen als Presi für die

35 Ibid. Translation (mine): “a zone of lower security with all of the political and strategic consequences of instability.”
37 He requested this in both his October 24 and December 14, 1983 letters to Honecker, as well as in his December 19, 1983 telephone conversation with the East German leader.
Bereitschaft der anderen Seite zu guten politischen Beziehungen zu opfern," he wrote in his December 1983 letter. With this in mind, he essentially took the issue of immediate nuclear disarmament off the table until the superpowers had resolved their disagreements at Geneva. In a December 19, 1983 telephone conversation, he told Honecker bluntly that “Ich will auch jetzt nicht eine Würdigung…was die Stationierung betrifft, vornehmen. Hier sind unsere Meinungen völlig verschieden." It would be up to the superpowers, whom the chancellor hoped would come to an understanding. Later, Kohl’s missile policy was far more active. In 1988 he was praised by Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze for his decision to remove Germany’s Pershing missiles during the negotiations for 1987’s Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force (INF) Treaty, a decision which was not supported by many CDU backbenchers. Kohl’s shift to “decidedly more dovish positions on military policy,” including his 1989 opposition to upgrades to NATO missiles in the FRG, would cause a serious strain in European politics. But at the time of NATO’s dual-track decision, Kohl was unwilling to make a major concession on missile deployment. The chancellor believed that instead of

40 Ibid.
41 Timothy Garton Ash, In Europe’s Name (New York: Random House, 1993), 110.
43 Kohl’s reticence in 1989 had a great deal to do with his slumping poll numbers at home, however. Had history not intervened that November, it is unclear if his government would have survived the 1990 Bundestag elections.
working to reduce each others’ stockpiles (especially through asking each other to first take the lead), it would be most beneficial for the two states to first act as a model for détente, keeping contact open in an increasingly hostile European environment.

Secondly, the states should to work to convince the superpowers to reach an accord that included fewer missiles. With the first goal in mind, the two states should focus on what they could do in isolation from the international situation; namely, improving the relations of the East and West German peoples through practical, concrete measures: increasing visitation, resolving trade issues, and promoting détente in popular terms: “die Menschen [sind die] echte Maßnahme der Friedenspolitik."

Family visitation was a key issue for the West German leadership; according to some, it was “the top operative priority of the Bonn government’s policy toward the GDR.” For Kohl, restoring the familial ties of relatives separated by the Iron Curtain was critical to maintain some semblance of a German identity, an idea which he clung strongly to. Beyond that, it was a popular and natural policy for the state. The postwar division of Germany and tightening restrictions in the East (culminating with the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961) had led to the separation of families, relatives, and friends in the two Germanies. Before the thaw of the early 1970s, communication between these separated persons was in most cases all but impossible. Nowhere was this more acute than in Berlin. After the construction of the Wall, there was no travel in either direction except by those willing to attempt an escape. As a result, “your brother

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45 Ash 142

46 Pensioners were generally given greater freedom to travel, but this was relative to the total shutdown of East-West travel after 1961.
three blocks up the Friedrichstrasse might just have well have been in Outer Mongolia."

This began to change in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as improving relations brought easier travel across what had been for all but a handful an impenetrable barrier. From a starting point of zero in 1970, casual telephone calls between West and East Berlin increased to “more than ten million” by 1988. That same year, more than 1.5 million traveled from West Berlin to East Germany. Similarly, travel between West Germany and West Berlin by land became commonplace between 1970 and the late 1980s; while air travel made up roughly forty percent of the twelve million or so FRG-West Berlin travel arrangements in 1970 (travel by land was inconvenient and subject to difficulties with East German authorities), by 1986 some eighty-six percent of the 28 million trips were done by car.

Improvements in the ability of FRG citizens to visit the GDR, and vice versa, were both the result of better relations between the two states and the result of continuous pressing by the Bonn government. In his first telephone conversation with Honecker, Kohl stated that the visitation question was “ein ganz zentraler Punkt für mich,” and stated his support for the expansion of such visits. Indeed, successive Western governments, including Kohl’s, were willing to make financial and political commitments to facilitate easier travel between the two states. West German Deutschmarks went east to improve roads, railways, and other connections, and FRG

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47 Ash 140
48 Ash 141
49 Ash 140
50 Ibid.
loans were often tied to liberalization of East German travel restrictions. The 1983 billion-mark loan to the GDR was explicitly described in such terms by FRG Minister of State Philipp Jenninger: “this was not a business transaction in the usual sense…it was an incentive to bring movement into intra-German relations on a broad basis.” In return for the loan, East Berlin agreed to specific measures to loosen travel restrictions, including reduction of minimum-exchange requirements, extension of maximum length of stay, and opening of more border-crossings between the two countries. The result was a steady increase in cross-border exchanges throughout the 1980s. Visitation was not without seemingly intractable issues: the minimum-exchange quantity, for example, would remain salient throughout the Kohl-Honecker era. The GDR sought to keep the minimum quantity high, as it encouraged Westerners to spend money in the East (officially, the East German Mark was pegged to the Deutschmark, requiring a conversion of one-to-one, far above its black market rate). Additionally, the policy made travel to the East more inconvenient and thus had the side effect of discouraging visits. Keeping the restrictions in place also allowed East Berlin to keep monetary issues in a prime spot in FRG policy-making; the GDR government was angered by Western speculation on the Mark and the permanent weakness of the Ostmark to the Deutschmark. Honecker sought parity for the East German mark in trade between the two states: “für uns ist die Mark im Verkehr zwischen der DDR und der BRD eine Mark.” The ability

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53 Ibid.
of West German visitors to exchange Deutschmarks for East German Marks at a rate of four or five DM to one DDR-Mark undermined this goal and also reflected unfavorably on the GDR’s economic position relative to the FRG. It was also a direct violation of the GDR’s stated laws, which established a direct parity between the DDR-Mark and the Deutschmark—one that often existed only on paper. Nevertheless, Honecker’s government was willing to liberalize travel policy to a reasonable extent. As stated, such liberalizations were profitable for the GDR, and the SED leadership saw it as a practical step that could be taken to improve relations. In his April, 1983 conversation with Kohl, Honecker agreed that his government would work diligently and was resolved to improve opportunities for cross-border interaction, and offered evidence of this, in that visits to West Berlin had doubled in the past year. While numbers of Westerners visiting the East grew by a huge rate during the 1970s and 1980s, liberalization in Eastern policy allowed growth in the numbers of Easterners going west. The number of GDR visitors to the West grew from a handful in the early 1980s—Kohl wrote that around ten thousand people per year, mostly pensioners, were able to obtain travel visas from the East—to more than half a million visitors yearly by the beginning of 1987. 1987 was a breakthrough year in visitations; raw numbers increased by a huge number and, for the first time, these numbers were made up by large groups of young people—previously, GDR citizens traveling west had been overwhelmingly elderly. In 1987 and 1988, more than 1.2 million East Germans visited the West, meaning that “one in every six East

Uhr,” 109. Translation (mine): “For us, the Mark is one Mark in trade between the GDR and the FRG.”

55 Ibid.
56 Kohl 30
57 Ash 655
Germans under pensionable age was able to travel to West Germany\textsuperscript{58,59},” including pensioners, more than six million East Germans—over a third of the total population—visited the West in 1988\textsuperscript{59}. Given the special nature of the German division, it was only natural that common agreements could be made on visitation, travel, and improving communication between families.

Beyond visitation, the idea of reasonable improvements in German-German relations led to modest action on a host of smaller issues. Town twinning, youth and cultural exchanges, and other gestures of goodwill became commonplace in the 1980s. Far from the freeze in German relations expected by the advent of the Kohl government, by the late 1980s inter-German relations were better than they had ever been in the postwar period. While major breakthroughs on key issues like weapons reduction remained out-of-reach, the overall climate of improving relations created an environment in which such breakthroughs did not seem unreasonable. More importantly, the inter-German détente which flourished in the 1980s helped to defuse the tense international environment of the time. Honecker and Kohl were able to look beyond their irreconcilable differences to make progress on those issues where mutual agreement existed, and by doing so they made significant and lasting progress in German-German relations. Despite the limitations on what they could do and their states’ second-chair positions vis-à-vis the superpowers, their coalition of reason created marked, steady improvements in the German situation throughout the 1980s, culminating in Honecker’s visit to Bonn in 1987. It was a seminal moment, one that would have seemed impossible two decades earlier. It was the triumph of reason and responsibility over ideology in the

\textsuperscript{58} Ash 148
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
basic functioning of German-German relations, the accumulation of small steps toward normalization, that created an environment in which this could occur. And though the two states, and their citizens, did not see a change in the basic situation of the German question in the near future, the efforts of Kohl, Honecker, and their governments continued the policies of Ostpolitik that enabled German relations to reach their best level in the postwar period.
Chapter Three: The Deutschmark Détente

East-West relations made significant strides in improving relations between the GDR and FRG during the 1980s. Nevertheless, as the previous chapter shows, it is important to remember that the two states were members of opposing alliances, with incompatible political and economic systems. These divisions were neither trifling nor easy to surmount, and the amount of agreement that could be made in spite of them was always limited. Certainly, there was room for improvement, but rational observers and policy-makers on both sides never intended the continuing and escalating thaw of the 1980s to lead toward political or economic union. Inter-German efforts to improve political dialogue and peace politics were indeed substantial, but the two states’ relations with the superpowers heavily influenced them. Trade between the two states had in many ways initiated détente in the 1970s; agreements on trade issues were the first to be established between the GDR and the FRG\(^1\). Beginning in the 1970s and continuing through the 1980s, the West German economy became increasingly tied into those of the GDR and of the Soviet Union, and vice versa. During the immediate postwar years, the Western powers frequently used inter-German trade as a political lever to isolate the East. A NATO embargo, for instance, in the early 1950s reduced East European countries’ share in West German foreign trade to just three percent, with the GDR accounting for only a small portion of that number\(^2\). These policies, however, were never logical nor sustainable for the West. As a growing economic power in the center of Europe, lying on the edge of the two blocs, the FRG would naturally benefit from an increase in trade.

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\(^1\) Ash 251
Likewise, the GDR sat in the similar position on its side of the bloc, poised to gain immensely from thawed relations between itself and West Germany and between the larger blocs. Trade was thus bound to increase. Between 1952 and 1960 trade between the FRG and the Eastern bloc rose from 400 million Deutschmarks to 2.1 billion; by 1970 it had increased to DM 5 billion, and by 1980 trade with the Eastern bloc, excluding the GDR, reached twenty billion Deutschmarks\(^3\). Foreign trade with the eastern bloc and GDR peaked at nine percent of West Germany’s total foreign trade in 1975; though it declined after this point in terms of the percentage of trade, the value of West German trade with the Warsaw Pact and Soviet Union continued to increase in real terms throughout the 1980s\(^4\). And while the West’s trade with the eastern bloc would not make or break its economy, certain industries, among them the steel, energy, and banking industries, were much more dependent on their trade with the East; twenty percent of West German steel was shipped eastward by the mid-1970s\(^5\). As these industries were often some of the most powerful corporate interests in Bonn, they had a disproportionately large effect on the push for greater economic integration. Growth in West German trade with the East outpaced other Western countries throughout the 1970s and 1980s as well. Between 1969 and 1988, the value of FRG trade to the eastern bloc increased by a factor of close to ten, from just over two billion dollars to more than nineteen billion. No other western country came close to such growth; Italy, in second place in 1988, went from $1.4 billion in 1969 to close to seven billion dollars’ worth of

\(^3\) Petzina 206
\(^4\) Ash 244
\(^5\) Ash 247
trade in 1988. By 1985 the FRG’s trade with the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union was more than four times that of the United States. West German companies also had premier roles in loans, joint ventures, and technological investments in the East.

In the East, trade was heavily tilted toward the FRG. By 1989, Soviet trade with the West Germans accounted for eighteen percent of its total trade with the West. In the mid-1980s, every Warsaw Pact country save Romania conducted at least one-third of its western trade to the FRG, with Hungary and the GDR’s shares far above that rate. It is no coincidence, then, that in the early to mid-1980s, Hungary and the GDR were unique in their opposition to Soviet foreign policy regarding détente and the missile crisis. For these states, economic integration with the West was intrinsically linked with closer political ties—Hungary with Austria and, to a lesser extent, the FRG, and the GDR primarily with West Germany. Indeed, Honecker’s attempt to visit the FRG in 1984 caused his government, in the words of one scholar, to be “in the unfamiliar role of being in a tacit alliance with Hungary against the Soviet Union.” As trade with the West became increasingly important to those states, so too did political stability and the desire for improved relations. Improving transportation and communication links between East and West may have appealed to Honecker on multiple levels, but the benefits to intra-German trade certainly did not harm his willingness to cooperate on these measures. As many of these improvements were bought with Western Deutschmarks, the benefits to

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6 Ash 651
7 Ash 246
8 Ash 248
9 Ash 246
10 Segal 194
the East Berlin regime, highly strapped for cash by the time Kohl took power, were both widespread and increasingly critical to the state’s financial health.

Trade could thus be seen as the block upon which the détente of the 1970s and 1980s was built. Whereas the international system was fraught with change and uncertainty, economic ties between the Germanies were much steadier and bound the two states in a system where both had much to gain from continued détente and much to lose from a major deterioration in relations. Additionally, the leading role of the Federal Republic as a western trade partner for the GDR, most of the Warsaw Pact, and the USSR itself helped to ease tensions between Bonn and those states, especially after the ascension of Gorbachev in 1985. Although trade was not the only reason for the improving relationship between the FRG and the USSR after 1985, the strong links between the two economies certainly helped relations; Honecker’s 1987 state visit to Bonn would not have been possible if Moscow had loud objections. But while direct trade was one of the most constant factors in the improving climate between the Germanies not the only area in which the FRG’s economic strength affected relations between East and West. The diplomatic thaw between East and West Germany was again reinforced in 1983 by the extension of major credit lines to the GDR by the Federal Republic. For years, the GDR had enjoyed a “swing” credit provided by the FRG to mitigate the effects of an economic crisis in the east. After 1976, Honecker had at all times 100 million “DM liquid” available in credit from the Federal Republic; between that year and 1988 he drew 1.05 billion DM from the account “as a general hard currency
This enough gave the East German leader reason to seek continued good relations with Bonn, but the loan extended in 1983 was of another order entirely. In 1983, Bavarian Minister-President and erstwhile Kohl rival Franz-Josef Strauß engineered a one billion-Deutschmark credit for the GDR, despite his image as a hardliner against the East German regime.

By that time, East Berlin was in desperate need of financial assistance, despite its public image—the economy of the GDR was long thought to be one of the strongest not only in the Eastern bloc but also in the world. One estimate in 1977 placed its per capita GDP above Britain’s. In 1986, James McAdams argued in Foreign Affairs that “the bargaining relationship between East Berlin and Bonn can for the first time be characterized as symmetrical, if not inclined in East Germany’s favor,” due to the East’s presumed economic strength. Such characterizations were untrue and reflected both the doctored statistics published by the government and Western misconceptions of Eastern and Soviet power. As the real situation in the East came to light, such assessments would change: in 1990, McAdams wrote that “East Berlin could no longer hope to resolve its massive economic problems without outside assistance.” By the time of unification, East Germany would accrue $26.5 billion in foreign debt; paying its interest took up sixty percent of the state’s export earnings. Already by the early 1980s, state ministers feared

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12 Merkl 232
14 McAdams 99
a collapse in liquidity. Alexander Schalck-Golodkowski, head of East Germany’s 
*Bereich Kommerzielle Koordinierung*\(^1\), warned that the GDR economy could only 
maintain liquidity for a few years without a major hard currency injection\(^2\). In 1983, the 
State Planning Commission of the GDR projected a deficit of DM 6.1 billion; during 
August and September of that year, “the GDR was essentially insolvent\(^3\).” Strauß’ loan, 
then, was critically needed to prevent the state from financial ruin. It was followed in 
1984 by another loan of DM 950 million\(^4\). The loans, made by Deutsche Bank to the 
Deutsche Außenhandelsbank AG, East Germany’s state bank, were engineered and 
backed by the West German government\(^5\). Interestingly, they were described and sold to 
the West German public through the language of “good neighborly relations,” as an 
“important contribution to deepening and stabilizing dialogue and cooperation…with the 
GDR,” and as a “revitalization of…relations with the GDR\(^6\).” In return, the Honecker 
regime had to make concessions—expanded travel arrangements, especially for families, 
easing marriage restrictions, and removing the tripwire weapons at the German-German 
border\(^7\). For the West Germans, loans to the GDR served multiple purposes. First, they 
could be used as a political tool to show the humanity of the CDU government and its 
commitment to improving the lives of Germans, wherever they might live. Kohl could, 
and did, argue that the question was essentially one of easing the financial pain in the

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\(^1\) Division of Commercial Coordination; it was a powerful state conglomerate that dealt 
with securing hard currency for the GDR
\(^2\) Horster 419
\(^3\) Jonathan Zatlin, *The Currency of Socialism: Money and Political Culture in East 
Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 140.
\(^4\) Ibid.
\(^5\) Jenninger, Philipp. “Erklärung zur Entwicklung der innerdeutschen Beziehungen von 
Staatsminister Dr. Philipp Jenninger.”
\(^6\) Ibid.
\(^7\) Zatlin 141
GDR in the context of its citizens. Additionally, the loans allowed for the stabilization of the GDR government, always a prime concern of Kohl’s regime. Finally, the ability of the FRG to advance credit, coupled with the GDR’s desperate need for the loans, created a situation in which the SED was increasingly reliant on the West to maintain its solvency. Such reliance increased Bonn’s power at the expense of the East Germans and helped to advance the West’s policy goals. East Germany was not alone in receiving credits from the FRG: in 1988, while Kohl visited Moscow, the Deutsche Bank extended a three billion Deutschmark credit to the USSR. In response, Gorbachev remarked that “we have very many German friends.” Unlike the loans to the East, the USSR loans were made in the context of the Soviet leader’s enormous personal popularity in the West, but the underlying motives were similar: the promotion of improved relations, a tangible commitment to stability, and as a way to increase the FRG’s bargaining position in future debates over the status of the two German states.

A final, and perhaps more sinister, manner in which the détente of the 1980s was highly financial in nature was the evolution of ransom. In 1962, the Protestant church in Germany made contact with Wolfgang Vogel, an eastern lawyer, and secured the release to West Germany of a small list of prisoners from the East. Their transit was paid with three truckloads of potash. By 1963, the issue of Freikauf—the buying free of Eastern political prisoners and those separated by the inner border—had been integrated into the West German government. In 1963, East Germany allowed eight political prisoners to be bought with cash; this number rose to 880 in 1964 and passed 1,000 by 1965. In 1966,

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23 Ash 112
24 Ash 142
25 Ash 143
the East German government created the KoKo specifically to handle such transactions\(^{26}\); by this point, the exchange of hard currency, material goods, and commodities was institutionalized on both sides of the border\(^{27}\). For the East, such an arrangement was a major boon. It allowed for the tidy disposal of political prisoners, which could now not only be sent west but also done so for a handsome profit. Additionally, it allowed the East Berlin regime to stress its humanitarian credentials by allowing political prisoners to be taken out of its prisons\(^{28}\). In the West, the purchases, like loans, were often used for political benefit. They were an indication that one took seriously the Federal Republic’s stated position of providing for all Germans, regardless of which German state the individual lived in. The Freikaufen were often tied to other, more innocuous payments, such as those made to reunite families, which also gave an air of humanitarian sacrifice. They also provided a common ground on which to begin negotiations; according to Schalck-Golodkowski of KoKo, “no government minister from West Germany would visit the GDR without a list of prisoners in his pocket as an appetizer for further negotiation in other areas\(^{29}\).” Quietly, a significant number of the Freikauf payments were made in exchange for Western agents in the East\(^{30}\). Between 1963 and 1989, the West German government “bought” the freedom of close to 34,000 political prisoners, reunited more than 2,000 children with parents, and expedited the resettlement of some quarter-million separated families for a total sum of DM 3.5 billion. Bonn hoped to use

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\(^{26}\) It would eventually branch out into all manner of economic activity, though, including running luxury goods stores in the East

\(^{27}\) Ash 145

\(^{28}\) Horster 420

\(^{29}\) Horster 420

the buying-free to encourage more normal transit from East to West, as well as maintain its commitment to improving the lives of those for whom the separation of Germany caused hardship, or those who had landed in prison due to their agitation against the GDR government.

The Deutschmark, and more broadly economic policies, cannot be ignored in the evolution of stronger ties between the two German states. Trade led the way; it was the first area in which the FRG and the GDR made significant contact and usually came in advance of, rather than after, major diplomatic and political breakthroughs. East-West trade developed into a profitable and binding relationship in which both sides had practical reason to oppose any deterioration in relations. By establishing a situation in which both the GDR and the FRG would lose valuable economic activity in the event of a showdown over the issues of the day, trade ties helped to avert such disagreements from occurring, or at least reaching their boiling point. Trade ties were augmented by the FRG’s economic strength and ability to provide easy, low-interest credit to the GDR. Ironically, without the Deutsche Bank, symbol of West Germany’s capitalist system, the East would have had extreme difficulty making it through the 1980s. Bankrupted by its constant need to import Western consumer goods, the East could not afford to keep its people satisfied without injections of cash. Such infusions helped to stabilize the regime, but more importantly they forced East Berlin into a closer relationship with the West and opened the door to concessions. The Freikaufen worked in roughly the opposite way: Honecker was able to bring the FRG government closer to his demands by allowing for the purchases, all the while ridding his state of costly and inexpedient dissidents. The FRG’s willingness to seemingly pay any price—by the early 1980s, nearly DM 96,000
per head\textsuperscript{31}—allowed the East to set the terms of the exchanges and effectively control the flow of dissidents to the West for large profits. While these purchases were unsavory, they were seen as progressive by the Western government and still helped to augment ties between the states. The conversations that were struck up as a result of the Freikauf program helped lead to breakthroughs in other areas, especially visitation and infrastructure improvements to the border. Similarly, the strings that came attached to Western loans, as well as Western money earmarked specifically for improvements or humanitarian concerns in the East, helped to establish a closer working relationship between the two states.

It would be incorrect to say that economics were the driving force behind the rapprochement of East and West Germany during the 1980s. Absent of an international situation instrumental in promoting a rational approach to German-German relations, as well as cooler heads in Bonn and Berlin, the increase in trade during the 1970s and 1980s would have likely remained just that—an increase in trade. Yet it set the stage for a broader discussion of German questions, and when combined with the situational factors of the Kohl-Honecker era, trade served as an underlying source of stability in the states’ negotiations.

\textsuperscript{31} Ash 146
Conclusions: The Importance of 1987, Revisited

This paper has discussed three distinct mechanisms by which the two German states were able to improve their relations and work more closely in practical, concrete ways. In reality, however, none of these existed in a vacuum. The détente of the 1980s was not made possible because of a flare-up in tensions over nuclear missiles. It was not begun by the agitations of a broad-based, popular consensus in opposition to nuclear brinksmanship in the Federal Republic or the simmering discontents of their counterparts in the GDR. Nor was it the result of trade agreements, loans, or the Freikauf program. The German détente was not even the result of the accession of leadership more concerned with rational cooperation than ideological battle in the FRG or the GDR; after all, the process of détente had been going on long before Kohl took power and was expected by many observers to falter or fail to develop further under his leadership.

Instead, what happened in Germany in the 1980s was the result of a unique combination of all of these factors. Trade and economic ties provided a stable base for relations between the two states to improve, as it had since the 1960s. But in 1982, the expected refreeze of the German détente that Kohl’s conservative government would supposedly bring never materialized. The explanation for this lies in both the international climate of the era and with the leaders themselves.

The effect of the dual militarizations of Germany in 1979 and 1983 had a profound effect on rank-and-file citizens’ perception of the threat of the Cold War. Where previously the brinksmanship of the Cold War was primarily in terms of ICBMs, where a crisis could theoretically be defused before nuclear warheads reached Washington or Moscow, the new reality was a scenario in which missiles could reach
major German population centers in a matter of seconds. Suddenly, the prospect of an accidental or irrational nuclear conflict became a real fear. In the event of a nuclear conflict, there would be no time for phone calls, talks, or eleventh-hour compromise. Warheads, launched from German soil, would destroy Germany, its people, and its civilization in less than a minute. Missile placements across the FRG and GDR also placed targets across the countries, conceivably making no place beyond the target ranges of a nuclear launch. These changes prompted a very real and legitimate fear across broad segments of German society—a Green election poster of the 1980s simply showed a map of the FRG with every nuclear site listed. Even those favoring closer ties to NATO and a response to the SS-20 deployment were forced to reevaluate the effect such actions would have on their state.

More remarkable than the public outcry, though, was the reaction of the two German leaders. Despite facing considerable pressure to freeze relations over Kohl’s support for the dual-track decision, Honecker instead remarked that the GDR government, “as genuine advocates of peace,” would instead be “guided by the popular wisdom that to negotiate ten times is always better than to fire a single shot.” On December 14, 1983 Kohl wrote to Honecker, “[ich] sehe in der Tat keine Alternative. Das gilt unabhängig davon, daß wir die Ursachen und Auswirkungen der derzeitigen Lage unterschiedlich bewerten.” The die was firmly cast in favor of dialogue and reason. What had occurred was a significant and remarkably balanced evolution of

1 Ash 167
thought and policy on both sides of the German-German border. In the West, a remarkable convergence on the importance of continuing the policies of Ostpolitik emerged within the Christian Democratic Union. Although the party was divided on the degree to which the West should work to accommodate the GDR, by 1988 the language of Ostpolitik was more or less endorsed by the CDU at its Wiesbaden party conference. And though these changes were largely driven by the emerging consensus within the CDU that liberalization could not be forced upon the GDR but rather would have to be essentially coaxed, the result was a pragmatic approach toward the East that was a key component of the improvement in German-German relations. In the East, Honecker’s decision to seek consensus and improvement was personally risky. It was highly opposed by Moscow, which saw the East as going directly against its foreign policy (it was). Eastern bloc leaders had been replaced for less, and Honecker above all knew this—he’d replaced Walter Ulbricht over ideological disagreements with Moscow in 1971. But despite the bitter division his actions caused between Honecker and Chernenko, Honecker correctly decided that his state had more to gain by working with the FRG than by starting a major diplomatic incident over the NATO missile placement. The result of these coordinated actions was that in an atmosphere of increasing international East-West tension, East-West relations in Germany became more cordial. Despite being locked into opposing alliances, despite decades of antagonism between the CDU and the SED, and despite being led by two leaders who ideologically and in terms of background could not be further apart, the Federal Republic and the German Democratic Republic overcame many of the divisions of the early and mid-1980s. They framed their decision in terms of

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3 Ash 112
mutual responsibility to their people, to peace, and to Europe, and they led the way for the later international détente of the Gorbachev era.

Early on, this paper posed the question of what to make of Erich Honecker’s 1987 visit to Bonn. In the context of the German Question’s ultimate fate, it is tempting to say that 1987 was, in fact, rather unimportant. One could argue that the upheaval of 1989 rendered the affirmation of Honecker’s government a moot point only two years after the fact. But to view the détente of the 1980s through the lens of the collapse of the GDR and German unification would be a mistake. Unification was never a foregone conclusion; indeed, practical observers did not see it as possible until things began to spin out of control in mid-1989. As late as 1988, former chancellor Willy Brandt described the goal of reunification as the Federal Republic’s “life-long lie.” Instead, the détente of the 1980s must be viewed separately, and in that context, Honecker’s visit to Bonn in 1987 was the capstone on years of calculated, often difficult decisions in favor of peace, better relations, and rationality in regards to the German question. It was an affirmation of what had seemed improbable for so long—that an East German head of state could visit the West under peaceful conditions and be treated more or less as a visiting head of state. The visit was rich in symbolism, poignant, and, at times, emotional, as when Honecker paid a visit to his former home in the Saarland. Most importantly, it showed how far the two states had come and, concurrently, how far the international system had advanced to catch up to them. Three years earlier, Chernenko had cancelled a similar trip, fearing an FRG propaganda trap and questioning Honecker’s commitment to the Warsaw Pact. Now, the winds of change were blowing, and though neither Kohl nor

4 Horster 421
Honecker could possibly anticipate how far those winds would carry their two states, they were largely responsible for creating the liberalized atmosphere in which German-German relations, and increasingly those of the entire Eastern and Western systems, were being conducted. These developments, emanating from the center of Cold War division—from the very point where tensions should theoretically be highest—were remarkable. Despite an international system aligned to discourage rapprochement in so many ways, a coalition of reason did prevail, and for that, Kohl and Honecker should be given a great deal of credit.
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