



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 9. Two Germanies, 1961-1989

Erich Honecker Defends the Achievements of Socialism on the 40th Anniversary of the GDR
(October 6, 1989)

The fortieth anniversary of the founding of the GDR provided Erich Honecker with an opportunity to celebrate the glorious achievements of socialism (increased economic production, the extension of welfare benefits, and the maintenance of peace) at just the moment when opposition critiques and public dissatisfaction were about to topple his regime.

Dear friends and comrades!
Honored foreign guests!
Ladies and gentlemen of the diplomatic corps!

Forty years ago, the first socialist state on German soil, the German Democratic Republic, was founded. Anyone who was lucky enough to participate in this historically significant event feels moved when thinking back to the days when the workers and farmers, in alliance with the intelligentsia and all workers, established their power in the truest sense of the word. In the West, where the Potsdam Agreement was ignored, a separate state was established without asking the people. There, the process of restoring the old society was started, as were the preparations to establish a new *Wehrmacht* for NATO using the former [Hitler] generals. They did not confront the past. Today it is clearer than ever before: The founding of the German Democratic Republic, which came about through a popular movement for unity and a just peace, and whose draft constitution had already been discussed by a broad base in all the zones, was virtually a historical necessity.

[. . .]

Today our republic is among the ten most productive industrial nations in the world and also among the nearly two dozen countries with the highest standard of living. Let us not forget that this country's prosperity neither gushes out of the ground nor comes at the expense of others. The GDR is the work of millions, over several generations, who worked hard to build up the Workers' and Farmers' State, a state with modern industry and agriculture, with a socialist education system, with flourishing science and culture. And finally: the GDR, a world-class nation in athletics. With our hands and our heads we have achieved this under the leadership of the party of the working class. Nothing, absolutely nothing, was given to us or fell into our laps. On top of that, not only was there more [war] rubble to clear away here than west of the Elbe and the Werra, there were also the rocks taken from there and put in our way. Today, the GDR is an outpost of peace and socialism in Europe. We will never forget this fact; this keeps us, and should also keep our enemies, from misjudgment.

Like the Soviet Union, which liberated us, and the People's Republic of China, which is also celebrating the 40th anniversary of its founding, the People's Republic of Poland, the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, and other socialist countries, the GDR will also cross the threshold into the year 2000 with the certainty that socialism is the future. Socialism is a young society, and yet it exerts a great influence on international developments. It has brought about significant social change and will continue to do so. Its existence gives hope, not only to our people, but to all of humankind.

[. . .]

Forty years of the GDR – these were forty years of heroic labor, forty years of successful struggle for the advancement of our socialist republic, for the good of the people. And that will continue in the future. The important thing is that the leading party of our society, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, will continue to strengthen its own ranks in preparation for its 12th party congress, will further tighten its ties to the working class, to the collective farmers, the intelligentsia, the people as a whole. We will also continue to act in the spirit of the insights of Karl Marx, that what matters is not only to interpret the world, but to change it. In the future, through our policies of continuity and renewal, we will go on changing our republic within the community of socialist countries in a manner consistent with the true colors of the GDR. The aims have been laid down in our party program. It is a matter of further shaping the developed socialist society.

Of course, this is not a project that can be achieved within a short period of time according to pat procedures and without an unremitting search for the best solution in each individual case. Instead, it is a historic, long-term process of profound change and reform in all areas. In this way, socialism steadily ascends to an ever-higher level as a real alternative to capitalism, and its advantages will have an even more lasting impact on the lives of the people. They themselves create their present and their future by actively participating in all social matters according to our principle: "Take part in the work, take part in the planning, and take part in the government." So much is certain: for us, the slogan coined in the founding period of the GDR still applies: "Forward ever, backward never."

[. . .]

Comparing the GDR of today with the GDR of 1949 speaks for itself. Impressively, the great revolutionary process of reorganization – a process that was carried out here on German soil and that proved the abilities of the working class and its allies to exercise power – still manifests itself. The trusting, comradely cooperation of the SED [Socialist Unity Party] and the other parties and mass organizations in the Democratic Bloc and the National Front of the GDR has proven itself as a form of democratic inclusion of all social forces that is appropriate to our country. And so it was possible to implement a number of changes – land reform, the conversion of important companies into public property, school reform, the law on local parliaments, industrial price reform, and structural changes in the political economy.

[. . .]

In forty years, we have developed an economy with a modern structure and great economic potential. It is characterized by dynamism and growing efficiency. In 1989, the national income will amount to 279 billion marks, eleven times what it was in 1949. Labor productivity rose ten and a half times. Industrial production increased eighteenfold in this time period! Production in construction in just one month is almost as high as in all of 1949. In our agriculture, plant

production almost doubled, and the production of meat stock increased eightfold. The daily turnover of industrial goods for the population today is thirteen-and-a-half times what it was forty years ago.

Our results also make themselves evident when we survey the recent past. Thanks to the labor of the workers, in the 1980s the national income rose by an average of four percent per annum, a rate that has also received international notice. We were able to assert ourselves in the face of great changes in the world market, with its increasingly harsh competition. That is a fact that speaks for itself, although we should certainly not fail to notice that we are facing an even greater challenge on account of rapid changes in science and technology throughout the world. We have accepted this challenge. It is still true that our workplace is a place of struggle for peace and popular prosperity.

[. . .]

Modern technologies strengthen our economic potential and at the same time offer many workers an interesting field for creative work and personal development. This applies to the younger generation especially. Is it not one of our republic's greatest achievements that all young people here, without exception, have a future? That they do not have to loiter on the streets without training, hang on the needle of drug addiction, or vegetate without a roof over their heads. "Trust and responsibility for the young": That is our better world. Anyone seeking a fulfilled life will quickly recognize the false glitter shining on the other side for that which it truly is.

Participating in the race against time in modern production requires considerable strength and means taking risks – and one is not immune to making occasional errors in uncharted territory. Structural changes and tensions go along with this. But where in the world would the scientific, technological revolution be accomplished without a hitch? We will solve our problems ourselves, though, with our socialist means. Advice that would lead to the weakening of socialism will not get anywhere with us. Mass unemployment, homelessness, lack of social protection – all of which accompany modern technology in the FRG – do not exist here now and won't in the future. It is a perversion of human rights when one-third, one-fourth, or whatever proportion of the population is shunned and excluded. The scientific, technological revolution is being implemented here by us along with social protection and is, to use Karl Marx's words, one of the wellsprings of social wealth.

[. . .]

We have set priorities in our social policies that correspond to the nature of our Workers' and Farmers' State. Our resources were concentrated on satisfying the basic needs of the people. Certainly, it is not possible to solve every problem at the same time, because as everyone knows, a mark can only be spent once. As performance continues to grow, our options will increase as well.

[. . .]

Our deepening cooperation with the Soviet Union and the other countries of Comecon is a firm foundation for our economic strategy.¹ In my meetings with our friend and comrade Mikhail Gorbachev over the past years, options for the division of labor and cooperation were further sounded out and corresponding practical steps were introduced. And so we are able to register that precisely in the area of high technology, which has such great significance for the future, closer and more effective cooperation than ever before is now developing. This makes us very happy.

Cooperation with the Soviet Union also involves the millions of meetings between citizens of the two countries. Who does not remember the fascinating “special” encounter between Sigmund Jähn and Valeri Bykovsky that occurred in 1978 as the two were in orbit? Thanks to our friendship, the first German in outer space was a citizen of the GDR. Likewise, this event should not be omitted from a look back at forty years of the GDR.

[. . .]

On the basis of increasing economic achievements we will continue our social policy, wherein residential housing construction is a top priority. At the same time, we will dedicate more attention to the need for consumer goods and services, which is becoming increasingly differentiated. Of course, crafts and trades have their place in all these steps and will be promoted.

Everyone in the GDR has his place, independent of worldview and religion. The humanistic objectives of socialism offer space for everyone to develop his personality. And everyone is also encouraged to participate creatively in our common project for the good of the people.

The development of the German Democratic Republic has always been accompanied by a rich intellectual and cultural life. By building numerous cultural venues, we have created significant additional possibilities. It is our wish and conviction that, inspired by great humanistic ideals, artists will more actively use their talent, ability, and the social opportunities afforded to them to enrich the intellectual life of the people and convey the values of socialism.

[. . .]

Forty years of the GDR mark a totally new chapter in the history of our people. At the same time, these forty years have impressed upon our consciousness the absolute necessity and also the preciousness of long-lasting peace. Never again shall war emanate from German soil; this declaration arises from a decisive lesson of the past. It has become our state policy. It has been the top priority behind all we have done up to now and all we will do in the future, so that the socialist GDR continues to thrive and the family of European peoples can live in safety and harmony. Our nation is reliably satisfying its responsibility at the center of the continent, at the division between the two major allied blocs.

[. . .]

The relentless, internationally coordinated slander campaign currently being led against the GDR aims to confuse the people and sow doubt regarding the strength and advantages of

¹ The Council of Mutual Economic Assistance [Comecon] was the Soviet bloc counterpart to the European Economic Community, i.e., an attempt at establishing a transnational market – eds.

socialism. This can only serve to strengthen our resolve to continue in the future to do everything possible for a peaceful European house. The ability for states with different social orders to live and work together in such a house should be allowed to develop to the fullest. A solid foundation for this is provided in the final act of the Helsinki Conference as well as other CSCE documents. But we will not allow anyone to abuse these agreements for the purpose of destabilizing socialism. Strict respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence, and non-intervention in internal affairs are indispensable.

The GDR has paved its way with achievements serving to strengthen our people in the knowledge of their power and of the worth of all efforts to establish a new, humane, complete life. Socialism and peace are, and remain, key words for that which we have achieved up to now, as well as that which we will continue to accomplish. We tackle the task with vigor and confidence. In its fifth decade, the socialist workers' and peasants' state on German soil will continue to prove – through its actions for the good of its people and through its efforts for peace, security and international cooperation – that its founding in October of 1949 was a turning point in the history of the German people and of Europe

Long live the German Democratic Republic on the occasion of its fortieth anniversary!

Source of original German text: The General Secretary of the Central Committee of the SED and Chairman of the Council of State of the GDR Erich Honecker on the Occasion of the Fortieth Anniversary of the Founding of the GDR, in East Berlin, *Neues Deutschland*, October 6, 1989. For an English translation of other parts of this document, see: "Erich Honecker on the 40th Anniversary of the Founding of the GDR" (October 6, 1989), in Konrad H. Jarausch and Volker Gransow, eds., *Uniting Germany: Documents and Debates, 1944-1993*. Translated by Allison Brown and Belinda Cooper. Berghahn Books: Providence and Oxford, 1994, p. 51-53. © Berghahn Books.

Translation: Allison Brown