

## **“To what extent were the methods used to foster an East German national identity different under the regimes of Ulbricht and Honecker?”**

Josef Stalin defined national identity in terms of ethnicity, history, culture, language and territory, as well as the particular socio-economic system of a society. A national consciousness has always been a powerful advantage for those who benefit from it, and for those who suffer from a lack of it, this has been an often insurmountable challenge. The Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, or SED, the ruling party of the GDR, found itself in the latter camp. Persuading the populace of a state that had been artificially birthed from the arbitrary Soviet occupation zone to think not in terms of a unified ‘Germany’ but of an independent ‘East German’ nation would have been perceived by many as an impossible task. Nonetheless, over the course of its occupation of power from 1945 to 1989, the SED attempted numerous methods to develop a common, unifying identity for their new Nation.

These efforts cannot, however, be examined as a study of one policy trend from 1945-89. The two longest-serving General Secretaries of the SED, Walter Ulbricht (served 1950-71) and Erich Honecker (served 1971-89) had markedly different ideas on how a national identity for the GDR should be constructed. At the time of Ulbricht’s ascension to the GDR’s highest office, it had been determined that the cornerstone of the national identity was to be antifascism – perhaps the most important continuous policy through the leadership of both General Secretaries. This was complemented by the adoption of *Ostorientierung*, or the concept that the GDR should look towards the Stalinist USSR for a model on which to found their antifascist society. Under Ulbricht, the SED viewed itself as the creator of a communist-dominated single German national identity, but the appointment of Erich Honecker to the leadership of the SED in 1971 brought a turning point. The socialist unification-driven narrative was abandoned in favour of a two-nation theory: there would always be two antagonistic German states that would develop their own identity. Stalin’s definition of national identity, having been officially adopted under Ulbricht, was also dropped immediately in 1971. It was now decreed that the socio-economic system of a country was the defining component of its national identity, a notion codified in Honecker’s revision of the constitution. Another defining notion also enshrined in the constitution was that of eternal GDR-USSR friendship. However, this came to be a liability in the late 1980s, which saw the last pivot in the national identity theme. GDR leaders were against Glasnost and Perestroika, so the party began to celebrate “socialism in the

colours of the GDR” as part of the party’s national-identity traditions.<sup>1</sup> The East German leadership now proclaimed that they would develop socialism in their own way.

Against this backdrop of changing national ideologies, the SED used three primary means of building a national consciousness: history-writing, control of popular culture, and sport and involvement with the youth. It is on the difference in the use of these methods from the era of Ulbricht to that of Honecker that this essay will focus.

### *History-writing*

In his warning against totalitarian government, George Orwell famously wrote “Who controls the past controls the future”.<sup>2</sup> The party leadership of the SED under Ulbricht seem to have believed this from the very genesis of the East German State. They saw the cultivation of a state-driven national view of history as crucial to their uphill battle to place the GDR in the past, present and future of the German experience, and thereby to foster a national identity. SED party directive to historians throughout the existence of the GDR was to supply evidence from history that would legitimize the regime under the historical tenets of Marxism-Leninism, as well as ensure a steady stream of loyal party comrades.<sup>3</sup> GDR leadership not only created historical myths to this end, but also *built* them; in other words, through monuments, festivals, school texts, holidays, and more so as to ingrain them in the public consciousness. They took individuals, events and institutions from the common German past and redefined and shaped them in order to create a politically appropriate and independent social consciousness. With the founding of the GDR under Ulbricht, for example, the SED invested into the restoration of the bombed-out Goethe house, and Goethe became the first victim of the SED’s manipulation of historic figures, portrayed as an intellectual pioneer of Marxism and a symbol of German unity.<sup>4</sup>

In 1952, the SED sought out a lasting myth strategy to develop a national identity. This was outlined by Albert Norden in his new book *Kampf um die Nation*, and not only portrayed the GDR as antifascist and culturally advanced, but also as the culmination of all progressive

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Orlow, *The GDR’s Failed Search for a National Identity, 1945-1989*, *German Studies Review* 29, no. 3 (October 2006), 551.

<sup>2</sup> George Orwell, 1984 (London: Secker & Warburg, 1949), 44.

<sup>3</sup> Orlow, *The GDR’s Failed Search for a National Identity, 1945-1989*, 545.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Nothnagle, *From Buchenwald to Bismarck: Historical Myth-Building in the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1989*, *Central European History* 26, no. 1 (1993), 97.



‘German’ trends in history. It embraced all figures in German history, irrespective of belief or class, who had contributed to the strengthening and unification of the German people. Martin Luther, for example, was enlisted into state service.<sup>5</sup> East German institutions began styling themselves after their pre-war counterparts, thus presenting themselves as their natural continuation. In 1955, the new National People’s Army began wearing uniforms only slightly dissimilar to those of the Wehrmacht.<sup>6</sup> As the Nazis understood the power of German symbols and myths, so the SED recognised the group identification these could continue to evoke post-war. At this time, Ulbricht and the SED’s stated goal was the reunification of Germany on an ‘antifascist’ basis, expressed in the Becher national anthem.<sup>7</sup> Under this myth of antifascism, Eastern Germany had not been defeated by the Allies in WWII. Instead, German “antifascists” had liberated their homeland. This was a myth serving primarily to portray the communists as the rightful rulers of Germany and thus promote a positive identification with the state. It was also part of a principle that formed the basis for the GDR national identity, that of ‘German-Soviet Friendship’. Beginning in 1955, Ulbricht mandated the erection of Lenin monuments throughout the GDR.<sup>8</sup> The principle can also be seen clearly in stamps commemorating the anniversaries of the “liberation from fascism”.

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<sup>5</sup> Orlow, *The GDR’s Failed Search for a National Identity, 1945-1989*, 549.

<sup>6</sup> Nothnagle, *Historical Myth-Building in the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1989*, 103.

<sup>7</sup> *National Anthem of the German Democratic Republic: “Auferstanden aus Ruinen”* (1949). [German History Intersections](#).

<sup>8</sup> Nothnagle, *Historical Myth-Building in the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1989*, 101.





Figure 1 - GDR stamps commemorating anniversaries of the 'liberation from fascism' - Museum Berlin-Karlshorst, 29/5/2024. Author's photo

With the replacement of Ulbricht by Honecker in 1971, and with the beginnings of *Ostpolitik*, a new mythology was called for that would present the GDR additionally as a Germany in its own right, seeing in a new era of identity-building through history.

Fearing that *Ostpolitik* would result in the Western infiltration of the GDR, Honecker in 1971 announced a policy of 'demarcation' from the FRG, resulting in the formal renunciation of reunification and the banning of the unification-oriented text of the Becher national anthem. The new policy reoriented GDR historiography, educational and cultural policy towards a discovery of a uniquely East German heritage and history. To this end, the SED historians Schmidt and Kosing began abandoning the binary view that the GDR was the culmination of all progressive German history, and started pushing the theory of *Erbe* (heritage) and *Tradition*.<sup>9</sup> Traditions were the aspects of the past that led directly to the creation of the GDR, such as working class struggles, revolutions and antifascism, and therefore were portrayed as

<sup>9</sup> Orlow, *The GDR's Failed Search for a National Identity, 1945-1989*, 548.



models for the population to revere. Heritages were ideologically less desirable people, events and movements of the past that nevertheless were part of national history and laid the groundwork for the GDR. *Erbe* and *Tradition* allowed for the claiming of all of German history for the development of the GDR, and the claiming of prewar German and Prussian national mythology. Notable examples include Honecker's directive to return Frederick the Great's statue to Berlin, and his 'reintegration' of him into the GDR historical consciousness, the proclamation of a "Luther-year" in 1983 (a notable policy continuation from Ulbricht's regime), and the reconstruction of the historic city centre of Berlin, demolished in the 1940s and 50s (a notable policy reversal).<sup>10</sup>

The strategies used in developing a national identity through myth-building and history-writing during the existence of the GDR varied considerably. The era of Ulbricht was characterised by three paradigms: firstly that the GDR was the pinnacle of everything positive and progressive in German history, and the FRG was that of everything negative and reactionary. Secondly, that of German-Soviet friendship, which the SED attempted to trace through forgotten Weimar-era leftist groups. Thirdly, that the legacy of the 'antifascists' was the fundamental basis of the GDR. All of these aimed to promote to the populace a positive identification with the state. With the regime of Erich Honecker came a new strategy; the national goal of reunification under SED rule was renounced, and focus shifted towards the creation of a not only socialist, but also uniquely East German identity and history. The historiography of *Erbe* and *Tradition* were the methods used to achieve this, as they allowed the claiming of all German history for the purpose of identity building and inspiring pride in the GDR among the population. Nonetheless, a few history-writing policies remained constant from Ulbricht to Honecker, among them antifascism, German-Soviet friendship, and justification of the socialist regime through manipulation of historical Marxist-Leninist ideals.

### *Popular Culture*

If we examine any remotely dictatorial or authoritarian regime throughout history, one of the most common trends is the censorship of literature, music, art, and drama, that dissents against the regime. The GDR was no different, with many restrictions on such works. However, its policy towards literature changed markedly during its existence. The late 1940s and early 1950s under Ulbricht saw the return of previously exiled left-wing writers, who had

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<sup>10</sup> Nothnagle, *Historical Myth-Building in the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1989*, 107-108.



high hopes for the foundation of the first socialist state on German soil. They included Anna Seghers and Johannes Becher (author of the unification-focused original GDR national anthem), who became in some ways GDR establishment figures. Bertholt Brecht, whose approval from the regime varied from praise to suppression, was another. The range of his work available for viewing and reading was restricted, as many of his works had an edge critical of Ulbricht's interpretation of communism.<sup>11</sup> The return of these figures was a positive for the regime's development of a national identity, as these writers were genuinely hopeful and optimistic for the future of the GDR, a sentiment conveyed in their writings. Thus, this optimistic and proud national feeling would be transmitted to the wider population.<sup>12</sup> One notable writer of this era was Christa Wolf, an ardent socialist and candidate member of the SED Central Committee whose political leanings were reflected in her works. She thus enjoyed the privileges of a 'state poet'.<sup>13</sup> The SED employed further measures in order to develop the national identity of a workers', peasants' and intelligentsia state: at a 1959 conference, the importance of relating intellectual and practical work was emphasised. Writers should gain knowledge of the factory experience, labourers should pick up the pen, the aim of this being to reinforce a sense of socialist national brotherhood between the labouring and intellectual classes.<sup>14</sup>

Erich Honecker began his term with these words: "if one proceeds from the firm position of socialism there can ... be no taboos".<sup>15</sup> Indeed, a period of relative experimentation with the norms did occur in the 1970s. Unlike in other Eastern Bloc countries, writers in the GDR were not the main source of opposition to the regime, as they generally held the privileged position of increased freedom of movement, and thus would cause no issues for the SED.<sup>16</sup> This was a key part of the strategy to use popular culture to foster a national identity, or at least restrict any material that would be counterproductive to its development. However, the main focus of the Honecker era was the development of a GDR-specific culture. The Honecker transition also marked a more stringent turning point in policy. While on an officially sanctioned tour of the FRG, musician Wolf Biermann was expatriated for "gross

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<sup>11</sup> Mary Fulbrook, *The Divided Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 292.

<sup>12</sup> Fulbrook, *The Divided Nation*, 293.

<sup>13</sup> The Economist, *Divided Soul - a Reassessment of East Germany's Most Famous Writer*, [Economist](#), July 13, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Fulbrook, *The Divided Nation*, 293.

<sup>15</sup> Neues Deutschland, *KOMMUNIQUE Der 4. Tagung Des Zentralkomitees Der SED, Neues Deutschland*, December 18, 1971.

<sup>16</sup> Fulbrook, *The Divided Nation*, 295.



violation of civic duties,” meaning that he fell the wrong side of the party line.<sup>17</sup> This represented a new degree of intolerance from the regime with regard to breaking with official cultural policy. This intolerance through the 1980s manifested itself in self-censorship and self-restraint for writers in what they would put into print, as well as actual censorship from the SED. This in fact contradicted the official line, which was that constraint and restriction were minimal, however it was explained away by claims of production issues.<sup>18</sup>

The SED’s policy regarding restriction of regime-critical literature, and promotion of ideologically desirable material that would aid in the promotion of a national identity, varied throughout the GDR’s existence. The regime of Ulbricht saw a return of left-wing writers to Germany under a policy of ‘social realism’, or the promotion of the building of socialism as a topic in literature, along with the synthesis of workers’ and writers’ skills to develop a national working class identity. In contrast, Honecker, in conjunction with his policy of ‘demarcation’ from the FRG, sought a new, GDR-exclusive culture, and at the same time tightened restrictions over dissent from official cultural policy. Censorship was the main policy which pervaded the two regimes, but it was taken further under Honecker. Of course, there existed a multitude of channels available to the regime for the dissemination of propaganda, such as newspapers and controlled TV; however, it was in the use of literature as a tool of cultural and identity development that the most significant changes occurred from the regime of Ulbricht to Honecker.

### *Sport & Involvement with the Youth*

Many of the principles and policies that aimed at a national identity in the GDR were not only found in official government speeches and documents, but also in the culture of the youth, through the Freie Deutsche Jugend (FDJ), the Ernst-Thälmann Pioniere, and the school curriculum. This is unsurprising, for the emphasis that the SED placed on the upbringing of the youth in a way beneficial to the antifascist communist revolution was apparent. The communist hero Ernst Thälmann, as quoted in Erich Honecker’s memoirs *Aus meinem Leben*, said that “Revolution without youth is only half a revolution, it cannot win”.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the most instrumental element of communist rule used by Ulbricht’s regime over the youth started as an apolitical institution. The FDJ was founded in 1946, and aimed for a free

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<sup>17</sup> Jim Morton, *The Expatriation of Wolf Biermann*, [East German Cinema Blog](#), September 17, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Fulbrook, *The Divided Nation*, 295.

<sup>19</sup> Erich Honecker, *Aus Meinem Leben* (Berlin Dietz, 1989), 339.





and democratic youth organisation where a range of young antifascists would band together for the reconstruction of their homeland. Nonetheless, it would not be long before it was transformed by Ulbricht's SED into a weapon of ideological indoctrination. The leading role of the Party was formally proclaimed in 1952, and in 1957 it was declared a socialist organisation.<sup>20</sup> Membership was not technically compulsory, yet it was far more difficult to get a job for those who did not participate. The FDJ was responsible for the socialist education of its members, all of whom were expected to participate in the 'school year', a programme of ideological schooling began in 1950 and designed to provide a large pool of well-trained cadres for future employment in the SED apparatus.<sup>21</sup> Thus, it was also necessary for the group to ensure identification with the state and the ideology of Marxism-Leninism. By the early 1950s, loyalty to the SED and USSR now formed a core part of the FDJ programme, illustrated by the increasingly powerful cult of Stalin in the GDR; in late 1949, the FDJ collected the signatures of more than 2 million young East Germans for a congratulatory telegram sent to Stalin on his 70th birthday.<sup>22</sup> Yet the turning point in FDJ policy came not with the appointment of Honecker, but with Ulbricht's youth policy reforms of the 1960s, moving away from his 'accelerated construction of socialism' agenda, and returning to the focus on leisure and cultural events.<sup>23</sup>

While strategy regarding the FDJ post-youth reform did not change considerably with the replacement of Ulbricht by Honecker, a new strategy by the SED regarding national identity made its way into the lives of the youth. From 1975 onwards, all youth received the book "Der Sozialismus – deine Welt" (socialism – your world) as a gift from the state on the occasion of their coming-of-age.<sup>24</sup> A good picture of the overall ideological and national message to youth can be found in the introduction, written by Honecker himself. Honecker begins by declaring that the youth can only survive whilst remaining "upright", something achievable only by taking the side of socialism. The knowledge gained from this would supposedly help the reader to "consciously and actively participate in the further shaping of the developed socialist society in our German Democratic Republic." The message is clear: it

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<sup>20</sup> Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship : Inside the GDR, 1949-1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 60.

<sup>21</sup> Alan McDougall, *Youth Politics in East Germany : The Free German Youth Movement, 1946-1968* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004), 20-21.

<sup>22</sup> McDougall, *Youth Politics in East Germany*, 24-25.

<sup>23</sup> Mike Dennis, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1990* (England, New York: Harlow, Longman, 2016), 112-13.

<sup>24</sup> Wall text, DDR Museum, Berlin.





is desirable to not be apathetic to the nation, but to take pride in its development and improvement. Again, we find SED history-writing intertwined with all aspects of life: Honecker explicitly states the official government historical policy of the time, namely that the GDR “is the fulfilment of the centuries-long successful struggle of all progressive forces of the German people”, and encourages the reader to educate themselves about this struggle and the events of history through which the GDR supposedly developed, described in the book. Furthermore, Honecker mentions the “victory of the Soviet Union over Hitlerite fascism” as paving the way for the modern East German state, thus emphasizing the ubiquitous narrative of German-Soviet friendship. Honecker, with unjustifiable optimism, describes his country as “a state of true freedom and democracy, of peace and humanity” where “the roots of wars and crises, social hardship and misery have been eliminated once and for all”.<sup>25</sup>

Another key ideological weapon aimed at youth and others was the GDR’s sport programme. The GDR constitution even encouraged citizens’ participation in sport in order to develop the socialist personality, and Honecker later went so far as to credit the 1948 formation of the German Sports Committee with aiding in the rise of the GDR.<sup>26</sup> In his then-position as chairman of the FDJ, he shaped much of the policy surrounding sports in East Germany; he believed that the struggles of the proletariat had always been closely linked to German workers’ sport, and thus sought to build the sport programme around this core link.<sup>27</sup> In his autobiography, Honecker wrote that “With all this we have succeeded in ensuring that sports and physical culture occupy a distinguished place in the life of the GDR”.<sup>28</sup> While this may be an exaggeration, there is no doubt that he, and the SED party leadership, made concerted efforts in the aftermath of WWII to develop a socialist national programme of sports. Honecker’s commitment to the formation of an identity surrounding sport can be no better demonstrated than through the fact that he played a public volleyball set against Walter Ulbricht in 1959.

The SED’s strategy regarding sport culture and the youth is one of the most fascinating components of their endeavours to develop a national identity for the GDR. The FDJ was an iconic symbol of the GDR, but not only this: it aimed to ensnare the entire young population

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<sup>25</sup> Heinrich Gemkow, *Der Sozialismus, Deine Welt* (Zentraler Ausschuss für Jugendweihe in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 1975), 5-7.

<sup>26</sup> Honecker, *Aus Meinem Leben*, 221.

<sup>27</sup> Honecker, *Aus Meinem Leben*, 220.

<sup>28</sup> Honecker, *Aus Meinem Leben*, 232.



of East Germany into as socialist and patriotic an upbringing as possible, through their combination of socialist schooling and appealing outdoor activities, along with the effectively mandatory membership. Originally a broad activity-driven organisation, the FDJ morphed into a weapon of ideological control under Ulbricht. Interestingly, the change within the FDJ did not occur with the new Honecker regime as with many other areas of national identity building, but instead came within the term of Ulbricht, when it reverted to its original purpose. The East German sports organisations were perhaps seen as one of the sectors of society that was most crucial for the formation of an East German identity, and by 1960, it could point to some impressive statistics: according to Honecker, 19,000 sports facilities were available to athletes in the DDR, and over 4.2 million citizens took part in sport in 1959 alone.<sup>29</sup> Sport was one of the only methods of identity promotion with a constant strategy between the two terms. The widespread book *Der Sozialismus – deine Welt* gives an insight into the strategies used by the SED to target the youth with messages of identification with the state, and shows a new approach in youth policy taken by Honecker.

## Conclusion

With the formation of the Soviet zone of occupation in the aftermath of WWII, it was a priority from the outset that the SED should focus on the development of a strong, independent national identity for its future citizens. This essay has shown some of the most prominent examples of the methods used which give insights into the general strategy of the SED. However, during the two main leadership eras under Ulbricht and Honecker, the policy of the SED changed markedly. This can be attributed to the changing geopolitical state of Europe at the transition point between the two General Secretaries, including the beginnings of *Ostpolitik*. In the field of history-writing, emphasis shifted from the idea that the GDR was the culmination of all progressive German history so as to justify the existence of an entirely artificial socialist state, towards the development of a notion of a uniquely East German identity and history through *Erbe* and *Tradition*, stimulated by Honecker's 'demarcation' policy with the FRG. As to the success of these policies, there is some evidence that the younger generation did begin to think in terms of GDR citizenship and GDR culture rather than simply seeing themselves as German. However, this could also be due to the passage of time and a new generation who had grown up in a socialist state. It seems that East Germans assented to the respect for the German national heritage that the state pushed in the 70s and

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<sup>29</sup> Honecker, *Aus Meinem Leben*, 224.



80s. On the other hand, East Germans kept an intense interest in the West, watching FRG TV and cultivating links with western friends.<sup>30</sup>

With regard to the area of literature and popular culture in the GDR, there was also change in strategy to be seen. The regime of Ulbricht developed a policy of 'socialist realism', characterised by an increased focus on the development of socialism and the socialist state as a literary topic, and attempted to strengthen the bond between the intelligentsia and workers under the leadership of the GDR through literature. With Honecker's policy of demarcation came an increased focus on the development of an independent GDR culture through literature, along with a crackdown on literary dissent. However, as the decades progressed, literature became a less effective tool of dissemination of the message of national unity, largely due to the increasing popularity of West German television. Moreover, earlier optimistic literature was later recognised to have had little merit or influence in transforming attitudes toward socialism.<sup>31</sup>

The SED's use of youth and sport culture to further their message of a GDR national identity differed less between the two regimes. The theme of socialist education was altered not at the transition between regimes, but instead under Ulbricht. Sport policy began intensely and did not let up. The new book presented for coming-of-age under Honecker gives a fascinating insight into just how far the SED pushed their narratives of the collective, German-Soviet friendship, and the GDR as the pinnacle of progressive German history. Nevertheless, the book was not read in earnest by very many at all, as young teenagers generally did not concern themselves with 500-page books on socialism. The FDJ, though effectively mandatory, only had on average a membership of around 40-55% during the 50s and 60s, and thus did not reach the audience desired by the party.<sup>32</sup>

The mission of the SED in creating a national identity was always going to be an uphill battle; in an entirely artificial nation with arbitrary borders, with an ideology that had never previously existed in that area, an identification with the state, rather than with Germany as a whole, would be very difficult to achieve for a majority of the population. Indeed, the evidence suggests that an East German national identity did not really develop until after reunification, and that being largely without socialism as part of that identity. This modern East German identity presents difficulties, as a growing rift between the West and

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<sup>30</sup> Fulbrook, *The Divided Nation*, 302-303.

<sup>31</sup> Fulbrook, *The Divided Nation*, 293.

<sup>32</sup> McDougall, *Youth Politics in East Germany*, 21.



East appears, and is now one of the biggest internal challenges facing the German government. Time will tell whether they can tackle their question of national identity better than the SED did.

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