

The Democratization Process in Thuringia 1989

The democratization process in the German Democratic Republic (DDR) in 1989/90 was caused and influenced by various factors. Following five aspects appeared to be of prominent significance: firstly, the deficits in the political organisation of society and state; secondly, the weakness of the DDR economy; thirdly, the disappearing legitimization of the state by the population; fourthly, external influences such as Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of Glasnost and Perestroika, the dissolution of the Soviet bloc system and the political change in Poland and Hungary; and lastly, the increasing importance of new social movements, which developed into de facto political opposition.

The structural peculiarities of the Thuringian districts Erfurt, Suhl and Gera were decisive for the developments of 1989/90; two ought to be mentioned: the several hundred kilometres long border shared by the first two districts with the Federal Republic of Germany (BRD) and the lack of large urban centers. Whether the close proximity of the border to the BRD had any impact on the selection of the local, political leadership cannot be suggested with certainty. However, it is conspicuous that the top secretaries of the SED district leaderships (Socialist Unity Party of Germany) Hans Albrecht (Suhl), Gerhard Müller (Erfurt) and Herbert Ziegenhahn (Gera), who were as 'Politburo' governors the de facto rulers, were known as uncompromising political hardliners. The lack of larger cities, in which it was easier to establish international contacts, restrained all external impulses leading to the formation of an opposition. Another peculiarity of the Thuringian region was the closed, inward-looking Catholic milieu of the Eichsfeld that did not involve itself in the shaping of the democratization process, from the beginning until November 1989.

Deficits of the System

The political and social deficits of the DDR system in Thuringia can be illustrated on three examples of the communal level, which are the extremely unbalanced distribution of political power in the district Sondershausen, the city planning and development in Erfurt and the local elections on May 7, 1989. In Sondershausen, the distribution of political power was so disparate that the 1st SED district-secretary Manfred Keßler, who based himself on his blood-relation to the DDR defense-secretary Heinz Keßler could, from the perspective of the citizens, behave like an absolutist monarch. Manfred Keßler did not hesitate to destroy careers, for example, the career of a forester, who refused to allow the hunting in a forest due to economic reasons that Keßler had requested.

The canteen of the SED district-leadership was subsidized by the culture- and social fund of the “Volkseigenen Betrieb Elektroinstallation Sondershausen” (People-owned Enterprise for Electrical Installation) so that the SED functionaries, who earned double- or triple as much as the average DDR-citizen, could eat on a cost-saving scheme.

The SED pursued ambitious projects in the area of city planning and development and perceived any external proposals or criticism as unwanted interference. Particularly in Erfurt, the planned demolition of the “Andreasviertel”, a former tradesman quarter that belonged to the old inner-city, was a highly controversial matter. Modern buildings, made from prefabricated slabs, ought to replace the historic houses of the quarter after the completion of a road construction project. The background of these plans, which the SED had pursued since the end of the 60es and picked-up again in the 80es, was the ideal of a ‘modern socialist metropolis’..

Further points of criticism had been two SED prestige projects: the “Haus der Kultur”, that the district-secretary Gerhard Müller presented as an absolute, political necessity, of which only the structure was completed as well as the 17.5 meter high Karl-Marx monument at the historic “Domplatz” in front of two cathedrals that never went further than the planning stage.

Local Elections

The rigging of election results by the SED on the local level in Thuringia was particularly evident in Weimar. The town of Goethe and Schiller had, in comparison to other towns of the region, a bourgeois-conservative dominated social structure and was traditionally governed by a CDU mayor (Christian Democratic Union), who was closely observed by a second mayor, appointed by the SED. Simultaneously, there was a remarkable, alternative culture in Weimar that did not only challenge the state and ‘the party’ (SED) but also the leadership of the Protestant Church. The ‘unproblematic conduct’ of the election fraud was particularly difficult within this triangular area of tension between the bourgeois-conservatives, a government that was not fully dependent on the SED and the critical, alternative milieu.

Just before the local elections, the chairman of the council for the district Erfurt, Arthur Swatek, ordered all members of the electoral commission not to pass on any of the election results to the districts without the permission of the prevailing SED leadership. This order indicates the absolute rule of ‘the party’ over the governments on the communal level.

A stir was caused, when the SED mayor Volkhardt Germer ordered three people (i.e. informants) to follow closely the counting of the ballot papers at two selected polling stations that were preferred by critics of 'the party' and the government due to reasons of anonymity, on May 6, 1989. Consequently, 'the party' withdrew Germer from the ongoing elections. On the election day itself, the 1st secretary of the SED district-leadership, Peter Damaschke negotiated with the mayor of Weimar Gerhard Baumgärtl about the realisation of predetermined election results and pointed to the "political responsibility" of 'the party'.

The leadership expected a result of 99+X % of votes. Baumgärtl refused and made clear that this request was not feasible. Damaschke on his part was under immense pressure by the regional district-secretary, Gerhard Müller. Ultimately, Damaschke and Baumgärtl agreed on a result of 97, 85% with roughly 1000 opposing votes. In this sense, the election results were manipulated. Despite the rigging, Weimar had the worst result across the district Erfurt and because of that Damaschke received harsh criticism from Gerhard Müller. The actual election results for Weimar counted 92% yes-votes and roughly 3000 opposing votes.

The Economy

The situation of the DDR-economy had been deteriorating since the mid-70es. In particular the oil crisis of 1973 until 1979; the 1976 decided realisation of an independent micro-electronics program that was out of reach without external help; the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan at the end of 1979/beginning 1980 with the consequence of the deterioration of West-East technology-transfers and the worldwide recession at the beginning of the 80es; dramatically increased the national debt of the DDR. The state debts rose to 49 billion 'Valutamark' (For exchange-earning bilateral agreements and business transactions between the BRD and DDR the stronger West German currency was used, whereby the term "Deutsche Mark" was frowned upon by the DDR leadership and in order to differentiate the DDR currency (Mark) from the BRD currency (D-Mark) the name 'Valutamark' became common practice.)

In autumn 1989, the DDR leadership apparently even considered the disposal of the Wall in case the BRD was prepared to offer extensive financial aid. According to Herbert Kroker, who replaced Gerhard Müller as 1st secretary of the district Erfurt and was known for his economic expertise, only a few, selected functionaries knew about the dimensions of the financial dilemma, not even the Politburo was fully informed. Further Kroker claims that the secretary of the 'Zentralkomitee' (Central Committee) for finance and economy Günter

Mittag, had disempowered the government, “violated everything” and did not allow any competition.

The deficits in the political organisation of state and society and the bleak situation of the economy undermined the population's belief in the legitimacy of the system. Mainly because the political leadership of ‘the party’ and state created a far-reaching system of privileges, which stood in massive contrast to the principle of equality that the Communists originally claimed to pursue more than anybody else. In 1989, it was repeatedly criticized that the leadership was “preaching water, yet drinking wine instead”.

The Impact of Internal and External Factors

The question, in how far the democratization process of 1989/90 originated from internal pressures or was heavily influenced by external circumstances led to a controversy amongst historians. Was the dissolution of SED power consequence of a revolution or an ‘implosion’? The historic reality is most probably located somewhere between those two positions.

It is undeniable that the external influences had a significant impact on the developments in the DDR in 1989. However, questioning the revolutionary character of the events cannot be useful, because revolutions have always been exposed to external influences (and external influences used to maximize the chances, leading to the achievement of political goals).

A political opposition in the DDR, in the “active” sense had formed relatively late in the mid-80es and particularly gained momentum in 1987. The expression ‘opposition’ was rather unusual, people were talking about the phenomenon of the “Gruppen” (groups) or the “Basisgruppen” - that represented an antagonizing culture to the officially dominating culture, marked by networks of personal relations that belonged to the ‘new social movements’, which were also known in West Germany. Later, only in September 1989, the expression ‘citizen movement’ (Bürgerbewegung) became common use.

The Citizen Movements

In the Thuringian region the most important citizen movement was the “Neue Forum” (New Forum), which came to public attention with its founding on September 12. In a private flat in Erfurt, a constituent assembly was held on September 21, 1989. The registration (which was at first not accepted by the official administration at the council, as ordered by the Ministry for State Security (MfS)) occurred on October 12.

In the district Suhl, the “Neue Forum” established itself through the circle “Gesellschaftliche Erneuerung” (the renewal of society) on September 13 and recruited its members from the leadership-teams of the church district and from representatives of the ecumenical/environmental group of Suhl. In Jena (district Gera), the “Neue Forum” was founded in a Protestant student congregation on September 25, 1989.

According to its self-conception, the “Neue Forum” was not a party but a ‘political platform for the whole DDR’. In the district Erfurt, the programmatic development of the “Neue Forum” was not particularly distinctive. Although it was clear that the “Neue Forum” did not work towards a restoration of the capitalist society but for a reformed socialist state under the rule of law. The “Neue Forum” did not question the state dualism in Germany (Zweistaatlichkeit).

In contrast to the “Neue Forum”, the “Demokratische Aufbruch –DA” (Democratic Awakening), the second most important citizen movement in Thuringia, pursued goals, of which realisation meant the overcoming of the current, political system of the DDR. This becomes evident in the ‘DA’ manifesto written by Edelbert Richter. According to Richter, the “Demokratische Aufbruch” had following inner-political goals: the SED to give up its leading role, the freedom of party pluralism and association, a state under the sound rule of law and the separation of powers. In terms of economic policy, the ‘fiction’ of the people’s common property had to be replaced by private property and the reality of market mechanisms was to be recognized. Apart from that the “Demokratische Aufbruch” was striving for a balance between economic efficiency, social justice and environmental sustainability.

The founding of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in the DDR took place in Schwante on October 7 and was difficult due to a mixture of reasons. Firstly, the social democratic tradition had been destroyed and eliminated by the DDR regime, secondly, it was feared that a strong Social Democratic Party would be able to challenge the SED more than other parties could.

The citizen movement “Demokratie-Jetzt” (Democracy-Now), of which founding became public on September 12, had close relations to the “Neue Forum” (however refused to register with the official administrations) and had its center in Berlin. In the Thuringian region, the movement was particularly present in the district Bad Salzungen, in Arnstadt, Eisenberg, Erfurt, Bad Langensalza, Nordhausen, Mühlhausen, Gera, Jena and Weimar.

In November 1989, the Green Party (Grüne Partei) was formed that in contrary to the “Neue Forum”, saw itself as a party with more articulated and stronger, programmatic background.

From the perspective of one representative of the Green Party in Thuringia, not many programmatic differences existed between the Green Party and the “Neue Forum”. Since 1990 however, the “Neue Forum” on its part, had been permanently fearing that it would be swallowed by the Green Party.

A unique case in the spectrum of the new movements was the “Vereinigte Linke -VL” (United Left) that represented a melting pot for all political streams left from the already mentioned, other groups. The VL felt responsible for former SED members as well as people, who considered themselves left-wing in an undogmatic manner and pursued anarchical-libertarian aims. The problem was that the other citizen movements, due to the VL’s openness towards former SED members, observed the United Left in distrust. Branches of the United Left that had its center in Berlin, existed only in Erfurt, Jena and Weimar.

The re-unification of Germany became the central programmatic cause of one political group in Thuringia, which was established relatively late on December 12, 1989 in Suhl: the “Forum-Partei Thüringen” (Forum Party Thuringia). The representatives of the “Neue Forum” in Berlin were against this choice of name and tried to stop it however without success. On January 20, 1990, the “Forum Partei Thüringen” formed with other regional groups that had conservative, basic principles in common the ‘Deutsche Soziale Union – DSU’ (German Social Union) in Leipzig. Below the official level of parties and groups that took part in central elections, a variety of groups existed that contributed to the democratization process in the local arena in 1989/90.

The Churches

The process of democratization in the DDR could not have taken place in this manner without the institution of the Protestant Church. Since the end of the 60es/beginning of the 70es, the church made political concessions to the SED, which was mirrored by the formula: “Church within Socialism”. From the perspective of leading Protestant theorists, for instance the provost Heino Falcke, a reformed socialism was considered desirable – however, the concept of socialism in itself was not questioned.

Under its first post-war and relatively SED-friendly bishop Moritz Mützenheim, the Protestant Lutheran Church in Thuringia chose its own ‘path’, which was highly disputed within its own ranks. Later however, it won independence and profile under the leadership of Bishop Werner Leich, who urged for societal changes in a conversation with Erich Honecker (General-Secretary of the Central Committee of the SED).

Christoph Demke, Bishop of the Protestant Church in the church province Saxony, to which belonged the former Prussian church districts Erfurt, Sömmerda, Mühlhausen, Langensalza, Suhl and Schleusingen, also stood up for reforms in September 1989. Even so the role of the Protestant Church in 1989 continues to be strongly debated it has to be noted that the Protestant Church and the Protestant milieu had developed an enormous political impact.

By contrast, the Catholic Church fell into a state of hibernation in the socialist system. Its self-perception was far less political compared to the Protestant Church and it only intervened, irrespective of the ecumenical assembly in Dresden in spring 1989, when the turning-point had nearly been reached at the end of October/beginning of November.

The Events

Looking at the democratization process in Thuringia as a whole in autumn 1989, it can be divided into following stages: First, the opposition conducted political assemblies in the public spaces of the Protestant Church. The second step was the organisation of so-called "citizens dialogues" (Bürgerdialoge) since the end of October. In doing so, the movement forced state and party representatives to answer critical questions. The party- and state leadership perceived these dialogues increasingly as 'executions' and announced its withdrawal from such events at the beginning of November. Only the third step, although it happened simultaneously to the second, was then the organisation of protest marches. These demonstrations had less significance than the protests in Berlin, Dresden and Leipzig.

The first big demonstration in Erfurt took place on October 26, after a first smaller protests on October 19. At the same time, demonstrations began to take place in other towns: in Mühlhausen on October 20, in Jena on October 25, in Gera on October 26 and in Eisenach on October 30. As starting point of the demonstrations used to serve the 'prayers for peace' (Friedensgebete) that were held very early in Erfurt, namely since 1987 and later also in other cities. There are a several causes for the belated/relatively late street demonstrations: one of them was that the opposition in Thuringia did not feel strong enough yet to risk the open confrontation at an earlier point in time. A lot of political activists traveled to Berlin, Dresden and Leipzig in order to take part in the protest marches. Secondly, the security forces and secret police attempted especially around the 40th anniversary of the founding of the DDR (October 7) with all possible means to prevent and stop any protest activities. Thirdly, the decision of the Protestant Church, for example in Erfurt, to host opposition groups reduced the pressure to take the protest on the street. Fourthly, some members of the "Neue Forum" understood demonstrations as an unnecessary risk and pursued the

strategy (that the MfS cleverly supported with the help of informants) to try and achieve political objectives by the means of negotiation.

The SED and Factional Parties

The question, whether the SED could be reformed was ultimately linked to a second question that was, whether the party would do without the claim to leadership in favour of the new political groups. The SED was, of course, not prepared to take this step, instead embarrassing attempts were made by Egon Krenz, Gerhard Müller and others, pretending that they were the catalysts of the social transformation and changes within 'the party'.

In fact, it was exactly this mixture between the will to maintain power and the lacking ability to act, which made the SED also open to attacks from its grass roots. The majority of the leadership of the factional parties supported the SED, while a distinctive resistance began to develop amongst grass roots members. This became evident when they started to speak publicly at demonstrations and rallies and took part in citizen committees (that were established after the occupation of the district administrations of the state security service). With the occupation of the former district administrations of the Ministry for State Security (Ministerium für Staatssicherheit), which was renamed to "Amt für Nationale Sicherheit" after Modrow's government statement on November 17, the last anchor of the old system had gone. The first spontaneous 'occupation' took place in the morning of December 4, in Erfurt. The initiative came from the female citizen group "Frauen für Veränderung" (Women for Change). With the disempowerment of the state security service, the last stage of the radical change was introduced, marked by the formation of citizen committees and round-tables. This phase came to an end with the elections in 1990, when the transfer of the round-tables and citizen committees that had been legitimized by the peaceful revolution to the formally legitimized and democratically elected parliaments was carried out. Decisive for this time was that the citizen movements did not pose the question of power but aimed to participate in the distribution of the same. Therefore this time was characterized by a juxtaposition of old and new forces.

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