
The East German Refugee Exodus of 1989

A Comparison of the Implications on the Bilateral Relations of Hungary with the GDR, BRD and USSR

Julian Kirchoff

Introduction and Relevance

In German popular opinion the fall of the Berlin Wall on the evening of the ninth of November 1989, set in motion by a chain of events following an ambiguous statement by the East German press secretary Günther Schabowski, marked the end of the Iron Curtain and paved the way for what would effectively cumulate in German reunification one year later. But while the event and the accompanying outpouring of joy in Berlin, which is still annually remembered as the “Mauerfall,” had a strong signal effect, it was not this spontaneous stroke of luck alone that led to the end of the intra-German border as is often portrayed. While the thousands of East Germans that successfully challenged the border guards at the Berlin wall that November evening certainly hastened the demise of the fortified division of Germany, it was only accelerated by a few weeks or days if the last West German de facto ambassador to the German Democratic Republic (GDR) Franz Bertele^① is to be believed. Rather than the product of a botched press conference, the “Mauerfall” was the inevitable product of a growing loss of control by the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) over its population, caused by economic stagnation paired with the unwillingness of the Honecker led government to adjust itself to the changing international environment of Glasnost and Perestroika.^② Apart from the increasingly well attended “Monday Protests” towards the end of 1989, the most obvious sign of this development was the massive refugee crisis, which began in summer that year as the Iron Curtain became more porous, owing to the fast-paced liberation in neighboring Hungary. Starting with the infamous pan-European picnic on the Austrian-Hungarian border, where over 300 GDR citizens were able to cross the iron wall mostly unimpeded,^③ the stream of refugees soon increased to many thousand a day, which not only tried to reach the west through Hungary, but also sought refuge in the West German embassies of Prague and Warsaw. Apart from the desire for more personal liberty and the opportunity to

① Reflection in his final report from the West German liaison office in East Berlin (1990).

② Steven Saxonberg, “The Fall: A Comparative Study of the End of Communism in Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary and Poland,” *Slavic Review* 61, no.3 (2017): 576-87.

③ Volker Wager, “Secrets of ‘Pan-European Picnic’ Still Shrouded in Mystery 30 Years Later,” *Deutsche Welle*, August 19, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/secrets-of-pan-european-picnic-still-shrouded-in-mystery-30-years-later/a-50059293> (accessed June 3, 2021).

travel freely, many of the refugees hoped for a better and more prosperous life in the capitalist west.^① The resulting crisis in the summer months required immediate decision making and laid bare the contradictions and incalculability in an Eastern Europe, where the long-standing political realities of the Soviet overlordship were crumbling, yet Moscow's reaction was still a matter of uncertainty.

While the spring of nations and fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 is well researched by historians and political scientists, existing analysis of the 1989 refugee exodus primarily focuses on the East German perspective as well as its implications for the German Democratic Republic. A stronger focus on the Hungarian perspective in light of its tumultuous 20th century history could yield additional insights. In my research paper I will focus on the case of Hungary and evaluate and compare how the refugee exodus affected Hungary's bilateral relations with the German Democratic Republic, the German Federal Republic (BRD) and the Soviet Union (USSR).

Literature Review

As many previously classified German documents concerning the happenings of 1989 were only released to the wider public from 2010 onwards, most relevant literature concerning the refugee exodus to Hungary and its implications are comparably new.^② A broad account on this topic is a 2015 paper by Polish social sciences professor Katarzyna Stokłosa^③ who focused on the situation and the implications of the East German refugees seeking refuge in the West German embassies in Warsaw, Prague and Budapest by analyzing among others, West German embassy cables exchanged during this period. While her comprehensive work contains valuable information and conclusions, some of which I might reference in my analysis, her paper strongly focuses on the situation in the West German embassies and the GDR response to it. In contrast to her work, my comparison will have a less narrow focus on the situation in the embassies and a stronger emphasis on assessing the political implications for Hungary omitting the already well researched topic of the factors that motivated East Germans to flee their own country.

The economic and political root causes of the following revolutions are also at the core of one of the most comprehensive English-language publications related to this topic, a 2017 book by author Steven Saxonberg.^④ The East German refugee exodus of 1989 is discussed in his book, although not with a very detailed analysis of its implications or comparisons, so some further focused research into this topic could still yield some additional insight.

① Katarzyna Stokłosa, "Die Letzte Fluchtwelle Aus Der DDR Im Jahr 1989. Aus Den Berichten Der Westdeutschen Botschaften in Budapest, Prag Und Warschau," *Zeitschrift Für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung*, 2015, 40–80.

② Tereza Procházková, "Der Ostdeutsche Exodus in Prag 1989 Und Seine Reflexion in Offiziellen Presse Der DDR Und ČSSR" (Master's Thesis, University Karlova, 2011).

③ Stokłosa, "Die Letzte Fluchtwelle Aus Der DDR Im Jahr 1989."

④ Saxonberg, *The Fall*.

Methodology

To answer the research question, I will introduce the historical background followed by an outline and analysis of the implications of the 1989 refugee crisis on Hungary's relationship with the GDR, the USSR, and the BRD. This is done by drawing on secondary sources such as some of the readings introduced above, as well as primary sources, among them documents and messages of the West German and East German foreign offices, which are publicly available through the library of the German foreign office. Hungary has also released some valuable documents from the concerned period, some of which have been translated. Furthermore, participating leaders such as Miklós Németh or Gyula Horn have given comprehensive accounts of their perspective through television interviews as well as in writing, both of which are publicly accessible.

Historical Background

The Communist Period

The communist period in Hungary began in earnest in 1949 when the Hungarian Communist Party, after having previously failed to win the majority in two more or less free elections, with Soviet backing forcibly integrated the remaining opposition parties into the new Hungarian Peoples Front. The new communist government was led by ardent Stalinist Matyas Rakosi, who instituted a personal cult around him and Stalin. His leadership was marked by tyranny signified by mass arrests and show trials, at one point even having his former right hand László Rajk executed.^① Due to the increasing resistance of the population and Communist Party cadres to his ruling style and his abuses, as well as the death of Stalin and the following de-Stalinization, Rakosi's power basis crumbled, and he was forced to resign in 1956. However, his resignation and replacement with Erno Gero failed to appease the masses and served as a precursor to the Hungarian revolution barely three months later.^②

The revolution of 1956 swept Imre Nagry to power who disbanded the feared secret service "Államvédelmi Hatóság" as well as among other measures, announced Hungary's neutrality and its exit of the Warsaw pact. These events forced the Soviet Union to intervene and violently crush the uprising.^③ Imre Nagy was exiled to Romania and later executed; his place was taken by fellow communist Janos Kadar. While the revolution of 1956 failed to achieve its initial objectives, it still laid the bedrock for a more liberal communism in Hungary the following decades. Coined the "Goulash communism," the Communist Party

① "Mátyás Rákosi (1892-1971)." *The Institute for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution*, 2000, http://www.rev.hu/history_of_56/szerviz/kislex/biograf/rakosi.htm (accessed June 3, 2021).

② Johanna Granville, "1956 Reconsidered: Why Hungary and Not Poland?," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 80, no.4 (2002): 656-87.

③ Ibid.

still maintained absolute control, but limitations on speech, culture and private economic activities were less strict compared to most other communist countries.

The following decades turned out to be a period of stability, but Hungary was, despite its comparably more liberal economic system, not spared from the general economic downturn that affected the Soviet Union and many of its satellite states from the 1980s onwards.^① Inflation and growing economic woes increased the pressure on the Kadar government and gave reformist minded groups new uplift. Unlike in other Soviet satellite states such as East Germany or Czechoslovakia, many high-ranking members of the Hungarian Communist Party acknowledged the pressing need for economic as well as political reforms fearing a public uprising should the dire economic situation continue. Janos Kadar gave in to internal pressure in 1988 and retired to be replaced by reformist communist and economic expert Miklós Németh. After overcoming severe resistance inside the communist party Németh set Hungary on a path to economic and political liberalization, democracy, as well rapprochement with the West. His strategy was not without risk, while it embraced Gorbachev's call for perestroika, there was the acute and unpredictable danger that going too far in the eyes of Moscow would attract Soviet wrath.

The Proceedings of 1989

In May 1989 the Hungarian government started to dismantle its border fence with Austria. The move was primarily a financial decision, as a replacement and upgrade of the aging border fortification would need to be paid for in hard currency.^② This decision was coordinated with the Soviet Union and Hungary assured that vigilant border controls would be kept up to deter any illegal border crossings toward the West.^③ For Hungarian citizens the border fortification had been already irrelevant, with the introduction of a World Passport in 1988 they were already free to travel to the West legally if they wished so.^④ While initially not widely publicized, a symbolic fence cutting ceremony between Austrian Foreign Minister Alois Mock and his Hungarian counterpart Gyula Horn in June 1989 was covered by western media and the news found its way to East Germany, where it made many aware that the Hungarian – Austrian Border could be a possible pathway to the west.

Despite the lack of a border fence, the border was not open and Hungarian Border troops stopped countless illegal border crossing attempts by GDR citizens. This first gap in the border appeared in August 1989 with the Pan-European Picnic.^⑤ The Picnic was an idea of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne

① Saxonberg, *The Fall*.

② Walter Mayr, "Hungary's Peaceful Revolution: Cutting the Fence and Changing History," *Der Spiegel*, May 2009, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/hungary-s-peaceful-revolution-cutting-the-fence-and-changing-history-a-627632.html> (accessed June 3, 2021).

③ "Gorbachev Hat Nur Gelächelt - Interview Mit Miklos Nemeth," *Die Welt*, September 11, 2004, <https://www.welt.de/print-welt/article339849/Gorbatschow-hat-nur-gelaechelt.html> (accessed June 3, 2021).

④ Mayr, "Hungary's Peaceful Revolution: Cutting the Fence and Changing History."

⑤ Wagener, "Secrets of 'Pan-European Picnic' Still Shrouded in Mystery 30 Years Later."

and member of EU Parliament Otto von Habsburg and conducted in collaboration with the Pan-European Union and the reformist Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF). The idea was to host a picnic directly on the Hungarian – Austrian border with attendees from both sides, to showcase the idea of a Europe without borders. The organizers received a permit that allowed for temporary border crossings during the picnic. Once approved, flyers for the event were extensively circulated among East German’s holidaying in Hungary.^① Many of them understood the message and some showed up at the advertised date and location. Once the temporary border gate was opened for the event to begin, around 700 East Germans overwhelmed the border guards, which mostly just stood by, and crossed into Austria unimpeded.^② Following the Picnic, the Hungarian Government intensified their border controls again, but was faced with an increasing number of illegal border crossing attempts by tens of thousands of East Germans now assembled in Hungary. Absent of border fortifications, quite a few slipped through every day. Contrary to previous practice, East Germans that were caught at the border were merely temporarily arrested and not deported back to their home country. Furthermore, Hungarian Border Guards were instructed not to use lethal force. In addition to those trying to illegally cross the border to Austria, up to 700 East Germans sought refuge in the West German embassy in Budapest and an adjacent campground. With the cold autumn weather approaching and absent of a negotiated solution involving the GDR, Hungary decided to suspend its bilateral treaty governing visa free travel in early September and opened the border to Austria; effectively allowing the GDR citizens within the country to cross into the West unhindered.^③

Analysis

Implications on the relationship with the GDR

When the Hungarian Ministry of Interior officially informed the GDR of the impending removal of the border fortification in early May, a fact which had previously been merely treated as a rumor in GDR government circles, the Hungarians were well aware of the possible consequences for its socialist brother country. They assured the GDR, however, that the change was merely cosmetic and stringent border controls would be kept up.^④ Hungary was bound by long-standing bilateral agreements with the GDR, which stipulated that it would not allow GDR citizens to travel onward to the non-socialist west.^⑤ This was important, because GDR citizens could travel to Hungary visa-free and did so in large numbers every year for vacation purposes, a lucrative business especially in the vacation hotspots near Lake Balaton.

① Wagener, “Secrets of ‘Pan-European Picnic’ Still Shrouded in Mystery 30 Years Later.”

② Mayr, “Hungary’s Peaceful Revolution: Cutting the Fence and Changing History.”

③ “19 August 1989 – a step on the way to German Reunification,” *German Political Archive*, 2019, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/-pan-european-picnic--1662402> (accessed June 3, 2021).

④ Stoklosa, “Die Letzte Fluchtelle Aus Der DDR Im Jahr 1989. Aus Den Berichten Der Westdeutschen Botschaften in Budapest, Prag Und Warschau.” 47.

⑤ 20 Deutsches Politisches Archiv – Deutschlandpolitik (BRD), Handakten Staatssekretär Jürgen Sudhoff, B – 2 B STS/286, August 1989, <https://politisches-archiv.diplo.de/invenio/direktlink/955d5ebe-cf95-4785-b55f-f7d29ebb00bc/>.

With few illegal border crossings, due to the limited spread of information about the removal of border fortifications and continuing controls, the GDR leadership was satisfied at first, but grew increasingly concerned when news spread among East Germans through western television following the official border fence cutting ceremony in late June. The news of the removed border fortification motivated many GDR citizens, in addition to the regular holidaymakers, to travel to Hungary for the summer vacation in hopes of being able to cross into the west. In a meeting with West German emissary Jürgen Sudhoff in early August, Hungarian foreign Minister Gyula Horn noted that by the end of July 1989, 200,000 GDR citizens had arrived in Hungary, which was a matter of great concern to Erich Honecker.^①

During July and August, many GDR citizens tried to cross the border to Austria illegally, but the majority were stopped by Hungarian border guards. Other GDR citizens sought refuge in the West German embassy in Budapest from August onward.^② The GDR demanded those apprehended at the border be deported back home based on their bilateral treaty, while the BRD demanded that Hungary recognize GDR citizens, especially those trapped at the embassy, as “German citizens” and therefore allow them to travel west.^③ This put the Hungarian leadership in a bind. On the one hand, Hungary recognized the humanitarian issue at stake and also strived to improve its relationship with the west as part of its reformist agenda, on the other hand, there was little appetite in further straining its relationship with the GDR and other Warsaw Pact states. The GDR was not only still a socialist brother country, but also one of Hungary’s largest trading partners. Furthermore, GDR tourists made up a considerable chunk of the country’s tourism business.^④ Antagonizing the Warsaw Pact could also have serious repercussion on the domestic reforms happening in Hungary. Since before the start of the refugee crisis, reformist developments in Hungary were already regarded with great suspicion by the GDR leadership. An internal report on the public reburial of Imre Nagy in June 1989 and the accompanying reassessment of the happenings of 1956 concluded that the USAP was increasingly losing control over the domestic situation and that a Hungarian rapprochement with the West and NATO would be a realistic possibility if the country continued its current trajectory.^⑤ The report called for a united response of the Warsaw Pact countries to these anti-Soviet actions, noting that the Romanian Ambassador in Budapest had already voiced his strong displeasure with the reactionary event.

With the Warsaw Pact reaction still uncertain and Hungarian Foreign Minister Horn anticipating a unilateral border closure by the GDR, should the situation escalate, the Hungarian leadership responded with a compromise. On one side, they publicly declined the BRD interpretation on the matter of German

① 20 Deutsches Politisches Archiv – Deutschlandpolitik (BRD), Handakten Staatssekretär Jürgen Sudhoff, B – 2 B STS/286.

② “Einmaliger Akt.” *Der Spiegel*, August 27, 1989, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/einmaliger-akt-a-58eefc7d-0002-0001-0000-000013495172> (accessed June 3, 2021).

③ 20 Deutsches Politisches Archiv – Deutschlandpolitik (BRD), Handakten Staatssekretär Jürgen Sudhoff, B – 2 B STS/286.

④ Stokfosa, “Die Letzte Fluchtelle Aus Der DDR Im Jahr 1989.”

⑤ 25 Deutsches Politisches Archiv – Grundsatzmaterialien zur Innerdeutschen Entwicklung, Lage in Ungarn (GDR), M 95-STG/712, June 1989, <https://politisches-archiv.diplo.de/invenio/direktlink/f5426943-b1cc-47d1-b339-a7c0d1bfbb93/>

citizenship, siding with the GDR, but they also ordered the border troops not to stamp documents or deport anybody back to the GDR who was caught illegally crossing the border. They clarified that the issue was primarily one concerning the BRD and the GDR and should be solved by both countries bilaterally.^① Nevertheless, Hungarian Foreign Minister Gyula Horn worked actively behind the scenes to find a face-saving solution for all parties.^② The GDR proved relentless, however and GDR Foreign Minister Oskar Fischer repeatedly declined proposals that would have provided a face-saving way for the GDR refugees into the West such as the formal granting of “Ausreiseanträge” (exit permits).^③ With the refugee situation becoming even more pressing during the course of August and a Soviet intervention becoming increasingly unlikely in the aftermath of the Pan-European Picnic, the Hungarian Foreign Minister put an ultimatum in front of his GDR counterpart Oskar Fischer. It stipulated that if he did not agree to any of the proposed solutions, Hungary would open its border to Austria and suspend its bilateral travel treaty with the GDR.^④ When this also failed to yield results, the Hungarian Government followed through with their threat in early September, allowing the GDR citizens to cross into the west unimpeded. This led to strong protest by the GDR and the East German Foreign Minister who accused Hungary of betraying the GDR and the Warsaw Pact.^⑤ But at this point Hungarian Foreign Minister Gyula Horn had already arrived at a conclusion which the GDR leadership still avoid acknowledging, namely that the internal situation in East Germany was heading toward a collapse.^⑥

The repercussions of the refugee exodus on the Hungarian – GDR relationship can be therefore characterized as negative. Despite Hungarian efforts to broker a face-saving solution the GDR leadership closed their eyes to the reality on the ground and refused a negotiated solution. The resulting border opening in September was met, not unexpectedly, with strong protest by the GDR, but with the larger threat of a Soviet intervention out of the way the Hungarian leadership accepted this consequence.

Implications for the Relationship with the USSR

The threat of a Soviet intervention hung for a long time over the events of Summer 1989. While Gorbachev allowed individual states more freedom as part of his new style of politics and declared that the USSR would not intervene in Eastern Europe, the limits of this declaration were still to be tested. This was especially relevant in the case of Hungary, which was the subject of a painful USSR intervention in 1956. When the Hungarian Government approached Gorbachev with regard to the dismantling of the border

① 20 Deutsches Politisches Archiv – Deutschlandpolitik (BRD), Handakten Staatssekretär Jürgen Sudhoff, B – 2 B STS/286.

② Stoklosa, “Die Letzte Fluchtwelle Aus Der DDR Im Jahr 1989,” 52.

③ “19 August 1989 – a step on the way to German reunification,” *German Political Archive*.

④ Stoklosa, “Die Letzte Fluchtwelle Aus Der DDR Im Jahr 1989,” 53.

⑤ “Horn informiert DDR-Führung über Grenzöffnung,” *Die Bundesregierung*, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/horn-informiert-ddr-fuehrung-ueber-grenzoeffnung-471388> (accessed June 3, 2021).

⑥ Stoklosa, “Die Letzte Fluchtwelle Aus Der DDR Im Jahr 1989,” 56.

fortifications, they cited primarily financial reasons. The original border fortifications and fences that were delivered by the USSR in the 1960s were rotten and broken, and would require extensive refurbishment.^① Hungary was unwilling to invest precious hard currency in the renovation, so if the USSR was not willing to shoulder the cost of the renovations either, it would be removed.^② According to Hungarian Prime Minister Nemeth, Gorbachev smiled and told him that the Brezhnev times were over, that Hungary would be free to do whatever it deems necessary in this matter, and that the USSR would not pay for any renovations. He also gave Nemeth the assurance that as long as he was in charge, 1956 would not be repeated.^③ Nevertheless, the looming refugee crisis sparked large concerns of Soviet interference should matters escalate. In his discussion with West German emissary Dr. Sudoff, Hungarian Foreign Minister Horn described his fear that any further easing of the border restrictions would attract large numbers of refugees from Romania, Czechoslovakia or even the USSR itself. He did not want Hungary to become the gateway to the West as this could attract severe repercussions from the Warsaw Bloc or even the USSR itself.^④

After the dismantling of the border fence, patrols were kept up, and while some refugees managed to slip through, many were stopped. Nevertheless, Gorbachev's reaction to a full and the intentional border opening was unclear. This changed with the Pan-European Picnic in August when the border fence was deliberately opened, albeit on a small scale, and GDR refugees could pass through unimpeded. The event was well publicized beforehand and Soviet authorities were certainly aware of it.^⑤ In a 2009 television interview, Nemeth described the event as an intentional test of the Soviet reaction.^⑥ After no serious negative reactions followed, he judged that a Soviet intervention was indeed unlikely and decided to open the border should no deal with the GDR be reached in the near future.^⑦ This was the case in early September, and while the Soviet leadership watched the proceedings with concern, they stuck to their hands-off approach.

Consequently, the implications of the refugee exodus on the Hungarian – USSR bilateral relations can be characterized as positive from the Hungarian perspective. While Gorbachev promised Hungarian leader Nemeth that he would not intervene in Hungary, the real implications of this promise were yet to be tested.

① Mayr, "Hungary's Peaceful Revolution: Cutting the Fence and Changing History."

② "Gorbachev Hat Nur Gelächelt" *Die Welt*.

③ Ibid.

④ 20 Deutsches Politisches Archiv – Deutschlandpolitik (BRD), Handakten Staatssekretär Jürgen Sudhoff, B – 2 B STS/286.

⑤ Bundesstelle Stasi Unterlagen, "Schlaglicht: Paneuropäisches Picnic - Geschichten - BStU," *Das Bundesarchiv*, <https://www.bstu.de/geschichten/die-stasi-im-jahr-1989/schlaglicht-paneuropaeisches-picnic/> (accessed June 3, 2021).

⑥ Al Jazeera, "Frost Over the World - David Hasselhoff - 6 Nov09- Pt4," *YouTube* video, 15:51, November 7, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TaP9cMplK1M>.

⑦ Christian Erdei, "The Picnic That Changed European History," *Deutsche Welle*, August 19, 2014, <https://www.dw.com/en/the-picnic-that-changed-european-history/a-4580616> (accessed June 3, 2021).

Soviet inaction in light of the border opening was proof that Gorbachev stood by his word and commanded enough authority in Moscow to restrain any hardline factions which might have decided otherwise.

Implications for Hungary's Relationship with the BRD

Throughout the summer, the BRD worked hard to find a solution for the thousands of East Germans that were looking for a way to the west. The lengthy discussions with Hungarian officials transcribed in the German political archive were in a friendly but constructive atmosphere. While Hungary did not share the West German interpretation that there was only one German citizenship and tried to avoid a too obvious border opening in fear of GDR or Soviet repercussions, they compromised on other important BRD demands such as the request that no GDR citizen be deported back to the GDR.^① Furthermore, Hungary was very supportive with regard to the situation at the West German Embassy in Budapest, allowing them to add several apartments and a campground to improve the situation for the countless refugees there, which was a contrast to the decision-making in neighboring Czechoslovakia.^②

Despite calling on the GDR and the BRD to solve the refugee problem bilaterally, the Hungarian leadership around Foreign Minister Horn worked diligently on brokering a face-saving solution to the issue with the goal of ultimately allowing the refugees to continue on to the West, something which was very much appreciated in BRD government circles. Once the decision was made to open the border to Austria unilaterally, Prime Minister Nemeth flew personally to Helmut Kohl in Bonn to inform the BRD of this intention.^③ The German Chancellor was deeply touched and later remarked that it was Hungary who pushed the first stone out of the Berlin Wall. While the Hungarian decision to open the Border was not directly tied to any financial incentives (Nemeth remarked "Hungary does not sell people"), Germany decided to extend favorable credits of over one billion Deutsche Mark to Hungary in October 1989, a decision which was likely heavily influenced by the preceding events.^④ The ramifications of the refugee exodus on the Hungarian – BRD relationship can be therefore characterized as positive, and it certainly benefited the Hungarian rapprochement with West Germany to a degree.

Conclusion

The refugee exodus in 1989 had far reaching implications on Hungarian bilateral relations and accelerated the process of detaching from the Warsaw Pact and turning toward the west which had begun in the previous year. The most important realization of the events was that Gorbachev would indeed stick

① 20 Deutsches Politisches Archiv – Deutschlandpolitik (BRD), Handakten Staatssekretär Jürgen Sudhoff, B – 2 B STS/286.

② "Einmaliger Akt," *Der Spiegel*.

③ "Das Geheimgespräch Auf Schloss Gymnich," *Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk*, August 26, 2010, <https://www.mdr.de/zeitreise/stoebern/damals/grenzoeffnung-ungarn-ausreise100.html> (accessed June 3, 2021).

④ "Das Geheimgespräch Auf Schloss Gymnich," *Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk*.

to his promised hands-off approach when push came to shove, something which many in Hungary long doubted in light of the painful intervention in 1956. With the looming threat of interference out of the way, Hungary was able to act with less restraint in foreign and domestic politics.

The Exodus to some degree also marked an end of cordial relations with the GDR. While the new reformist Hungarian leadership never particularly liked their East German counterparts (in a discussion between Gyula Horn and German emissary Dr. Sudhoff, Horn remarked that: “we never liked Erich Honecker and he doesn’t like Hungary either”)^① they nevertheless sided with their socialist brother country during important questions in the early stages of the crisis and worked towards finding a solution that would have saved the GDR’s face. With Soviet intervention increasingly unlikely, and no negotiated solution in sight, Hungary abandoned those efforts and opened the border unilaterally regardless of potential consequences by the GDR.

In contrast to the negative implications for the GDR, the BRD-Hungarian relations benefited from the refugee crisis in 1989. The events led to intense dialogue between the BRD and the Hungarian leadership, and West Germany appreciated the border opening in September. Despite it not being tied to any financial incentives, Hungary benefited from the generous West German support in the aftermath of the crisis.

Limitations

Due to the limited length of the resulting paper, I will be only able to focus on a narrow scope in my research. In the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the German political archive was not accessible for in-person visits at the time of writing, and only a subset of the available files is digitalized. For this reason, I have had to rely in part on secondary sources of authors who have had access to those files.

^① 20 Deutsches Politisches Archiv – Deutschlandpolitik (BRD), Handakten Staatssekretär Jürgen Sudhoff, B – 2 B STS/286.

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- [3] 25 Deutsches Politisches Archiv – Grundsatzmaterialien zur Innerdeutschen Entwicklung, Lage in Ungarn (GDR), M 95-STG/712, June 1989. <https://politisches-archiv.diplo.de/invenio/direktlink/f5426943-b1cc-47d1-b339-a7c0d1bfb93/>.
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