



Public Rhetoric and Ideological Divergence GDR Perceptions of China, 1986-1989

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Abstract: This paper analyzes how the German Democratic Republic (GDR) viewed its relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and evaluated China's political and economic reforms from 1986 to 1989. Using archival documents from the Bundesarchiv and the Wilson Center Digital Archive, the paper examines diplomatic exchanges, symbolic gestures, and internal evaluations. Although the GDR publicly supported China's reforms, internal evaluations criticized them as inconsistent with Marxism-Leninism. The paper argues that the GDR employed rhetoric of ideological alignment to justify cooperation with China, revealing a tension between pragmatic diplomacy and ideological rigidity during the late Cold War era.

Keywords: *German Democratic Republic, People's Republic of China, socialist diplomacy, ideological alignment, Cold War, archival analysis*

Introduction

The final years of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) as presented in this paper from 1986 to 1989 were marked by ideological crises across the socialist world. The People's Republic of China's (PRC) economic reforms sharply diverged from East Germany's rigid adherence to Soviet-style socialism during this period.¹ At the same time with Gorbachev's rise to power in 1985 and his initiation of Perestroika and Glasnost and the SED's tendency to keep important matters from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) leadership, the Soviet-East German frictions intensified.² The period of 1986 to 1989 is also seen as pivotal as 1986 marked a turning point in the GDR's foreign policy with Honecker's first visit to the PRC balancing pressure from Moscow with a need to expand to new markets.³

Against this backdrop, this paper examines how the GDR perceived its relationship with the PRC, and how it assessed the PRC's political and economic reforms, during the pivotal period of 1986–1989. This study tests two hypotheses:

H 1: The GDR's public embrace of China was purely strategic, reflecting neither ideological approval nor private trust.

H 2: The GDR even with the opposition of the Soviet Union approached China as they aligned with their party legitimacy.

To answer these questions the paper analyses primary and secondary sources from the Bundesarchiv (German Federal Archive) and the Wilson Center Digital Archive categorizing the evidence the three sections: Symbolic acts and public image (press articles, toasts, speeches from Honecker's 1986 China visit), Diplomatic exchanges (state visits, official talks and economic cooperations), internal assessments (Reports and other internal documents).

¹ Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic's Relations with the People's Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 11.

² Hannes Adomeit, "Imperial Overstretch: Germany in Soviet Policy from Stalin to Gorbachev: An Analysis Based on New Archival Evidence, Memoirs, and Interviews," *Slavic Review* 58, no. 1 (1998): 235–297; Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic's Relations with the People's Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 115.

³ Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 217; Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic's Relations with the People's Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 10.

The findings reveal that despite publicly supporting China's reforms, internal party assessments criticized the PRC's reform for not adhering to Marxism-Leninism. The paper argues that the SED framed its cooperation with China with strategic ideological rhetoric focused on alignment to legitimize the partnership. Even as it distanced itself from the PRC's reforms in internal documents. This paper further contributes to the broader field of ideological divergence within the socialist bloc during the end of the Cold War and how socialist satellite states of the USSR like the GDR navigated ideology and reforms during the end of the Cold War.

Early Amicable Relations

The relationship of both states starts with their timewise close creation. Mao Zedong proclaimed the People's Republic of China at the Gate of Heavenly Peace in Beijing on October 1, 1949 and only 6 days later, the constitution of the German Democratic Republic was adopted in East Germany, giving way to the creation of the GDR.⁴ Following this the Relationships between the GDR and the PRC were strongly dependent on their relationship with the USSR as the GDR was a satellite state under close watch of the leadership in Moscow.⁵

In the 1950s, Sino-GDR relations were characterised by deepening economic and technical cooperation, and a shared ideological view.⁶ Both countries faced economic boycotts by the West and were therefore largely isolated.⁷ Consequently, they focused their search for new partners on the socialist world. In the year of its foundation, the People's Republic of China established diplomatic relations with all socialist states in Eastern Europe, including the GDR.⁸

For the GDR China presented an economic and political opportunity as China emerged as the second major power in the socialist world.⁹ East Germany provided assistance as it supplied

⁴ Kai Vogelsang, *Geschichte Chinas* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2012), 536; Hermann Weber, *Die DDR 1945–1990* (Oldenburg: Oldenburg, 2012), 28.

⁵ Yuenian Chen, "Why Did the Soviet Model of Socialism Fail? A Comparative Study of USSR and PRC" (PhD diss., New York University, 1997), 49; Vladislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 340.

⁶ Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 4.

⁷ Joachim Krüger, "Die Volksrepublik China in der außenpolitischen Strategie der DDR (1949–1989)," in *Deutschland und China: Beiträge des Zweiten Internationalen Symposiums zur Geschichte der deutsch-chinesischen Beziehungen, Berlin 1991*, ed. Mechthild Leutner and Heng-yü Kuo (Berlin: [publisher], 1994), 67.

⁸ Martina Wobst, *BChSt 43 – Die Kulturbeziehungen zwischen der DDR und der VR China 1949–1990* (Berlin: [publisher], 2005), 45.

⁹ Martina Wobst, *BChSt 43 – Die Kulturbeziehungen zwischen der DDR und der VR China 1949–1990* (Berlin: [publisher], 2005), 45.

equipment and assisted China's economic and trade interests in Western Europe through the China Export GmbH. As already mentioned both states were largely diplomatically isolated giving them a shared experience.¹⁰ The growing relationship was further strengthened by PRC officials particularly those educated in the USSR and GDR having a positive attitude towards socialism and cooperation with socialist countries.¹¹ In conclusion the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) established a close alliance predicated on a shared ideology, mutual isolation, and practical economic cooperation before the Sino-Soviet split.

The Impact of the Sino-Soviet Split Shift On Late 70s Rapprochement

Later on in the late 1950s to 1960 ideological disagreements caused the Sino-Soviet split. This impacted the relationships within the socialist bloc. As a satellite state the GDR had to side with Moscow and turn China into an "ideological enemy."¹² The obligation to follow Moscow's anti-China directives is evident in the negative reporting on China by East German newspapers as well as by Moscow actively restraining the GDR from engaging with China.¹³ However some East German officials expressed sympathy for the Chinese position and complained about the GDR's obedience to Moscow, though this had little impact on the country's official policies.¹⁴

Initially the PRC tried to leverage the GDR in their dispute with the USSR but China's attitude became increasingly influenced by its deteriorating relationships with Moscow.¹⁵ Especially from 1963 onwards relationships worsened with confrontational exchanges and insults. East Germany accused China of collaborating with the West, especially regarding the PRC

¹⁰ Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 18.

¹¹ Herbert Weiz, "Report about the Working Visit to the PR China from 10 to 16 May 1987," Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA XVIII, 18262 (1987), 10.

¹² Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 4, 21; Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic's Relations with the People's Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 46.

¹³ Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 21; Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic's Relations with the People's Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 46, 48.

¹⁴ Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 28.

¹⁵ Hope M. Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall: Soviet–East German Relations, 1953–1961* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 223, 334.

supporting West Germany.¹⁶ All in all, this caused Beijing and Berlin to experience a shutdown or “ice age” in their diplomatic relationships in the 60s which continued throughout much of the 70s but also started an internal debate about the constraints on GDR’s option due to Moscow’s influence.¹⁷

In the late 1970s and 80s the relations between the PRC and East Germany relations began to improve with the rise of Deng Xiaoping and friction between Moscow and Berlin.¹⁸ In the PRC Deng’s pragmatism, opening-up policy and engagement with Eastern Europe to learn from reform experiences and economic know-how lead to a reassessment of its relationship with the GDR.¹⁹ At the same time East Germany shifted its foreign policies towards a more independent stance from Moscow due to differing views on the war in Afghanistan and cutbacks in oil-deliveries. Its dependence on the Soviet economy also led the GDR to seek new markets as it became increasingly reliant on inter-German cooperation.²⁰ In conclusion, Sino–East German relations underwent a shift from ideological hostility to cautious rapprochement, due to a changing leadership and strategic interests.

Shared Goals and Conflicting Ideology

Initially the two countries shared a common interest in opposing Western imperialism as well as a shared ideological view as they both attempted to develop their new socialist state systems.²¹ The USSR being the major socialist power was seen as a guide for both countries and a place to seek recognition and legitimacy as well as the “right” interpretation of socialism.²²

¹⁶ Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 98, 122.

¹⁷ Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 93; Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Soviet Bloc: Unity and Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 434.

¹⁸ Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic’s Relations with the People’s Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 24.

¹⁹ Yuenian Chen, “Why Did the Soviet Model of Socialism Fail? A Comparative Study of USSR and PRC” (PhD diss., New York University, 1997), 24.

²⁰ Yuenian Chen, “Why Did the Soviet Model of Socialism Fail? A Comparative Study of USSR and PRC” (PhD diss., New York University, 1997), 61; Joachim Krüger, *Zu Gast in Peking: Die DDR und die VR China in den 80er Jahren* (Potsdam: Universität Potsdam, 2006), 39.

²¹ Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 24; Hope M. Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall: Soviet–East German Relations, 1953–1961* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 109.

²² Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 17, 30; Barna Tólas, *Economic Reforms and Political Attempts in China, 1979–1989* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1991), 16, 28.

However, this trend did not continue in the 50s. Ulbricht and Mao reaffirmed their mutual rejection of the new Soviet course in 1956, marking the beginning of a period of “like-mindedness” and shared fundamental interests. They both believed that the Soviets did not provide insufficient support in their struggle against 'imperialist' control of their territories.²³

This period of “like-mindedness” ended quickly. As the Soviet and Chinese views on socialism diverged, the GDR was forced to take an anti-China position. East Berlin accused China of following the “wrong” form of socialism and switching from Marxism-Leninism to “Maoism” supporting a personality cult, which clashed with the GDR’s ideological views.²⁴ Ulbricht especially advocated for the Soviet Union's interpretation of socialism as the “correct” form that the GDR must follow.²⁵

China’s “Reform and Opening up” brought up ideological changes for example the shift from a centralized planned economy to one that integrated market mechanisms starting the idea of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.”²⁶ This also created an interest for China to learn from other socialist economies such as the GDR which was at that time economically successful.²⁷ Despite the economic reforms, China maintained its stance and held the shared view with the GDR that the leadership and authority of the communist party must never be questioned. As both parties prioritised the authority of the Communist Party, this resulted in a growing suspicion of

²³ Hope M. Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall: Soviet–East German Relations, 1953–1961* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 109, 205; Joachim Krüger, “Die Volksrepublik China in der außenpolitischen Strategie der DDR (1949–1989),” in *Deutschland und China: Beiträge des Zweiten Internationalen Symposiums zur Geschichte der deutsch-chinesischen Beziehungen, Berlin 1991*, ed. Mechthild Leutner and Heng-yü Kuo (Berlin: [publisher], 1994), 53; Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 219–235; Werner Meißner, ed., *Die DDR und China 1945–1990: Politik – Wirtschaft – Kultur. Eine Quellensammlung* (Munich: De Gruyter Akademie Forschung, 1995), 90.

²⁴ Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 27; James G. Hershberg, David Wolff, Péter Vámos, and Sergey Radchenko, *The Interkit Story: A Window into the Final Decades of the Sino-Soviet Relationship* (Washington, DC: Wilson Center Press, 2011), 8.

²⁵ Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 29.

²⁶ Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic's Relations with the People's Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 81; Gilbert Rozman, *The Chinese Debate about Soviet Socialism, 1978–1985* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 16, 22; Barna Tólas, *Economic Reforms and Political Attempts in China, 1979–1989* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1991), 88.

²⁷ Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic's Relations with the People's Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 36.

Moscow's liberalising reforms and a convergence of ideological views.²⁸ But while the GDR continued to legitimize itself through its loyalty to soviet-style socialism and political stability, China was also able to justify the communist party's legitimacy through economic development.²⁹

Shared Perspective on Gorbachev's Reforms

Following Moscow's proposed reforms in 1985, Honecker proclaimed that the GDR would pursue "Socialism in the colour of the GDR" and refused to adopt the reforms.³⁰ East Berlin rejected the reforms as it viewed them as a threat to the regime and the party's legitimacy.³¹ Honecker believed that the GDR had undergone sufficient reform since 1971 and that further reforms were unnecessary. The country's focus was on trade reforms and relied on West German loans to stabilize its economy. The leadership in Berlin sought to maintain the political status quo and promote "ideological stability."³²

Overall, although the countries paths diverged during the Sino-Soviet Split, both found common ideological ground in the late 80s through a shared commitment to maintaining the party's absolute authority and resisting Moscow's efforts to liberalise politics. Further they both endorsed for their own version of socialism, distinct from Gorbachev's, showing a comparable ideological conservatism. The following table compares the divergence by the GDR and China

²⁸ Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic's Relations with the People's Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 19, 160, 227; Gilbert Rozman, *The Chinese Debate about Soviet Socialism, 1978–1985* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 19.

²⁹ Yuenian Chen, "Why Did the Soviet Model of Socialism Fail? A Comparative Study of USSR and PRC" (PhD diss., New York University, 1997), 363; Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic's Relations with the People's Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 189; Minxin Pei, *From Reform to Revolution: The Demise of Communism in China and the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 47; Gilbert Rozman, *The Chinese Debate about Soviet Socialism, 1978–1985* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 7.

³⁰ Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic's Relations with the People's Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 191; Andreas Malycha and Peter Jochen Winters, *Die SED: Geschichte einer deutschen Partei* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2009), 300.

³¹ Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 218; Minxin Pei, *From Reform to Revolution: The Demise of Communism in China and the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 210.

³² Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 253, 259; Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic's Relations with the People's Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 63, 128, 143; Ministry for State Security (GDR), "Information about a Meeting of Comrade Erich Honecker with Comrade Song Jian, 20 May 1986," Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA XVIII, 18262, 3.

during 1986-1989.³³

Table 1 A comparison of the socialist approaches of China and East Germany in the 1980s.

Aspect	China	East Germany
Economic Reforms	Reorientated its economy through market reforms and “Opening Up”	Minimized reforms, prioritizing foreign trade (e.g. with China and West Germany) without changing the system.
Ideology	Adapted Marxism to fit the Chinese situation “socialism with Chinese characteristics”, while opposing liberal reforms under Gorbachev and supporting Germany reunification.	Maintained the Soviet ideal, opposed liberal reforms under Gorbachev and rejected reunification with West Germany.
Party Legitimacy Narrative	Based on economic development	Based on loyalty to Soviet-style socialism and political stability

Symbolic Acts and Public Image

This section analyses the symbolic acts and public image of the East German leadership by looking at press articles, toasts, speeches from Honecker’s 1986 China visit on China’s reforms. Looking at the GDR’s public rhetoric we can clearly see a pattern of avoiding references to China’s “opening up” and market-reforms. The rhetoric is strategically focused on anti-imperialist solidarity and the shared “socialist brotherhood.”³⁴

³³ Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021); Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic’s Relations with the People’s Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014); Joachim Krüger, “Die Volksrepublik China in der außenpolitischen Strategie der DDR (1949–1989),” in *Deutschland und China: Beiträge des Zweiten Internationalen Symposiums zur Geschichte der deutsch-chinesischen Beziehungen, Berlin 1991*, ed. Mechthild Leutner and Heng-yü Kuo (Berlin: [publisher], 1994), 43–58; Joachim Krüger, *Zu Gast in Peking: Die DDR und die VR China in den 80er Jahren* (Potsdam: Universität Potsdam, 2006); Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Andreas Malycha and Peter Jochen Winters, *Die SED: Geschichte einer deutschen Partei* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2009); Minxin Pei, *From Reform to Revolution: The Demise of Communism in China and the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Gilbert Rozman, *The Chinese Debate about Soviet Socialism, 1978–1985* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); Barna Tólas, *Economic Reforms and Political Attempts in China, 1979–1989* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1991).

³⁴ “Interview with Erich Honecker for Chinese Media,” Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986); “Press Articles on Erich Honecker’s Visit to China,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986; “Report on Erich Honecker’s Visit to China,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986; “Toast by Erich Honecker during Dinner on the Occasion of His Visit to China,”

During his visit Honecker highlighted ideas on “the exchange of experiences on socialist construction” and cooperation while the Chinese side expressed interest in “promoting the development of relations with other brother parties in the European socialist states.”³⁵ Honecker mentioned in an interview to Chinese media the “traditionally friendly relationships” emphasising the common “fight [...] against imperialism, oppression, fascism and war,” often using terms such as “dear comrades and friends” when addressing Chinese officials.³⁶

Honecker also talks about Shanghai being a fight against the imperial struggle bringing up the topic of anti-imperialism multiple times.³⁷ While an official report discusses the topic of “Policy of economic reform and opening up to the outside world,” Honecker himself makes more general statements such as “far-reaching plans for developing the national economy, raising living standards, creating a life under socialism.”³⁸ All in all the GDR’s rhetoric emphasized common ideology such as “socialist construction” and anti-imperialism with Honecker especially avoiding the topic of economic reforms.³⁹

Examining the documents there is no evidence of the GDR presenting China as a model of “stable socialism” in order to implicitly contrast with soviet reforms. Furthermore, during his visit to China Honecker expressed his agreement with Gorbachev’s views as set out in his speech in Vladivostok and “familiarised the Chinese discussion partners with the GDR’s position on the Soviet-American meeting in Reykjavik.”⁴⁰ The same report also states “China’s adherence to Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong’s ideas as one of the four fundamental principles of its

Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986; “Toast during the Dinner in Honour of the Chinese Delegation,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1987.

³⁵ “Report on Erich Honecker’s Visit to China,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 1.

³⁶ “Interview with Erich Honecker for Chinese Media,” Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 1; “Toast by Erich Honecker during Dinner on the Occasion of His Visit to China,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986; “Toast during the Dinner in Honour of the Chinese Delegation,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1987.

³⁷ “Toast by Erich Honecker during Dinner on the Occasion of His Visit to China,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 1ff.

³⁸ “Report on Erich Honecker’s Visit to China,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 8; “Toast by Erich Honecker during Dinner on the Occasion of His Visit to China,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 4.

³⁹ “Report on Erich Honecker’s Visit to China,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 1.

⁴⁰ “Report on Erich Honecker’s Visit to China,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 5.

politics,” but frames it as a Chinese self-description not explicitly talking about China as more adherent to socialist principles than the USSR.⁴¹

Further Honecker brings up the “traditionally friendly relationships” and the common “fight [...] against imperialism, oppression, fascism and war,” highlighting ideological and historical alignment. Honecker frames the PRC’s economic achievements as “far-reaching plans for developing the national economy,” noting that the achievements contribute to “strengthening of socialism.”⁴² This demonstrates the reinforcement of a shared ideological narrative.

The GDR further framed its own economic policy changes as “the more effective internal combination of the advantages of socialism with the achievements of the scientific and technological revolution.”⁴³ This shows that the GDR sees its own advancements as leveraging technological development in a socialist system rather than reform implicitly criticising the soviet approach of Perestroika.⁴⁴ Overall the documents do not show explicit criticism of Gorbachev’s reforms, nor do they frame China as a model of “stable socialism” in contrast to the USSR. However the papers do show a tendency to emphasize ideological alignment like the “fight [...] against imperialism, oppression, fascism and war” while avoiding mentionings of Chinese reforms.⁴⁵

East Germany’s Diplomatic Exchanges

This section analyzes East Germany’s diplomatic exchanges, and the normalization of the relationships by looking at state visits, official talks and economic cooperations.

While the documents do not demonstrate a lack of ideological alignment, they do emphasize pragmatic cooperation within a shared ideological framework as evidenced by the focus on

⁴¹ “Report on Erich Honecker’s Visit to China,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 8.

⁴² “Interview with Erich Honecker for Chinese Media,” Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 1; “Toast by Erich Honecker during Dinner on the Occasion of His Visit to China,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 4–5; “Toast by Erich Honecker during Dinner on the Occasion of His Visit to China,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 6.

⁴³ “Interview with Erich Honecker for Chinese Media,” Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 3ff.

⁴⁴ Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic’s Relations with the People’s Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 115; Minxin Pei, *From Reform to Revolution: The Demise of Communism in China and the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 12.

⁴⁵ “Interview with Erich Honecker for Chinese Media,” Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 1.

“exchange on the basic orientations of the domestic, economic and foreign policies of both parties and states, and [...] of experiences on socialist construction,” and in the “Report about the Working Visit to the PR China from 10 to 16 May 1987” where the idea of a “common foundation concerning the build-up of socialism” is mentioned as well as “further expansion of scientific-technological cooperation.”⁴⁶

In his conversations with both Deng Xiaoping and Hu Yaobang, Honecker frequently emphasizes the “long tradition” of relations and cooperations between the parties.⁴⁷ Other issues, such as visa exemptions, were pragmatic, but were framed as contributing to socialism as well as the signing of the “agreement about the long-term development of economic and scientific-technological cooperation” which was seen as in “the interest of economic progress and the solidification of friendly relations and peace.”⁴⁸ All this created rhetoric of ideological alignment.

The conversation with Margot Honecker (the Minister of National Education) was focused on ideological dimensions talking about the “friendly coexistence of all socialist states in general” and a wish to better the relationships with the USSR, with China focusing on “three respects”:⁴⁹

1. “The PRC fully respects the internal and external policies of these states;
2. The PRC fully respects the special relations of these states with the USSR, which have been established and developed over the past decades;
3. The PRC fully respects the ideas and plans of these states regarding the development of their relations with the PRC.”⁵⁰

Hu further mentioned that “Progress has been made in economic relations [...], but there has been no significant progress in political relations” with the USSR emphasizing the want to

⁴⁶ “Report on the Visit of the Chinese Delegation to the GDR,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2437, *Relations with China*, Bd. 2 (1987–1989), 1987, 1; Herbert Weiz, “Report about the Working Visit to the PR China from 10 to 16 May 1987,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA XVIII, 18262 (1987), 4.

⁴⁷ “Conversation between Erich Honecker and Deng Xiaoping,” Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 4, 6; “Conversation between Erich Honecker and Hu Yaobang,” Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 4.

⁴⁸ “Report on the Visit of the Chinese Delegation to the GDR,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2437, *Relations with China*, Bd. 2 (1987–1989), 1987, 2; Herbert Weiz, “Report about the Working Visit to the PR China from 10 to 16 May 1987,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA XVIII, 18262 (1987), 2–3.

⁴⁹ “Conversation between Margot Honecker and Hu Yaobang,” Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 1.

⁵⁰ “Conversation between Margot Honecker and Hu Yaobang,” Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 2.

engage with the USSR. To this Margot Honecker references the GDR's "independent foreign policy" trying to strengthen "the position of socialism" all in all showing an underlined focus on ideological rapprochement and strong motivation for pragmatic cooperation.⁵¹

Interest in sharing experience and technical cooperation can also be seen in other conversations. Herbert Weiz's conversation with Song Jian, the latter emphasizes that it would be "worthwhile for the PR China to study the experiences of the GDR" while Weiz showed an interest for the GDR on rural development.⁵² Other conversations such as the ones between Honecker and Deng, between Günter Mittag and Li Peng and the report on the Song Jian's visit show agreements on technological cooperation, discussions about trade aimed at strengthening the socialist economy while emphasizing the "common foundation concerning the build-up of socialism."⁵³

Looking at the above-mentioned conversation Hu Yaobang highlighted "three respects" also counter the argument that China was being used to distance itself from the Soviet Union as it explicitly focuses on cooperation between all states in the socialist bloc.⁵⁴ The documents do not explicitly show that the GDR used its ties to China to demonstrate its ideological independence from the USSR. They often reference a commitment to cooperating with the entire socialist bloc and including positive notes about the USSR. Furthermore, the documents show that the expanding relationship was motivated by a mixture of ideological alignment and pragmatic cooperation.

China's Diplomatic Exchanges

This section analyzes China's domestic developments, China's political reforms and their implications for GDR foreign policy by looking at reports from the Foreign Ministry and other internal documents. The internal reports studied clearly express concern and criticism by the

⁵¹ "Conversation between Margot Honecker and Hu Yaobang," Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 7.

⁵² Herbert Weiz, "Report about the Working Visit to the PR China from 10 to 16 May 1987," Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA XVIII, 18262 (1987), 5.

⁵³ Herbert Weiz, "Report about the Working Visit to the PR China from 10 to 16 May 1987," Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA XVIII, 18262 (1987), 4; "Conversation between Erich Honecker and Deng Xiaoping," Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986; "Conversation between Günter Mittag and Li Peng," Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986; Ministry for State Security (GDR), "Information about a Meeting of Comrade Erich Honecker with Comrade Song Jian, 20 May 1986," Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA XVIII, 18262 (1986).

⁵⁴ "Conversation between Margot Honecker and Hu Yaobang," Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 2.

Foreign Ministry and Stasi (Ministry of State Security of the GDR) towards China's. Firstly, when analysing the documents, it becomes evident that the GDR questioned Chinese socialism, labelling China as an "ideological revisionist."

A report by the Stasi the Ministry describes how China sees itself in an "initial stage of socialism" but focuses on terms associated with market reforms, such as "foreign property in the form of joint ventures" showing criticism while maintaining a more conservative view of socialism.⁵⁵ The same document also implies a deviation from socialist principles by concerns about ideological foundations and "education of party members only[...] [being] developed modestly."⁵⁶ Another document from 1989 also expresses similar concerns that "methods of political-educational activities are met increasingly with rejection in factories and institutions" suggesting a failure to educate on socialist values in the population, all in all criticising China's economic reforms in different ways.⁵⁷

Some documents also express distrust and criticism of Deng's policies. A report 1987 by the Stasi acknowledges economic growth but suggest "spontaneous factors" such as "relatively high rates of inflation" to be the reason and questions the "proportional development of the economy" concluding that the "Chinese economic organism is still subject to heavy swings and changes," indicating a lack of trust in the long-term development of the economy.⁵⁸ The report from 1989 mentions Western experts' views on how "the situation in the People's Republic of China is still complicated" and that "a successful mastery especially of the economic problems are said to have decreased," clearly criticising.⁵⁹ Other documents by the Stasi also show a worry about social unrest in China.

The report from 1987 is warning that the "discontent within the population is growing" and in 1989 the report highlights how "one has not succeeded in eliminating the tensions in the relationship between Army and the population" showing concern of potential instability by the

⁵⁵ Ministry for State Security (GDR), Main Department II, "Statements on Some Regimen and Structural Issues of the Ministry of State Security of the PR China," Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA II, 40864 (1987), 3, 6.

⁵⁶ Ministry for State Security (GDR), Main Department II, "Statements on Some Regimen and Structural Issues of the Ministry of State Security of the PR China," Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA II, 40864 (1987), 6.

⁵⁷ Ministry for State Security (GDR), "Information about Aspects of the Current Domestic and Foreign Policy Situation of China," Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HV A 644, 1-2 (1989), 3.

⁵⁸ Ministry for State Security (GDR), Main Department II, "Statements on Some Regimen and Structural Issues of the Ministry of State Security of the PR China," Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA II, 40864 (1987), 3.

⁵⁹ Ministry for State Security (GDR), "Information about Aspects of the Current Domestic and Foreign Policy Situation of China," Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HV A 644, 1-2 (1989), 2.

GDR.⁶⁰ Reports from 1987 also express distrust in the competence of leadership, noting Minister of State Security Jia Chunwang to be “a young and inexperienced man,” “lacking the collective recognition needed for such a position.”⁶¹ While the report from 1987 criticises China’s economic development it also acknowledges that “Cooperation was expanded both comprehensively and in intensity.”⁶²

A different report by a Chinese intelligence source mentions that the GDR “acted very courageously” and was the first demonstratively displaying friendship towards China.⁶³ All in all some of the documents make contradicting statements acknowledging the increase of relationships but criticizing Deng’s policies and others. In a report on the developments of the relations between China and the GDR “the Chinese side” expresses “confidence in the firm and stable course of the party and government of the GDR” giving reciprocal recognition and reinforcing legitimacy for the GDR through its engagement.⁶⁴ Even though China’s self-views as in the “initial stage of socialism” reports by the Stasi still highlight China’s commitment to the “four fundamental principles,” focusing on its commitment to socialism and the leadership of the communist party, to legitimize cooperation by viewing China as part of the socialist bloc.⁶⁵ The same report also finds a connection between the PRC and the GDR in the primary concern for “political stability” and to “develop the leading role of the party.”⁶⁶ Maintaining a leading role as the communist party

⁶⁰ Ministry for State Security (GDR), “Information about Aspects of the Current Domestic and Foreign Policy Situation of China,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HV A 644, 1–2 (1989), 4; Ministry for State Security (GDR), Main Department II, “Statements on Some Regimen and Structural Issues of the Ministry of State Security of the PR China,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA II, 40864 (1987), 3.

⁶¹ Ministry for State Security (GDR), Main Department II, “Statements on Some Regimen and Structural Issues of the Ministry of State Security of the PR China,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA II, 40864 (1987), 2.

⁶² Ministry for State Security (GDR), Main Department II, “Statements on Some Regimen and Structural Issues of the Ministry of State Security of the PR China,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA II, 40864 (1987), 6.

⁶³ Opinions from a Member of an Intelligence Service of the PR China Operating in the GDR under Journalistic Cover 1987, p.2)

⁶⁴ Foreign Ministry (GDR), “Entwicklung der Beziehungen zu China und Korea,” Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2345, *Foreign Policy Information from the Minister of Foreign Affairs to Erich Honecker* (1988), 2; Ministry for State Security (GDR), Main Department II, “Statements on Some Regimen and Structural Issues of the Ministry of State Security of the PR China,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA II, 40864 (1987), 2.

⁶⁵ Ministry for State Security (GDR), Main Department II, “Statements on Some Regimen and Structural Issues of the Ministry of State Security of the PR China,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA II, 40864 (1987), 6.

⁶⁶ Ministry for State Security (GDR), Main Department II, “Statements on Some Regimen and Structural Issues of the Ministry of State Security of the PR China,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA II, 40864 (1987), 3, 6.

is central to the GDR's legitimacy narrative, therefore these reports highlight a perceived alignment with the PRC.⁶⁷

The reports do not explicitly compare the perceived instability in the USSR with China but there is a clear indication for tensions which may have elevated China as the more stable and reliable partner. Especially the Chinese intelligence source in the GDR in 1987 notes about tensions between the USSR and the GDR saying, "Some official personalities" of the GDR would "openly oppose the Soviet Union," which contrasts the portrayal of the Chinese leadership which seemed to overall positive despite challenges.⁶⁸

All in all, documents seem to implicitly compare China as a success with "increased activities vis-a-vis its socialist partners" to the USSR's slowing development.⁶⁹ Overall, the reports highlight aspects that support the GDR's rhetoric on stability and party leadership showing a common ground in party legitimacy narrative to validate the GDR's engagement with China, while also implicitly comparing the PRC and the USSR. The documents highlight ideological concerns, observations of economic instability and potential social unrest. The analysis highlights the stark difference between the public portrayal of the relationships and the negative internal assessments of China's developments. However there appears to be a desire to legitimize the cooperation with China by implicitly comparing it to the USSR and aligning with the narrative on party legitimacy.

Conclusion

The final years of the GDR must be seen against the backdrop of the changing socialist bloc with reforms in most countries.⁷⁰ This paper examined how the German Democratic Republic (GDR) perceived its relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC), and how

⁶⁷ Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic's Relations with the People's Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 208.

⁶⁸ "Opinions from a Member of an Intelligence Service of the PR China Operating in the GDR under Journalistic Cover," Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA II, 40864 (1987), 2; Ministry for State Security (GDR), Main Department II, "Statements on Some Regimen and Structural Issues of the Ministry of State Security of the PR China," Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA II, 40864 (1987), 2.

⁶⁹ Ministry for State Security (GDR), "Information about Aspects of the Current Domestic and Foreign Policy Situation of China," Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HV A 644, 1–2 (1989), 4.

⁷⁰ Axel Berkofsky, *China-GDR Relations from 1949 to 1989: The (Bad) Company You Keep*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham: Springer, 2021), 258; Zhong Chen, *Defying Moscow, Engaging Beijing: The German Democratic Republic's Relations with the People's Republic of China, 1980–1989* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 19.

it assessed China's political and economic reforms, during this period of change" In the first part of the analysis, the documents do not show explicit criticism of Gorbachev's reforms, nor do they frame China as a model of "stable socialism" in contrast to the USSR. Instead, they emphasize ideological alignment through shared rhetoric such as the "fight [...] against imperialism, oppression, fascism and war," while avoiding direct references to Chinese reforms.⁷¹ This supports Hypothesis 1, suggesting that the GDR's public discourse prioritized common ideological values, but it does not support Hypothesis 2, as there is no evidence that this alignment was used to implicitly critique Soviet policies.

In the second part of the analysis, neither Hypothesis 1 nor Hypothesis 2 is supported. The development of Sino-GDR relations cannot be explained by a shift away from ideology toward pragmatism, but instead reflects an interaction between ideological alignment and pragmatic considerations. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the GDR leveraged its relationship with China to signal ideological autonomy from the Soviet Union.

The third part of the analysis proves both hypothesis 1 and 2. Overall, the documents mention ideological concerns, observations of economic instability and potential social unrest. The analysis highlights the stark difference between the public portrayal of the relationships and the negative internal assessments of China's developments, yet there seems to be a want to legitimize the cooperation with China through a comparison with the USSR and an alignment on party legitimacy narrative.

The GDR from the analysis seemed to have understood its relationship with China as deepening but there is no evidence supporting that it saw its strengthening connections to the PRC as a form of ideological independence for the USSR. Rather it tried to walk a thin path between needed pragmatic cooperation trying to create a legitimacy for the relationship by emphasising "socialist brotherhood" and a common "fight [...] against imperialism, oppression, fascism and war."⁷² There can also be no evidence found criticising Gorbachev's reforms to find an alignment with China. From the analysis it can be said that the GDR viewed China's political and economic reforms positive in public statements often in a combination with "strengthening of socialism," but internally seeing China's economic success as a combination of "spontaneous factors," while

⁷¹ "Interview with Erich Honecker for Chinese Media," Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 1.

⁷² "Interview with Erich Honecker for Chinese Media," Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 1.

also criticising Minister of State Security Jia Chunwang to be “a [...] inexperienced man.”⁷³ All together it should be noted that the research would benefit from more documents during the years 1988 and 1989 with most documents in the analysis being in 1986 and 1987. The analysis also mainly relied on public records which leaves private conversation between SED members remaining undiscussed. Here the paper could benefit from interviews with ex-SED members or ambassadors of the GDR in China.

Although this paper has limitations it contributes to the broader field of how socialist states navigated ideology and reforms during the end of the cold war. Especially the GDR’s deepening relationship with China disprove the common narratives on monolithic structure of the socialist bloc whose policies were entirely dictated by Moscow. This paper analysis shows that the GDR’s sought to deepen its relations with China while framing the partnership as ideologically aligned, despite policy differences. The GDR publicly supported Chinese reforms but was criticized internally. This contradiction highlights how the SED used ideological rhetoric to justify cooperation, emphasising shared narratives of party legitimacy to legitimise engagement with a reformist communist state.

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⁷³ “Toast by Erich Honecker during Dinner on the Occasion of His Visit to China,” Bundesarchiv, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 5–6; Ministry for State Security (GDR), Main Department II, “Statements on Some Regimen and Structural Issues of the Ministry of State Security of the PR China,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, BStU, ZA, HA II, 40864 (1987), 3; “Conversation between Margot Honecker and Hu Yaobang,” Bundesarchiv, BStU, DY 30/2436, *Relations with China*, Bd. 1 (1979–1986), 1986, 2.

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