

# **THE CRISIS OF THE GERMAN LEFT**

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# **THE CRISIS OF THE GERMAN LEFT**

The PDS, Stalinism and the Global Economy

Peter Thompson



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I dedicate this book to my children: David, Philip and Rosa.

# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CDU	Christlich Demokratische Union
COCOM	Coordinating Committee for Export to Communist Areas
COMECON	Council for Mutual Economic Assistance
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CSU	Christlich Soziale Union
DVU	Deutsche Volks Union
FAZ	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung
FDP	Freie Demokratische Partei
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GDR	German Democratic Republic
GNP	Gross National Product
IMF	International Monetary Fund
KPD	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands
KPF	Kommunistische Plattform
MF	Marxistisches Forum
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Area
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NÖSPL	Neues Ökonomisches System der Planung und Leitung
NSDAP	Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei
PDS	Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus
SBZ	Sowjetische Besatzungszone
SDP	Sozial Demokratische Partei (GDR)
SED	Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands
SMAD	Sowjetische Militäradministration in Deutschland
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands
SZO	Soviet Zone of Occupation
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WTC	World Trade Centre
WTO	World Trade Organisation
UPDS	Unabhängige Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus



# INTRODUCTION

While waiting on the tarmac in East Berlin for the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachov on his fateful visit of the summer of 1989, Erich Honecker responded to the journalists' shouted questions about the future of the GDR by saying that 'reports of its death have been much exaggerated'.<sup>1</sup> Within 16 months the state had disappeared and along with it the SED, its ruling Communist Party. In the months after the fall of the Berlin Wall the SED underwent a period of convulsion and transformation which saw the expulsion of many of its old hard-line leaders and their replacement with more moderate and reformist forces from within its own ranks. There was a move towards a more pluralistic socialist outlook, an end to the dogmatic approach of the Stalinist system and, above all, a gradual – though reluctant – acceptance that Germany would be united and that the ex-Communists would have only a minor role to play in that new nation. In December 1989 the SED mutated into the SED/PDS and then, in February 1990, into the PDS. For most commentators, the days of both the state and the party, in whatever form, were numbered. The first and last free parliamentary elections in the GDR on 18 March 1990 brought in a governing coalition of centre-right forces under the premiership of the CDU leader, Lothar de Maizière, committed to the reunification of Germany.

What the collapse of the GDR has left behind, however, is a greater sense of East German identity than probably ever existed before 1989 and a continuing political presence for the PDS which has confounded many commentators and dismayed many of its political competitors. Even though at the time of writing this introduction, the fortunes of the PDS are not at their highest point, there is every reason to believe that that situation could change again, just as it did in the mid-1990s.<sup>2</sup> The reasons for this are manifold and reside in complicated social and psychological

1. 'Die totesagten leben länger'.

2. See Dan Hough, *The Fall and Rise of the PDS in Eastern Germany*, Birmingham, 2002, for a discussion of the varying fortunes of the PDS.

factors to do with the reciprocal relationship between the need for both individual freedom and social security in the ex-GDR. As Tanja Busse and Tobias Dürr have pointed out recently, many of the facets of eastern German identity are very similar to those of immigrant communities arriving in a new land. Without having physically moved, East Germans have indeed come to a new country and, like all immigrant communities, they have brought with them their own world-views and values and their own political cultures.<sup>3</sup> This includes continuing, though perhaps unstable, support for the political party most identified with the ex-GDR, namely, the PDS. The continuing obsession with the GDR and growing self-identification as East German rather than just German also parallel the continuing and even growing identification which many third-generation immigrants in West Germany have with their grandparents' homelands. This is unlikely to fade in the near future and may indeed last for many decades. After all, 300 years after the Act of Union in the U.K. there would appear to be little decline in the national identity of the Scottish people, despite attempts to create a British identity. Before 1989 it used to be said that there were two states in one German nation; now it could be argued that there are two German nations in one state.

However, the PDS finds itself in a situation in which it is only reluctantly a regional party and, indeed, wishes to see itself as an increasingly all-German socialist, left-social democratic or even Marxist party, able to mobilise opposition to the growing political, social and economic dislocation engendered by the marketisation of the German economy. The extent to which it will be able to play this latter role is under discussion here. There is little sign of it at present and indeed, recent elections have seen it in steady decline in its heartlands in East Germany as well. However, Germany is really only just beginning to enter a process of reform and economic adjustment which Britain undertook some thirty years ago, with the advent of monetarism under a previous Labour administration and its entrenchment under Mrs Thatcher. The political consequences of the neo-liberal undermining of the Rhenish capitalist model which, until recently, was accepted by almost all parts of the mainstream political spectrum in Germany have yet to be fully felt. It is for this reason that it would be too early to write off the PDS completely, despite the very real difficulties which it is at present experiencing.

The aim of this study is to help towards an understanding of the very complicated development of identity and opinion in the ex-GDR since 1990 in its proper historical and theoretical context. The first two-thirds of this book look at the long waves and trends at work in the socio-economic development of twentieth-century Germany. This represents an attempt to separate out the structural and the conjunctural factors at play in global politics and to identify which is most important at specific

3. Toralf Staud 'Ossis sind Türken', *Die Zeit* no. 41, 1 October 2003, p. 9

historical and political moments. The main part of the analysis discusses the shift from the primacy of politics, which prevailed throughout most of the twentieth century, to the primacy of economics, which has prevailed from around the middle of the 1970s and is the basis for what is widely known as globalisation but which is essentially about the creation of a market-state in which finance capital and neo-liberal short-termism has replaced the productivist imperative. The impact this shift had on the workers' movement in both East and West is obvious and yet incompletely understood, not least because the ideological shift which has accompanied the economic one has been so complete that what used to be seen as relatively moderate demands, such as the social imperative behind even Christian Democratic programmes, are now seen as dangerously radical and yet at the same time a part of the 'forces of conservatism'.

This book is not an exhaustive or empirical account of the fortunes of the PDS as a contemporary political party. There are many such studies and simply to add to them would not be of great benefit. Instead, this book sets out the development of the 'Stalinisation' of the communist movement in Germany in the context of a global primacy of politics. It discusses the role and function of the SED in the GDR and the continuing debate about the extent to which the PDS is simply the successor party to the SED and therefore irretrievably 'Stalinist' as is often maintained also within this global political context. The main question though, is the extent to which it is a new departure from its own past, able to jump over its own shadow.

In 1944 Karl Polanyi, in his book *The Great Transformation*, argued that the rise of fascism and the Second World War had been brought about by the shifting balance in the relationship between politics and economics in the first part of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> He believed that the ascendance of market liberalism and the primacy of economics had brought about a dislocation which issued directly into social instability. In many ways, what I have tried to do here is to adapt this analysis to the collapse of communism and to see the latter as a symptom of the re-emergence of a triumphant market neo-liberalism out of the economic crisis of the 1970s which continues to reshape the world. In that sense this book is about the second great transformation, this time at the end of the twentieth century, and the effect that it is having on the world in general and Eastern Germany in particular.

When looking at Eastern Germany and the PDS we can see that the history of the GDR and the SED has both uses and disadvantages for the PDS and that the monumentalist, antiquarian and critical elements at work in the history of the German workers' movement continue to function both positively and negatively within the party. In an interview conducted in 1998, the then Deputy Chair of the PDS, Sylvia-Yvonne

4. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, Boston, 2001.

Kaufmann, spoke of the 'rucksack of history'<sup>5</sup> which the party is obliged to carry with it. This was meant as a metaphor for the burden of the GDR past, but a rucksack is also a very useful thing to carry on a journey. What this book aims to do is to unpack the PDS's rucksack and find out what is in it. To what extent are its contents weighing the party down and impeding its progress, and to what extent are they useful on a journey which is taking Germany through a second great transformation?

The PDS arouses passions on all sides, which remain to a large extent irreconcilable. It is what makes it one of the most interesting parties to study in Europe today, but it is also what makes it one of the most difficult to fully comprehend. Above all, this is because to understand the party today it is necessary to grapple with some of the fundamental dilemmas of twentieth-century political life as it relates to the German workers' movement. As Gerhard Schürer stated in his evidence to the Enquête-Kommission on the history of the GDR and the role of the SED:

If one analyses the power structures [of the GDR], then one must also study their relationship to the Soviet model which was adopted. One has to analyse the history of both East and West Germany. One has to analyse the Cold War. I don't think one can say that one does not have space or time for it. On the contrary, it is essential to any convincing historical analysis of the GDR.<sup>6</sup>

In order to understand the PDS, therefore, one has to understand the SED and the GDR. But in order to understand them one has to understand the relationship between Stalinism and the Cold War. However, these phenomena only become clear if, in turn, one has a grasp of the fundamental turning-points in the history of the twentieth century, and the motivating forces behind them. The relevance of this historical framework will become clear during the exposition of the themes contained here.

In any perusal of the books and pamphlets on the PDS, from both within its own ranks and outside, one is struck by the omnipresence of the historical debate and the lessons which that history can teach. On the one hand the party is attacked for still believing in 'socialism' in a post-socialist world. On the other hand, those within the party understand socialism in very disparate and vague terms. Furthermore, the Stalinism debate within the party, which has consumed much theoretical energy in since 1989, has produced relatively little enlightenment but has at least allowed the different factions to present their own political credentials.

What all of those factions have in common – no matter how far apart they may seem – is their commitment to a sense of the primacy of the political and the collective over the individual and the purely economic.

5. Interview with Yvonne Kaufmann, Karl Liebknecht Haus, 26 September 1998.

6. Gerhard Schürer was a member of the Politburo of the SED from 1973 to 1989. See *Getrennte Vergangenheit, gemeinsame Zukunft*, 4 vols, Munich, 1997, vol. 1, pp. 50–51.

The main difference arises not over whether the approach should be a collectivist one, but where the locus of collectivism should rest: with the community or with the state. Since 1990 the party has had to try to maintain its position as representative and defender of the community of the ex-GDR, whilst at the same time attempting to become a party with a role to play at the federal state level. The PDS has reached that point which faces all those parties which start off as anti-systemic: namely, whether to criticise the system or to exercise power within it, or indeed both. The latest developments and the outcome of the city elections in Berlin in 2001, in which the PDS gained nearly 50 per cent of the votes in the eastern parts of the city, and the federal election of 2002 in which it maintained a high level of support in the East but still failed to leap the 5 per cent hurdle would seem to suggest that the party has begun to turn back towards its own community in the ex-GDR for support. It is attempting to solve or at least ameliorate the dilemma of power by exercising it in the East as a form of opposition to the prevailing Western-dominated federal system.<sup>7</sup>

This dichotomy is compounded by the fact that in the East it has to appeal to voters who are, in traditional political terms, relatively conservative whilst trying to appeal to radicalised and marginalised groups in the West. Paradoxically, therefore, its association with the GDR and the SED is not an expression of its political radicalism but of its social conservatism and is of considerable benefit to it in the ex-GDR. In the West this social conservatism can be a deterrent to winning over the libertarian Left, who traditionally vote Green. Concepts such as order, discipline, family, community and nation do not have the same negative connotations in the East as they do for the Western Left. It is certainly the case that within the PDS there is a tendency towards the acceptance of traditional hierarchical categories. As Toralf Staud has pointed out, the values of the membership of the PDS tend to be quite conservative compared with those of the Western Left, and the election in October 2000 of Gabrielle Zimmer as the new leader, to replace Lothar Bisky, seemed to imply a retreat by the party into its heartlands.<sup>8</sup> This was compounded by the federal election defeat of 2002 and the fact that, despite that defeat, Zimmer was re-elected as party leader. Zimmer stepped down, however, in June 2003 and Bisky took over once again as party chairman. He saw part of his job, and was supported by Zimmer in this as well, as attempting a reform of the party's fundamental positions and the adoption of a 'basic programme' which moved the party increasingly away from its more orthodox traditions towards a modernised socialism,

7. At the time of writing, in addition to its acquisition of governmental responsibility in Berlin, it was in government in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and supported the red-green government in Sachsen-Anhalt and the SPD minority government in Brandenburg as well as forming the governing party in many cities and local authorities.

8. Toralf Staud, 'Auf dem Weg zur CSU des Ostens', *Die Zeit* no. 43, 19 October 2000, p. 6.

capable of accepting important changes to the structure of the global economy and supporting the 'enterprise culture' as something positive.

Within the Gysi/Bisky/Brie group the trend has long been to try to break out of the traditionalist ghetto and turn towards a more liberal or even libertarian version of socialism that would appeal to Western voters. In the Berlin city election of 2001, Gregor Gysi was very much at pains to distance himself from the more orthodox views of his party in order to appeal to West Berlin voters. He stated, for example, that, in a conflict of interests between the party and Berlin, he would always choose Berlin. This is a radically liberal position for any party leader to take and is even more the case in a party which emerged out of the rigid democratic centralism of the SED.

In general, then, we can say that the PDS continues to represent a part of the Left historically anchored in collectivist values but with increasingly libertarian tendencies which are bound, one might say designed, to upset the more traditionalist wings. The struggle for the direction and locus of the party is far from over. Put in general terms, the East/West split is compounded by the Left/Right split but the outcome of these constant splits and fusions will be determined by forces and developments beyond the party's control. As Yvonne Kaufmann has maintained, 'The PDS is a party opposed to the prevailing system. That is central to the identity of the party. Without it we would be superfluous.'<sup>9</sup> Its whole political physiognomy is an expression of a commitment to socialism in its traditional vein but with modernising influences. Effectively it wishes to return to being a pre-Stalinist communist party, with a Marxist base but a lively culture of factions, tendencies and discussion but with one important dimension, namely that of revolution, largely removed. Despite the replacement of Zimmer with Bisky and a more liberal orientation, the PDS will remain a party of the East and that it will be forced to be anti-systemic within its electoral fortress of the ex-GDR rather than the whole of the Federal Republic. This demonstrates that the basic values of the PDS, although still of the Left, are actually fundamentally different from those in the West. Its 1968 was primarily that of the Prague Spring rather than Paris and it did not grow up in the context of the Anglo-Saxon individualism which so characterises the mainstream Western liberal Left. For this reason its roots are in a more orthodox Marxism, tempered by a regionalist nationalism, in which values of order and community take precedence over individualism. Whether there can be local solutions to global problems today remains, however, an unanswered question. And when we look at that question in the context of the notion of the end of ideology which claims that there can no longer be global solutions to local problems, we can see the nature of the crisis which faces the PDS and the Left in general.

9. Interview with Yvonne Kaufmann.



However, what worries the leadership of the PDS is not so much the need to maintain a Marxist focus: Yvonne Kaufmann maintains that the party is proud to see itself as part of a tradition stretching from Marx and Engels via Liebknecht and Luxemburg.<sup>10</sup> However it is also concerned that for anti-PDS commentators of the Centre and Right, but also for the more orthodox members of the party in the Kommunistische Plattform (KPF) and the Marxistisches Forum (MF), there is, in effect, little or no difference between Marxism and Stalinism. A recent example is to be found in an essay by Konrad Weiss, where Marxism is equated with Stalinism in a very black and white view of the PDS: 'I believe that a Saul can become a Paul; the Bible describes that quite clearly. But I do not believe in mass conversion as a result of a conference resolution: a resolution which makes Marxists into democrats, militarists into pacifists, militant atheists into believers, privileged functionaries into lovers of humanity.'<sup>11</sup> The end result is that both of these elements supply each other with ammunition for their cause. The Right can point to the existence of the KPF and MF and maintain that the party is therefore still 'Stalinist' and the KPF and MF can point to the fact that the leadership has talked about their expulsion as proof that the party is in danger of becoming 'social-democratised'.<sup>12</sup> An almost obsessive discussion of Stalinism and the Stalinist nature of the GDR is therefore central to the electoral fortunes of the party, rather than, as some see it, a harmful diversion from the reality of day-to-day politics. The real locus of the problem lies not in the theoretical hair-splitting but in the fact that any attempt to prioritise the political over the economic is therefore seen as essentially dogmatic and therefore – in a Marxist party, at least – Stalinist.

The PDS is therefore confronted with the task of remaining a distinctive party of the Left in Germany (which means that it has to remain true to its roots in Marxism) and yet not appear so radical as to preclude the chances of cooperation at local and federal state level with parties which have long since arrived in the Federal Republic. As Michael Schumann observes: 'On the one hand there are those who solemnly celebrate their views of orthodox socialism in a sort of self-constructed religious fervour, whilst others – apparently far removed from all programmatic discussions and theories – carry out basic day-to-day policies.'<sup>13</sup> In other words, it is a party like any other. In order to survive in post-unification Germany,

10. Interview with Yvonne Kaufmann. See also the PDS Statute in both its 1991 and 1997 versions: <http://www.pds-online.de/partei/dokumente/statut/>.

11. *MUT, Forum für Kultur, Politik und Geschichte*, August 1998, [http://www.bln.de/k.weiss/tx\\_total.htm](http://www.bln.de/k.weiss/tx_total.htm)

12. See Günter Minnerup, 'The PDS and Strategic Dilemmas of the Left', in Peter Barker (ed.), *The Party of Democratic Socialism in Germany. Modern Post-Communism or Nostalgic Populism?*, Amsterdam and Atlanta, 1998, p. 218.

13. PDS Executive Committee member Michael Schumann, <http://www.ddr-im-www.de/Aktuelles/Sonstiges/040200.htm>.