



GDR Economics Minister Günter Mittag Explains the Failure of the Planned Economy (1991)  
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In retrospect, the GDR's leading economist Günter Mittag blames the collapse of the East German economy on the rigidity of Erich Honecker's pursuit of "unity of economic and social policy." Honecker's policy, Mittag asserts, was directed toward stabilizing the regime through increased consumption and thereby ruined the country's productive capacity.

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There were few principles that determined Erich Honecker's thinking on economic issues. Increased work productivity, yes, but without any perceptible demands on the individual in the sense of needing to work more. Pats on the shoulder instead of discipline. In cases of doubt, better to spend money on the social sector than on manufacturing. He did not understand the interdependency of accumulation and consumption.

At the same time, he also misjudged the changed significance of consumption. He was of the opinion that while new products were certainly desirable, what was ultimately decisive was that people had a roof over their heads and enough to eat. This had to do with his own personal life experience in the past. He had not internalized the fact that needs had taken on a totally different quality and that – owing to generational change – people determined what they wanted based on what they saw of present-day reality in the FRG, and not based on a past they were largely unfamiliar with.

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Now I better understand why it was often so terribly difficult to get his approval on some essential questions, why ideas were so often rejected. Judging by some of his language, he did in fact make demands for greater work productivity, etc., but as soon as it was a matter of practical consequences, meaning raising the level of productive accumulation at the expense of consumption – and here it would have been society's consumption – he didn't approve. On the surface he did not take a negative stance on new issues. As a rule, however, if faced with fundamental decisions, he let himself be guided by his simplified principles.

In essential questions of economics, Erich Honecker unfortunately evinced static thinking. He wanted stability (in the well-understood sense of the word) at any price, and did not understand that it was precisely this insistence on stability – in the sense of holding on to the same old,

entrenched structures – that necessarily caused the opposite of stability, namely, instability. So it was neither possible to make corrections in the distribution of resources in favor of industrial investments nor to relieve the burden of subsidies, which had become unbearable, by changing the consumer price policy.

And so what resulted was a schematic, if not to say stubborn, insistence on the unity of economic and social policy down to the very last detail. It wasn't even possible to change the price for flowers, although the supply situation was demonstrably worsened by this policy, because gardeners and florists weren't interested in more and prettier flowers. How many attempts I made here, supported by others, and how often they failed. That put me in a difficult position, because I was always obliged to officially defend the line of the General Secretary. At the same time, however, I discussed pressing problems in a larger circle of people and made sure, time and again, that relevant proposals for change were drawn up. That involved, in particular, questions relating to subsidies: the unreasonable costs levied upon companies by "social costs", the cutting back of administrative personnel, and the redistribution of defense costs in favor of the economy. Those were always the "hot potatoes," and they were also the "slow burners," for at no point could a fundamental solution to these questions be found.

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All in all, there was a failure to respond to the fundamentally changed development conditions of the productive forces, to unconditionally and comprehensively deal with the question of how the GDR should react.

The necessary structural adjustment of the economy in the direction of thorough modernization never came. No one was allowed to talk about structural policy. My efforts in this area didn't get through to Honecker, and I wouldn't have found the necessary support in the Politburo anyway. People shied away from any and every serious change to the political line.

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First I would like to clarify: if this had been understood as the end of this policy altogether, then it would have already brought about the funeral of the GDR in the 1970s. It would have led to social conflicts with political consequences that presumably would have affected more than just the former GDR. That risk couldn't be taken at a time when the Cold War wasn't even close to being resolved, because the consequences would have been unforeseeable. Just think of the explosive situation brought about by the missile deployment. The slightest tremor in the heart of Europe would have very likely led to a nuclear inferno.

Therefore, at the time, the possibility of politically destabilizing the GDR by restricting sociopolitical measures involved an utterly incalculable political risk. In view of that, guaranteeing economic and thus also social stability was a fundamental premise of all political action.

Since the need to constantly raise the standard of living was considered an incontrovertible axiom, loans were taken out to bridge any supply bottlenecks that emerged. At the same time, the goods that were purchased this way raised the standards that the population came to expect. For the most part, these goods were sold for the same low and largely subsidized prices as GDR goods. This occurred under the term “basic needs.” While this term originally referred mostly to basic food items, more and more products started falling into this category, until it finally encompassed virtually everything that was sold. Even cars were sometimes subsidized, although a totally different price level developed under the table.

By constantly emphasizing that prices for basic necessities, energy, and rent had to remain stable – this basic principle was anchored in the resolutions of the Central Committee – it was almost impossible to reflect the true cost of goods in retail prices. Since the supply itself, relative to growing demand levels, did not improve significantly, the “Policy of the Principle Task” was *de facto* limited to the rigid maintenance of virtually all retail prices for any sort of item.

Thus the policy lost all dynamism, although the idea behind it was correct. It became increasingly independent of developments in productivity and also restricted the effectiveness of the performance principle. It fostered an unjustified feeling of entitlement. This had very negative psychological effects. Complaints about the insufficient range of available goods were countered with the argument of the “second pay envelope,” which consisted of the average per capita sum of the subsidies as calculated on the basis of the consumption of goods. Yet that was no help when a worker went shopping and tried to purchase something with his earned wages only to be confronted with a shortage of goods; at best, it was good as an argument at rallies.

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In the 1980s at the latest, as the burdens were piling up, it would have been necessary and feasible to initiate a radical redirection of public consumption. That would have included a reduction of the exaggerated expenditures for defense and security, but also for public buildings, as well as a reduction of public expenses. Here, the reaction was too little too late. These questions should have been posed in a more fundamental way. I do not absolve myself from this responsibility.

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Source: Günter Mittag, *Um jeden Preis. Im Spannungsfeld zweier Systeme* [At Any Price. In the Field of Conflict between Two Systems]. Berlin, 1991, pp. 58-64.

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