

## **Was the GDR a Totalitarian Regime? – An Attempt to Define the GDR with the Totalitarianism Theory of Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski**

### **Introduction**

*“History is not an exact science. In describing and seeking to resurrect – or at least reconstruct – past society’s historians make use of concepts that bear a double freight and meaning. (...) Historical concepts at any level of abstraction beyond the most basic and immediate empirical references also part of broader contemporary debates. This is clearly the case with the GDR, which raises profound issues concerning the relationship of scholarly inquiry to political and moral values.”* Mary Fuller, *The Limits of Totalitarianism: God, State and Society in the GDR*. 1996. p. 25

Trying to define the GDR as a totalitarian regime is made difficult by the fact, that it changed over the 40 years of its existence and that there are many different theories about Totalitarianism. Therefore I want to start with the Totalitarianism theory of Friedrich and Brzezinski and then apply it to the GDR in order to categorize it. Eventually I want draw a conclusion and have a look at the problems that arise, when trying to define the GDR as totalitarian regime.

### **Defining Totalitarianism**

*“Totalitarianism (or totalitarian rule) is a political system where the state, usually under the control of a single political organization, faction, or class domination, recognizes no limits to its authority and strives to regulate every aspect of public and private life wherever feasible. Totalitarianism is generally characterized by the coincidence of authoritarianism (i.e., where ordinary citizens have no significant share in state decision-making) and ideology (i.e., a pervasive scheme of values promulgated by institutional means to direct the most significant aspects of public and private life).”*

A totalitarian regime attempts to control virtually all aspects of the social life including economy, education, art, science, private life and morals of citizens. The state proclaimed ideology penetrates every aspect of social life and the totalitarian government furthermore seeks to completely control the thoughts and actions of its citizens. The term totalitarian society or totalitarianism sets in on the identification of this society with certain structural marks. According to Friedrich and Brzezinski these characteristics are:

1. A state proclaimed ideology, as for example Nazism or Marxism-Leninism, which has either religious or utopian connotations and is aimed to create a new, better society.
2. The submission of the individual to the community, going as far as oppression and loss of personal freedom due to collectivism
3. No separation of powers - Legislative, Executive and Judicative are all in the hand of a dictator or reigning political party, which are at the top of a hierarchic society.
4. The reigning political party or dictator tries to manipulate and influence not only the way the citizen act outwardly, furthermore their inner beliefs and feelings. This is achieved by means of propaganda, indoctrination and manipulation from the earliest age on.

5. Disregard of civil or social rights, no freedom of opinion, speech, press, religion or art often achieved by rigid censorship.
6. Intimidation of the people by terroristic acts, a secret police, intelligence agencies and repression in order to oppress independent thinking amongst the people.
7. Often there are as well concentration camps, work camps, political prisons and torture of prisoners
8. Often there is a militarization of public life in connection with an aggressive foreign policy or isolation.
9. The state has the nearly complete monopoly on all means of mass communication, weapons, surveillance and control of the economy.

A totalitarian regime is furthermore defined by its organization and methods to establish total control, and not by its desire for total control. Nonetheless is Totalitarianism a constantly evolving and changing concept.

### **Was the GDR a totalitarian state?**

The GDR existed from 1949 until 1990, during those 40 years there were different leaders and with that different policies. Therefore it would be necessary to look at each decade or year to be able to say whether it was a totalitarian regime back then or not. To look at the complete GDR means to leave out certain details and to look at it rather undifferentiated, which means that some factors might be left unconsidered.

In a totalitarian system there is a state proclaimed ideology, which plays a central role in society. For the GDR this was Marxism-Leninism with the ulterior goal of achieving an ideal state of a classless society, or generally communism. *“Communism is a social structure in which classes are abolished and property is commonly controlled, as well as a political philosophy and social movement that advocates and aims to create such a society.”*

To accept and believe into this was required of every citizen of the GDR. This came at the cost of losing their personal freedom. As typical for every totalitarian regime, the leading political party wanted to not only rule over the people but penetrate their beliefs and every aspect of life. Therefore people were forced to not only accept but to actively promote the ideology due to its ever constant presence in their life and outside pressure. This was achieved through various means, one of them being the hierarchic structure of society and the concentration of all powers within the leading political party, the SED (Soviet Unity Party of Germany). The realization of this collectivism was achieved through the so called *“Demokratischen Zentralismus”* (democratic centralism). *“Democratic centralism is the name given to the principles of internal organization used by Leninist political parties, and the term is sometimes used as a synonym for any Leninist policy inside a political party. The democratic aspect of this organizational method describes the freedom of members of the political party to discuss and debate matters of policy and direction, but once the decision of the party is made by majority vote, all members are expected to uphold that decision. This latter aspect represents the centralism. As Lenin described it, democratic centralism consisted of “freedom of discussion, unity of action”.*

A separation of powers was de facto in place, with the executive powers being the Eastern German administration and government, the *“Staatsrat”* and the *“Ministerrat”*. The legislative powers lay within the *“Volkskammer”*, which was elected directly by the people but did not have a

lot of power, additionally the "Bezirkstage" and "Volkstage" and the executive powers were held by the High Court, General State Attorney as well as the state and local courts. Therefore it would be possible to say there was separation of powers in the GDR and thus that it wasn't a totalitarian regime. For one it still can be a totalitarian regime even though missing one criterion, but on the other side this separation wasn't necessarily reality. Because of the single power status of the SED it became a kind of a single power. The whole system was designed to strengthen the power of the SED as Marxist-Leninist party in order to reach the end goal, which was communism.

Furthermore there was rigid censorship going hand in hand with oppression of the people via the use of a secret police and an intelligence agency, the Stasi, which secretly collected information about the citizen. *"The Ministry for State Security, (Ministerium für Staatssicherheit, commonly known as the Stasi, was the official state security service of East Germany. It was widely regarded as one of the most effective and repressive intelligence and secret police agencies in the world. The MfS motto was "Schild und Schwert der Partei" (Shield and Sword of the Party), that is the SED."* Every aspect of social but also cultural life was supervised and with that there was a ground covering oppression of independent thinking and opposition.

This system of oppression went as far as the destruction of entire families because of public system criticism. One example where open criticism was punished is the case of Wolf Biermann, singer and songwriter, who wrote critical pieces about the way the people were forced to live in the GDR, he was exiled. This is an example for the disregard of social and civil rights as well because the freedom of speech and art is abridged. The entire system made it impossible for people to escape into privacy, they were forced to actively participate and promote the ideology. Another example for this is the FDJ, the Free German Youth, which was an organization every youngster had to join, if he or she wanted to be left in peace and have a chance to get a decent job later. With that there was an indoctrination and manipulation of young people as well, that was supposed to connect them more closely to the ideology and make them supporters of the regime. Even the school system, was planned as to teach children from the earliest age on to believe in and support communism. Whereas on one hand people were pushed towards the ideology by means of scholarships and perks for the best but on the other hand people were intimidated by the "Staatssicherheit" and tried to conform as to avoid danger or harm for their families. Political prisons most likely existed.

*"Planned economy (or directed economy) is an economic system in which the state or workers' councils manage the economy. It is an economic system in which the central government makes all decisions on the production and consumption of goods and services. Its most extensive form is referred to as a command economy, centrally planned economy, or command and control economy. In such economies, central economic planning by the state or government controls all major sectors of the economy and formulates all decisions about the use of resources and the distribution of output. Planners decide what should be produced and direct lower-level enterprises to produce those goods in accordance with national and social objectives. "Planned economy meant furthermore that the state had the monopoly to control all of the economy and through that indirectly the people.*

Well before the set up of the Berlin Wall, the GDR practiced a foreign policy of isolation, only opening up to the mother country Sowjet union, which was seen as glorious example. By closing all borders it took the step to being a completely isolated country claiming it to be the best to reach the end goal.

Looking at the GDR one could say that it had the monopoly on the use of forces, since there was a standing army controlled by the government, which was mainly the leading party SED. It furthermore had the ulterior power over the economy, because of its centralized planning and work towards communism. Even the mass media was under monopolistic control of the regime; due to the Party policy in East Germany was to censor the "mass media". *"As television had a limited audience, it was not classed as a mass medium and therefore Aktuelle Kamera was, at first, uncensored and even critical. This situation changed after the television service reported accurately on the uprising in East Germany on 17 June 1953. The director was removed and news was then sourced from official outlets."*

Because all of the above mentioned criteria seem to apply one could say, that the GDR was indeed a totalitarian regime. The German Enquete Commission, which had the task to determine whether the GDR was a totalitarian regime or not, came to the same conclusion. But with this definition come certain problems.

### **Problems in defining the GDR as totalitarian regime**

A problem that comes with defining the GDR as a totalitarian regime is, that it is now comparable to other totalitarian regimes. Now it is possible to not only compare Hitler and Stalin, but furthermore Hitler and Honecker, Auschwitz and Bautzen – GDR and Nazi Germany are now in the same category.

Moreover it also depends on which catalog of criteria one uses to answer this question. The variety of Totalitarianism theories makes it harder to come to a general conclusion. In using Friedrich's theory it is possible to identify the GDR as totalitarian state on the first glimpse. It can be proven that there is an ideology that serves as a constitution in Marxism- Leninism, and that there is a political party with a claim of autarchy, first led by Ulbricht and later then by Honecker. The "Staatssicherheit", was a police that had a terroristic purpose and means of acting and the "National People's Army" (National Volksarmee), was an expression of the monopoly on the use of forces of the SED. The media was controlled centrally and the economy was managed centrally as well.

But if one looks at the matter more thoroughly, one might come to doubt the quick classification. There was definitely freedom of religion and the "block parties" did have a certain degree of independence and power, which undermines the theory of the SED as the single power. Whereas it is easy to agree on the fact that there was political terror against the citizens of the GDR, it is problematic to prove that there was constant terror. Times of intense terror and numerous terroristic acts were occasionally replaced by times of legal certainty. The monopoly on all means of communication is questionable as well, because West German television often undermined the GDR authority. Even the monopoly on the use of forces is not easily proven, because there have always been more Soviet than German soldiers stationed in the GDR and the National People's Army has always been under the superior command of the Soviet Union due to the Warsaw Treaty.

The identification of totalitarianism with the relatively consolidated social structures of late state socialism among other things however ignores the peculiarity of Hitler fascism and Stalinist Soviet Union. The deficiency of the theory of totalitarianism consists above all in that new structures and

voluntary forms of relationships of late socialism remain completely excluded, as they cannot be reduced to simple deviations of »totalitarian« core. As Mary Fullbrook put it, “history is not an exact science”, therefore it is not possible to exactly define something as a certain thing. Although the GDR was clearly an authorial and at times even totalitarian regime, it would be wrong to say this for all of its 40 years of existence. There are always factors left out, the use of a different theory or way to look at it can always point out more and different angles, which can change the result of the analysis to the extent of a completely different outcome. But it is nonetheless important to try to find a definition anyway, to be able to deal with and to analyze historical events and times.

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