

7.9.1987: First GDR State visit to German Federal Republic

For the Head of Council of the GDR, Erich Honecker, a lifetime's dream was being fulfilled. He stood a little stiffly beside Helmut Kohl while the national anthems were sung and the formation viewed, fully conscious that the whole world was watching. Finally everyone could see that the big Federal Republic had to recognise the existence of its lesser cousin, the GDR.



That evening the East German leader proudly gave a history lesson to all those who up until recently were still putting the words German Democratic Republic in parentheses.

Erich Honecker said, "Good neighbourship in the long term means respecting the realities formed by the Second World War and events immediately after it. It is useless and dangerous to mourn for the lost German Reich. Both of the German states must learn to live alongside each other in peace and mutual respect, as is the norm between sovereign states. We owe ourselves and the peoples of Europe at least this much.

In his speech, which was transmitted live on GDR television, the West German Chancellor referred especially to the preamble of the German constitution, in which German reunification is laid down as a goal.

Helmut Kohl wanted to improve life for people on both sides of the river Elbe. Above all, he aimed for better travel options for GDR citizens and wanted to convince the GDR leadership that border controls should be relaxed and the citizens given more access to information from the West.

None of these goals were new. Kohl said what he had to say to his guest and Honecker listened. At the end of the day each remained on his own side of the fence. For that reason alone any suspicion on the part of Moscow was unfounded. The big brother USSR had worried that the tentative contacts established between the two Germanys might lead to a loss of control of the Soviet Union's power over East Germany.

So while Erich Honecker travelled through the Federal Republic, the highlight of his trip being a visit to his former home in the Saarland region, his people stayed at home, following every step by their head of state via the extensive television coverage. Interest, however, was limited. Let him go wherever he wants, it's got nothing to do with me, thought many.

If anything, the GDR citizens wanted to be able to travel to the West, too! And they made that very clear to Western reporters. Some spoke of their hopes: "Maybe some improvement in conditions for visiting relatives, otherwise I don't hope for much." – "That it will perhaps become easier for those to travel who don't have any friends or family in the West." – "Well, it doesn't interest me, really, I mean, what will we get out of it? I would have found it more interesting if they had emphasised the issue of German-German relations more, so that contact to friends and acquaintances could be easier."

In the GDR everything remained the same, however. For the time being, that was, for at the end of the day the red carpet in Bonn was no longer any use to Erich Honecker. Two years later the people had had enough of waiting for state permission to travel. They expressed their opinion with their feet, running in hordes across the border to Hungary, seeking refuge in West German embassies in Prague and Budapest, and within the country the voice of opposition grew louder. The state visit to Bonn had neither strengthened the GDR nor enabled it to survive longer.

All the same, Erich Honecker in 1987 had had five full days to savour his greatest personal triumph. And at least one of those who had to stay at home amused himself thoroughly. Wolfgang Ullmann, formal civil rights leader from the GDR remembers: "It really was rather amusing when Honecker pompously compared the societies in the two Germanys to "fire and water". Our family sat there and joked: well, was Honecker in the fire or in the water at that moment?! And when I think that Wiebelskirchen, the tiny village he came from, was so proud of their son, the great statesman, that they almost named a street after him! It really was rather grotesque!"