

CHINA AND THE GERMAN AND BERLIN QUESTIONS – FIRST CARROTS, THEN LOTS OF STICKS FOR EAST BERLIN

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Introduction

When the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was founded in 1949, East Berlin under its Soviet-installed party *apparatschik* Walter Ulbricht decided (all by himself) that the division of Germany in 1945 had not only created two German states but had also miraculously given birth to a second German nation. That second German nation, the GDR's political leadership around SED¹ Secretary-General Walter Ulbricht claimed, was socialist, 'anti-imperialist' and 'anti-fascist'². The birth of the post World War II *German Question* as defined in East Berlin. And then there was the *Berlin Question*, a thorn in Ulbricht's side since the GDR's foundation: a 'capitalist' city in the middle of GDR territory - the reason why East Berlin decided that West Berlin does not belong to the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), that it must not be allowed to host western military troops and will have to be incorporated as part of an undivided Berlin into the GDR³. On August 13, 1961 then Ulbricht ordered the erection of

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¹ *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (SED) (Socialist Unity Party of Germany).

² Ironically, GDR citizen Bernd Heller, who in the 1950s and 1960s investigated the past of SED party officials, concluded in 1956 that more than 40 percent of the members of the GDR's Volkskammer at the time were former members of Adolf Hitler's *Nationalist-Socialist Party* (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (NSDAP)).

³ For further details On the *German and Berlin Questions* see also R. STEINIGER, *The German Question, 1945–95*, in K. LARRES (ed.), "Germany since Unification", London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2001, p. 9-32; also D. SCHOENBAUM, E. POND, "The German Question and other German Questions", London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1996;

the Berlin Wall in a desperate but (from his distorted point of view) necessary attempt to keep even more East Germans from escaping from the GDR. Necessary as from 1949 and until August 1961 roughly 2.9 million GDR citizens had left the GDR and the running joke among diplomats based in East Berlin at the time was that if GDR citizens were not soon kept from leaving the country, the only ones left in the GDR would be Ulbricht and his mistress before too long⁴. As we know it did not come to that, and in the decades ahead Ulbricht he and also his successor Erich Honecker⁵ made the transit of West German citizens through GDR territory to reach West Berlin as uncomfortable and cumbersome as possible. Ulbricht sounded very self-confident in 1949 when he declared that there existed now a second German ‘anti-fascist’ and socialist nation, but in reality Ulbricht and his successor were over the decades suffering from an ‘inferiority complex’ - always and constantly worried that the international community – including the socialist brother countries – would not acknowledge the GDR as a fully sovereign and independent country. An independent country as opposed to one, which merely owes its existence to the Soviet Union – which in fact it was even if Ulbricht and his successor Honecker over the decades invested enormous resources into seeking to make believe that the GDR is a prosperous and influential socialist country looking eye to eye with the Soviet Union⁶. Indeed, East German policymakers never failed to point out that East Berlin had its very own and independent foreign policy and that the 500.000 Soviet troops stationed all over GDR territory were not there to control and dominate the GDR but instead stationed to protect

J. RYNHOLD, *The German Question in Central and Eastern Europe and the Long Peace in Europe after 1945: an integrated Theoretical Explanation*, in “Review of International Studies” Volume 37, January 1, 2011, pp. 249-275.

⁴ As it turned out, Walter Ulbricht’s mistress/former girl-friend was French and lived in Paris.

⁵ Who took over power from Ulbricht in 1971. Ulbricht – like any self-respecting dictator would do – did not sign his resignation letter voluntarily but was de facto forced by Honecker into retirement. Honecker, accompanied by armed police, showed up at Ulbricht’s residence outside East Berlin and told Ulbricht to sign the letter or else. ‘Else’ as in being arrested and spending the rest of his life behind bars.

⁶ For recent analysis of GDR foreign policy see also H. KRISCH, *The German Democratic Republic: The Search for Identity*, London, Routledge, 2019; also H.J. SPANGER, *The GDR in East-West Relations*; “The Adelphi Papers”, Volume 29, Issue 240 International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), London, 1989.

the state from (imaginary) western ‘imperialists’ and West German ‘militarists’ and/or ‘fascists.’ In 1954 Moscow provided the illusion that the GDR is a fully sovereign country when it published a declaration acknowledging the GDR’s full sovereignty. The declaration granted East Berlin the right to autonomously formulate and adopt its domestic and external policies. Furthermore, Moscow replaced its East Berlin-based Soviet high commissioner with an ambassador and East Berlin could now feel like a country as opposed to a Soviet ‘annex’ occupied by the Red Army. However, that did not change anything about the fact that the GDR merely enjoyed “sovereignty at the mercy of Moscow”, as Joachim Scholtyseck puts it⁷. Consequently, East Berlin could use all the support it could get even if East Berlin’s policymakers had to find out over the years that China’s support for Ulbricht’s dreamt up and implausible two German nations theory was not sustainable, subject to U-turns and in the early 1970s eventually replaced by Beijing opting for West German economic assistance and investments. The same was true for Beijing’s support for joining Moscow and East Berlin’s policies to force the western Allies out of West Berlin: initially Beijing supported East Berlin and Moscow’s threats and blackmail policies to oblige the western Allies to leave West Berlin while it later – sometimes more, sometimes less wholeheartedly – supported their presence as a means to contain Moscow.

Through the analysis of East German-Chinese official exchanges available in East German archive sources⁸, the analysis of articles of the Chinese newspapers *People’s Daily (Renmin Ribao)* and other secondary sources, this article examines Beijing’s position on the aforementioned *Berlin and German Questions*⁹.

⁷ J. SCHOLTYSECK, *Die Außenpolitik der DDR*, München, R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2003, p. 14; also see See e.g. D. CHILDS, *The GDR: Moscow’s German Ally*, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1983; also J. ROESLER, *Der Handlungsspielraum der DDR-Führung gegenüber der UdSSR*, in “Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft”, 4/1993, pp. 293-301.

⁸ The archive sources used for this article come from the GDR’s former Institut für Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung, Zentrales Parteiarchiv (ZPA), the archive of the GDR’s ruling Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschland (SED). Since 1993, that archive material has belonged to Germany’s Bundesarchiv (Federal Archive) and is called “Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisation der DDR im Bundesarchiv.” The sources are cited as ‘SAPMO-BARCH, ZPA’ in this article.

⁹ For more analysis on GDR-China relations see e.g. Q. SLOBODIAN, *The Maoist Enemy: China’s Challenge in the 1960s East Germany*, in “Journal of Contemporary History” 51 (3) July 2016, pp. 635-659; also A. BERKOFKY, *From Foes to Fair-Weather*

In order to appreciate the relevance of an analysis of China's positions on the *German Question* and *Berlin Question*, it is necessary to put it into the overall context of Chinese foreign and security policies under Chinese dictator Mao Zedong. Mao's various campaigns and purges against alleged 'capitalists', 'revisionists', 'landlords' and other imaginary enemies of the day, the *Great Leap Forward* (1958-1962) accompanied by mass famine resulting in up to 40 million deaths¹⁰, attacks on Taiwanese offshore islands, (1957/1958), a border war with India in 1962, the *Socialist Education Campaign* in the early 1960s, the *Cultural Revolution* in 1966 and finally the border wars with the Soviet Union in 1969 provide ample evidence that Beijing's domestic and foreign policies were motivated by and conducted with violence. This in turn - at least in parts - explains Chinese policy U-turns, its chaotic and foreign policies and policymaking and decision-making defined by Mao's ideological obsessions, paranoia, sense of constant persecution and his overall conclusion that domestic and foreign policy must be radical and violent to achieve results.¹¹ Among others, the following questions will be addressed in this article: what and until what extent did Beijing respond to and satisfy East Berlin's near-obsession that the western Allies had to leave West Berlin and that the division of Germany not only created two German states but also the aforementioned two German nations? What motivated and drove Beijing to change its positions and policies more than once over the decades on both question and what impact did this have on overall bilateral East German-Chinese relations?

Friends and Comrades in Arms. The Ups and Downs of Relations Between the GDR and China in the 1980s, in "The Journal of Northeast Asian History" Volume 14 Number 1 Summer 2017, p. 9-47; also B. ERLINGHAGEN, *Von Wildgewordenem Kleinbürgertum und 'Weltherrschaftsplänen': die Volksrepublik China im Spiegel der DDR-Presse (1966-1976)*, Cologne, PapyRossa Verlag, 2009; H. MÖLLER, *Die DDR und VR China: Unterstützung der VRCH auf Politischem, Ökonomischem und Militärischem Gebiet (1949-1964): eine Dokumentation*, Berlin, Dr. Köster Verlag, 2003.

¹⁰ For an excellent account of Mao's *Great Leap Forward* see F. DIKÖTTER, *Mao's Great Famine. The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe*, London, Bloomsbury, 2010.

¹¹ This article does provide an in-depth analysis of Mao's foreign policy approaches, obsessions and campaigns. For details and in-depth analysis see e.g. J. LOVELL, *Maoism. A Global History*, London, Penguin Random House, 2019; O.A. WESTAD, *Restless Empire. China and the World since 1750*, London, Vintage Books, 2013; also J. T. Dreyer, *China's Political System 10th Edition*, London & New York, Routledge 2019.

1. *Moscow playing Hard Ball*

In July 1957 the German Democratic Republic's (GDR) Council of Ministers proposed to establish a German 'confederation', i.e. a confederation of two German states. Bilateral negotiations, East Berlin proposed, should result in an international treaty, which foresees that neither party of the treaty had the right to rule over the other¹². East Berlin proposed to establish an *All-German Council*, which was to consist of parliamentarians from both countries. Unsurprisingly, Bonn dismissed all of this out of hand. The authoritarian regime in East Berlin depending on the equally authoritarian Soviet Union, Bonn concluded, cannot be part of a confederation with the democratic Federal Republic of Germany (FRG¹³). This prompted Moscow to seek to solve the two issues on its very own terms in the late 1950s. On November 27, 1958 Soviet leader Khrushchev announced the *Berlin Ultimatum*, issuing the western powers a 6-month ultimatum to withdraw from Berlin, ordering it to become what he called a 'demilitarised city.' Khrushchev also decided that after six months Moscow would turn over the right to control and restrict transit routes through GDR territory to and from West Berlin to the East German authorities. That meant that the western Allies would have to ask for permission to access West Berlin. He then went on to warn that if the West did not accept the Soviet proposal of a peace treaty with both East and West Germany within six months, then Moscow would unilaterally adopt a peace treaty with the GDR. If the western Allies instead decided to accept Moscow's blackmail proposals, Berlin would become a 'demilitarized city', meaning that US, British and French troops would have to leave West Berlin. Should the western Allies instead try to re-open the transit routes with military force, Moscow would interpret this as an act of aggression against East Germany, to which in turn it would respond with military force. A nuclear conflict, he warned dramatically at the time, could follow¹⁴. Unsurprisingly, the western Allies refused the ultimatum and

¹² See *Deutschlandpolitik und deutsch-deutscher Konflikt 1955–1961*, in "Deutschland-Archiv", Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung (bpb); <http://www.bpb.de/geschichte/zeitgeschichte/deutschland-chronik/131501/27-juli-1957> (last accessed in March 2022).

¹³ Referred to as West Germany in this article.

¹⁴ See e.g. G. WETTIG, *Chruschtschow, Ulbricht und die Berliner Mauer*, "Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte", (APUZ 31-34/2011); Bundeszentrale fuer Politische Bildung (bpb),

insisted on their right to free access to and from West Berlin. Khrushchev withdrew his ultimatum in May 1959, opting for negotiations with the western Allies in Geneva in August 1959¹⁵. Negotiations did not produce any results and in September 1959 Khrushchev met with US President Eisenhower in Washington. That meeting led to optimism that the *Berlin Crisis* could be solved through negotiations. Short-lived optimism, as it turned out. New and more serious tensions followed when Soviet air defences shot down a US U-2 reconnaissance plane over Soviet territory on May 1, 1960. Khrushchev still travelled to the Paris Summit on May 16 but did not negotiate with Eisenhower on the *Berlin Question*. Khrushchev then met with newly elected US President Kennedy at the Vienna Summit on June 1961. A meeting that led to Khrushchev re-issuing the *Berlin Ultimatum*. Kennedy responded to the ultimatum by freeing an additional \$3.25 billion for military spending and an increase of active US armed forces from 875.000 to roughly one million men. The crisis de facto ended on August 13, 1961 when Khrushchev gave Ulbricht the go-ahead to build the *Berlin Wall* and Kennedy chose not to risk World War III over free access to West Berlin¹⁶.

Khrushchev's aforementioned *Berlin Ultimatum* was without much doubt welcome by both Walter Ulbricht and Chinese leader Mao Zedong, who found themselves agreeing on tactics and ideology at a time when Khrushchev's reaching out to Washington created anxiety in East Berlin and Beijing, as Martin Esslin wrote in 1960: "At times when Khrushchev was working for a détente it was in the interests both of Peking and of Pankow to keep the tensions high. If Communist China fears the consequences of a rapprochement between the Soviet Union and the United States, Ulbricht has every reason to dread the spectre (however remote it may be) of a settlement of the German problem through free elections"¹⁷.

July 26, 2011; <http://www.bpb.de/apuz/33186/chruschtschow-ulbricht-und-die-berliner-mauer?p=all> (last accessed March 2022).

¹⁵ The *Geneva Foreign Ministers' Conference* 11 May–5 August 1959.

¹⁶ Khrushchev and Ulbricht met on August 1, 1961 - a meeting, during which they discussed their plan to close the border between East and West Berlin for good; see August 01, 1961 Notes on the Conversation of Comrade N.S. Khrushchev with Comrade W. Ulbricht on 1 August 1961, in "History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive"; Wilson Center Digital Archive International History Declassified; <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110206.pdf?v=e7e2f1ba845d74e12ac22a4cc347e0ed>. (last accessed March 2022).

¹⁷ See M.J. ESSLIN, *East Germany: Peking – Pankow Axis*, in "China Quarterly", No. 3 (Jul.–Sept., 1960), pp. 87.

2. *Beijing is on Board, Temporarily*

An article in the government's mouthpiece newspaper *People's Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*) on November 30, 1958 cited Chinese Vice Prime Minister Chen Yi who declared that Beijing supports Moscow's proposal to turn Berlin into what Moscow called a 'free and demilitarized city'¹⁸. However, Chen 'forgot' to mention that the proposal was accompanied by Moscow's ultimatum issued to the three western Allied Powers to accept Moscow's blackmail proposal or lose access to West Berlin. Chen concluded that Moscow's idea of turning Berlin into a 'demilitarized' city would make sure that US, French and British military troops stationed in West Berlin would have to leave the city indefinitely. The departure of Soviet troops from West Berlin in order to make the city truly 'demilitarized' on the other hand was not mentioned and indeed not foreseen in Moscow. In 1959 Beijing still welcomed the Soviet proposal to convene a peace conference in order to adopt a peace treaty with Germany (with both East and West Germany). For that to happen, an article in the *People's Daily* reads, western military troops will have to leave West Berlin. Obviously, the article did not suggest the departure of also Soviet troops from East Berlin as a precondition for Berlin to become the kind of 'free' and 'demilitarized' city Moscow claimed Berlin should become¹⁹. In March 1959 Beijing lamented that West Germany and the western Allies had boycotted various attempts by East Berlin in the past to aim at rapprochement between the two German states²⁰. What Beijing was referring to was the GDR's July 1957 proposal to establish the above-mentioned non-starter *confederation* of two German states.

3. *East Berlin Smelling Conspiracy*

The 1960s began like the 1950s ended as regards Beijing's position on the *Berlin and German Questions*. Chinese support for East Berlin's

¹⁸ *People's Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*) 30 November 1958, cited in W. MEISSNER, *Die DDR und China 1949 bis 1990. Politik – Wirtschaft – Kultur. Eine Quellensammlung*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1995, p. 188.

¹⁹ *People's Daily* 22 January 1959, cited in W. MEISSNER *Die DDR und China 1949 bis 1990. Politik – Wirtschaft – Kultur. Eine Quellensammlung*, cit., pp. 191-192.

²⁰ *People's Daily* 20 March 1959, cited in W. MEISSNER *Die DDR und China 1949 bis 1990. Politik – Wirtschaft – Kultur. Eine Quellensammlung*, cit., p. 193.

conclusion that West Berlin belongs to the GDR and that East Germany is home to a second German ‘peace-loving socialist nation.’ Chinese Vice Prime Minister Chen furthermore decided in January 1961 during a conversation with East German diplomats that the *Berlin* and *Taiwan Questions* have much in common²¹. ‘In common’ as in requesting US military to withdraw from Taiwan, like they should do from West Berlin, Chen pointed out²². However, Chen admitted that this is unrealistic, as Taiwan is hosting US military bases of great strategic importance to Washington. Chen’s interlocutor, East Berlin’s ambassador to China Wandel, confirmed that the *Berlin* and *Taiwan Questions* do indeed have much in common but pointed out that a solution to the *Taiwan Question* is less pressing than one to the *Berlin Question*. Unlike Taiwan, Berlin is on the ‘frontline’ of the Cold War and the theatre where a military conflict with the western imperialists war could break out, Wandel warned. However, given that West Berlin is situated in the middle of GDR territory, East German ambassador in Beijing Wandel explained in February 1961, its position is more advantageous than that of Taiwan should West Germany and its allies impose an economic embargo onto the GDR (without Wandel adding any details on why that is in his view the case).

In mid-1961 East Berlin decided that the Chinese press failed to acknowledge West Germany’s alleged aggressive and militarist character. East Berlin’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued two reports over two weeks on that topic, lamenting that Chinese newspaper articles failed to report that West Germany is already a full-fledged aggressive ‘militarist country.’ Chinese newspaper articles, the ministry warned, spoke ‘only’ about the ongoing ‘revival’ of West German militarism, suggesting that West Germany has yet to become a ‘fully’ militarist country²³. The second ministry report issued on the 24th of July 1961 struck a similar tone. In July 1964onsensical and made up claims. Indeed,lating its borders.ent and militarist government in Bonn, dead set on violati... It complained that the Chinese press is not nearly explicit enough about the fact that the western Allies have violated the *Potsdam Declaration*²⁴. That was as implausible as it gets as the *Potsdam*

²¹ SAPMO-BArch, ZPA IV 2/20/123.

²² Which Washington only did in 1979 when the U.S. and China established diplomatic relations.

²³ SAPMO-BArch, ZPA IV 2/20/115.

²⁴ The parties to the *Potsdam Declaration* agreed to establish a demilitarized and disarmed Germany under four zones of Allied occupation.

Declaration did obviously not foresee the kind of Berlin Moscow did: no Western military troops but instead Soviet troops stationed in a then ‘not-so-de-militarized’ Berlin. It went on to complain that the Chinese press warns of the ‘re-emerging’ as opposed to what East Berlin warned is already a ‘re-emerged’ West German militarism²⁵. But East Berlin wasn’t done yet warning about West German militarism. When SED Politburo member Hermann Matern was invited by the *People’s Daily* to write an article on the *Berlin Question*, he received instructions from the Politburo to include the following issues: 1. warnings on the danger of West German militarism and 2. lack of Chinese support for East Berlin’s position on the existence of two German states²⁶. During a meeting between East German ambassador Hegen and Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Chi in Beijing in December 1961 Hegen gave himself confident that the western Allies leaving West Berlin would only be a matter of time²⁷. Hegen stroke a dramatic tone when he announced that ‘something big’ could happen in Berlin if the situation escalated. What he must have meant was a strong US reaction, i.e. the use of military force in case Moscow and East Berlin decided to indefinitely end western access to West Berlin. That ‘something big’ did not happen and instead the year 1961 ended with GDR authorities lamenting that Beijing’s support for the GDR’s statehood and nationhood was fading. Labelled as ‘strictly confidential’, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs protested that the Chinese press did not report on whether Beijing would adopting a peace treaty with the GDR should the western powers refuse to adopt a peace treaty with the two German states²⁸.

4. *Applauding the Berlin Wall*

Bilateral relations took a (temporary) turn for the better when Beijing joined East Berlin and Moscow in applauding what East Berlin referred to as the ‘anti-fascist wall’ (the *Berlin Wall* was meant). When after years of begging GDR leader Ulbricht got the go-ahead from Moscow to separate

²⁵ The terms used in German are ‘wiedererstehenden’ versus ‘wiedererstandenen’ together with the term ‘Militarismus’ (militarism).

²⁶ SAPMO-BArch, ZPA IV 2/20/115.

²⁷ SAPMO-BArch, ZPA IV 2/20/123.

²⁸ SAPMO-BArch, ZPA IV 2/20/115.

West and East Berlin with a wall on August 13, 1961, Beijing's disinformation campaign went into overdrive²⁹. On August 18, 1961, *The People's Daily* reported that "life in the democratic sector of Berlin goes on as usual" (East Berlin was meant obviously when the paper spoke of the 'democratic sector' of the city)³⁰. Without mentioning the *Berlin Wall*, instead referring to it as "security measures along the border", the newspaper reported that East Berlin's population appreciated the police's efforts to defend the city from West German provocations and sabotage. The paper furthermore claimed that West Berlin's population is withdrawing money from banks, is buying flight tickets and is transporting furniture out of the city. China's *Xinhua* news agency took up the disinformation campaign and claimed that more and more West German citizens from Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg and the Rhineland were seeking political asylum in the GDR, among them those who, as the *Xinhua* reported, refuse to serve in West Germany's 'revanchist' military³¹. *The People's Daily* then reported in late August 1961³² that West Germany's Ministry for All-German Affairs³³ - in collaboration with the US Secret Services - was engaged in human trafficking, i.e. the trafficking of East German citizens into West Berlin. Without citing any evidence at all, the US Secret Service, the *People's Daily* claimed, was active in human trafficking in West Berlin and was collaborating with various organizations such as the *Association for Free Lawyers* together with teachers' and students' organizations and farmers' associations. A week later the *People's Daily*³⁴ published an article, in which it called West Berlin a "hotbed for US - sponsored fascists, militarists and

²⁹ Ulbricht sought throughout the 1950s more than once to urge Moscow to endorse his plans to keep East Germans from leaving the GDR by separating East from West Berlin; see e.g. Koehn, Jody, *East Germans Pressured Soviets to Build the Wall*; Wilson Center, July 11, 2011; <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/east-germans-pressured-soviets-to-build-berlin-wall> (last accessed March 2022).

³⁰ *People's Daily* 18 August 1961, cited in W. MEISSNER *Die DDR und China 1949 bis 1990. Politik – Wirtschaft – Kultur. Eine Quellensammlung*, cit., p. 200/201.

³¹ Cited in W. MEISSNER *Die DDR und China 1949 bis 1990. Politik – Wirtschaft – Kultur. Eine Quellensammlung*, cit., p. 201/202.

³² Cited in W. MEISSNER *Die DDR und China 1949 bis 1990. Politik – Wirtschaft – Kultur. Eine Quellensammlung*, cit., p. 203.

³³ *Ministerium für Gesamteutsche Fragen* (in 1969 re-named to *Bundesministerium für innerdeutsche Beziehungen*).

³⁴ *People's Daily* 30 August 1961, cited in W. MEISSNER *Die DDR und China 1949 bis 1990. Politik – Wirtschaft – Kultur. Eine Quellensammlung*, cit., p. 204/205.

imperialists who consider West Berlin their basis of the Cold War”, from which democracy and socialism in the GDR are being attacked. It is now time to remove the “cancer” of western fascism and imperialism from West Berlin, the article concluded in a dramatic fashion. In September 1961 East Germany’s ambassador to China Hegen met with China’s Politburo member Chen Ji. Chen approved of East Berlin’s decision to shoot at unarmed East German citizens who were trying to cross the border between East and West Berlin and/or between the GDR and West German territory. Chen furthermore concluded that because the West had by now not reacted to the building of the *Berlin Wall*, it must have accepted the fact that Berlin is a permanently divided city³⁵. Chen became very explicit about his approval for East Berlin’s practice to oppress its citizens. “I am in total agreement with your measures regarding political-ideological education and measures of suppression. Also internally, one has to resort to sanctions and punishment. Therefore, I completely endorse the police shooting at those who violate the border.” In August 1962, *The People’s Daily* described numerous alleged provocations and acts of sabotage committed by West German politicians (among them West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and West Berlin’s major Willy Brandt) along the inner-Berlin border³⁶. This included, as the newspaper article claimed, provocations on the anniversary of the events of June 17, 1953 - the day East Berlin’s police and armed forces- together with Soviet military - ended the GDR workers’ demonstrations against the regime with military force.

5. *Ups and Downs, Propaganda and Plots*

The *Sino-Soviet Split* and the Beijing and Moscow falling out over ideology and policies in the early 1960s, which in 1969 resulted in a series of Sino-Soviet border clashes and Moscow considering the bombing Chinese territory with nuclear weapons, inevitably had an impact on Sino-East German relations³⁷. In fact, at the beginning of 1962 East Berlin

³⁵ SAPMO-BArch, ZPA IV 2/20/123.

³⁶ See *Provokationen an der Grenze der DDR sind nicht erlaubt*, in “People’s Daily”, August 13, 1962.

³⁷ For details see e.g. L. LÜTHI, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008.

concluded that Beijing does no longer support Moscow and East Berlin's position on the *Berlin Question* and now endorses the peace treaty proposed by Moscow to both German states. East Berlin's Ministry of Foreign Affairs complained in a note that Beijing accused East Berlin and Moscow of caving in to US pressure by agreeing to negotiate on the status of West Berlin³⁸. In August 1963 then Beijing accused Moscow of de facto recognizing West Germany as the sole representative of the German people when it – together with the US and the UK - signed the *Nuclear Test Ban Treaty* in Moscow on August 5, 1963³⁹. Both West Germany and the GDR acceded to the treaty, but Washington, London and Bonn insisted that East Berlin's accession to the treaty does not change anything about their diplomatic non-recognition of the GDR⁴⁰. This, the *People's Daily* concluded on behalf of the Chinese government on August 23, 1963, is a “disgraceful act of betrayal”⁴¹. The “betrayal” of East German interests is, an article of the same newspaper one week later concluded, comparable with Moscow's “betrayal” of Chinese people's interests on the ‘Taiwan question’⁴². What Beijing meant with that was Moscow's decision not to support and participate in Mao's reckless decision to bomb Taiwanese offshore islands in 1958⁴³.

When throughout the year 1964 Beijing and Bonn were negotiating a bilateral trade agreement, a *People's Daily* article in September of that year portrayed Beijing as the defender of East German interests and declared to protect the GDR against West German attempts to ‘absorb’ the GDR through forceful re-unification. The Soviet Union, the article claimed, was planning to cut a ‘deal’ with West Germany in order to sell out the GDR⁴⁴. While

³⁸ SAPMO-BArch, ZPA IV 2/20/115.

³⁹ Official title: *Treaty Banning Nuclear Weapons Tests in the Atmosphere, in Outer Space, and Under Water*.

⁴⁰ While the West German ambassadors in Washington, London and Moscow were granted the right to sign the treaty on behalf of the West German government, the East German government signed the treaty only in Moscow (as it did not have embassies in London, Washington and Bonn).

⁴¹ “People's Daily”, August 23, 1963 cited in W. MEISSNER *Die DDR und China 1949 bis 1990. Politik – Wirtschaft – Kultur. Eine Quellensammlung*, cit., p. 215.

⁴² “People's Daily”, August 30, 1963, cited in W. MEISSNER *Die DDR und China 1949 bis 1990. Politik – Wirtschaft – Kultur. Eine Quellensammlung*, cit., p. 216.

⁴³ Which would very likely have led to a military conflict with the U.S. and U.S. forces stationed in Taiwan.

⁴⁴ *People's Daily* 8 September 1964, cited in W. MEISSNER *Die DDR und China 1949 bis 1990. Politik – Wirtschaft – Kultur. Eine Quellensammlung*, cit., p. 221.

Beijing might have thought to have made it into East Berlin's good books, East Berlin instead identified this as part of Beijing's 'dual strategy': on the one hand driving to drive a wedge between East Berlin and Moscow while on the other hand portraying itself as the defender of East German interests. However, Beijing spreading rumours and ordering its mouthpiece newspapers to publish articles explaining the alleged benefits and achievements of its fight against West German and/or US 'imperialism' was arguably hardly a strategy. East Berlin responded to the *People's Daily* article a few days later⁴⁵. Chinese attempts to drive a wedge between East Berlin and Moscow will not be successful and Khrushchev's upcoming visit to West Germany⁴⁶ was not – as Beijing argued - to be understood as Moscow deciding to 'sell out' East German interests. The East German newspaper *Neues Deutschland* added a few days later that the GDR-USSR Friendship Treaty (of 1955⁴⁷) is the pillar of the fight against Western imperialism. The treaty is the confirmation, the article reads, that Chinese go-it-alone policies are misguided and 'anti-revolutionary.' The article ends by concluding that Beijing opting for 'independence' from Moscow is aimed at isolating fellow socialist countries⁴⁸. On the occasion of the *International Peace Manifestation*⁴⁹ in East Berlin in early December 1964 Beijing then struck a conciliatory tone when the leader of the Chinese delegation Cheng assured East Berlin that the Chinese people will continue fight alongside their 'German brothers' against US imperialism and West German militarism⁵⁰. East Berlin, however, was not convinced about the sincerity of Beijing's assurances of that socialist fraternal embrace. Only one day earlier East Germany's embassy in Beijing complained Cheng's speech that Chinese Foreign Minister Chen Yi did not talk about two German states but instead "two parts of Germany" when talking to Western journalists⁵¹.

⁴⁵ SAPMO-BArch, ZPA IVA 2/20/222.

⁴⁶ Which never took place as the Soviet leader was toppled in October 1964.

⁴⁷ Adopted in 1955. Through the treaty the GDR and Soviet Union agreed to treat each other as equal partners and not interfere in each other's internal affairs.

⁴⁸ See Sozialistischer Internationalismus der Tat. Gedanken zum Westen des Freundschaftsvertrags DDR-UdSSR; in "Neues Deutschland", September 18, 1964.

⁴⁹ *Internationale Friedenskundgebung* in German. That gathering of socialist and communist countries took place in East Berlin in December 1964.

⁵⁰ See *Wille der Völker ist Staatsgesetz der DDR*, in "Neues Deutschland", December 12, 1964.

⁵¹ SAPMO-BArch, ZPA NL 182/122.

6. *Flirting with Bonn*

In an effort trying to isolate Moscow internationally, Beijing in 1963 turned to seeking diplomatic recognition from France and West Germany. While in the case of France this resulted in the establishment of diplomatic relations 1964, Bonn and Beijing decided at the time to hold (secret) negotiations in the Swiss capital Bern in 1964⁵². For Bonn, the decision to negotiate with Beijing was motivated by the hope that China would support Bonn's position on the *German Question* and endorse the kind of German re-unification Bonn was aiming for⁵³. A case of wishful thinking as it would turn out. West German – Chinese tentative rapprochement started with Beijing declaring an interest in establishing a trade mission in Bonn. At the beginning of 1964 Beijing proposed that West Germany could establish trade missions like the ones it had established with Warsaw Pact countries previously. On May 23, 1964 then Bonn's embassy in Bern was officially charged with the task of facilitating negotiations with their Chinese counterparts. At the time Bonn, however, insisted that successful negotiations will not be accompanied by Bonn changing its position on Taiwan: Bonn will continue to leave it undefined whether for Bonn the government in Beijing or the one in Taipei represents the Chinese people. Bonn hoped that the adoption of a trade agreement could convince Mao to change China's position on the *Berlin Question* and that Beijing would – like other East European states earlier in 1963/1964⁵⁴ - agree that West Berlin would be covered by a trade agreement. That because the inclusion of West Berlin in a bilateral trade agreement would obviously have supported Bonn's legal conception that West Berlin is an integral part of West Germany. Bonn gave itself optimistic that Washington would not be opposed to a trade agreement with Beijing. Washington, however, was just that and during a meeting with West German Chancellor Erhard and Foreign Minister Schröder, US Secretary of State Rusk summed it up for the German

⁵² Five rounds of negotiations between May and November 1964.

⁵³ See E. MAJONICA, *Bonns 'chinesische Karte'*, in "Die Zeit", September 3, 1971; <https://www.zeit.de/1971/36/bonns-chinesische-karte/komplettansicht>.

⁵⁴ When Bonn adopted trade treaties with Poland, Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria. However, due to Moscow's refusal to acknowledge West Berlin as part of West Germany, the inclusion of West Berlin into the trade agreements was not made official and instead West Berlin was referred to as *DM-West* (standing for *Deutschmark-West*) in the agreements.

⁵⁵ E. MAJONICA, *Bonns 'chinesische Karte'*, cit..

delegation: the US war in Vietnam and Chinese support for the North Vietnamese Vietcong means that any attempt to establish relations with Beijing is to be understood as support for the enemy⁵⁵. Bonn got the message and Erhard from then on insisted that he never had the intention to adopt a formal trade agreement but merely what he called a ‘commodity agreement’ with China. Negotiations broke down in when Beijing in November denied to have ever agreed to a ‘Berlin clause’, i.e. denied to have agreed that West Berlin would be part of a trade agreement with China.

Almost needless to say West German–Chinese first secret and then official trade agreement negotiations led to accusations of ‘betrayal’ in East Berlin. Hermann Matern, a member of the SED Politburo summed it up when he accused Beijing of de facto collaborating with NATO countries as opposed to siding with fellow socialist countries⁵⁶. Matern furthermore accused Beijing of endorsing and supporting West German ‘militarists’ and ‘Bonner Ultras’⁵⁷ in their alleged quest for nuclear weapons. The list of accusations goes on and Matern concluded that Beijing’s policy of rapprochement with Bonn is aimed at weakening the Soviet Union’s solidarity with the socialist countries and is exposing the GDR to attacks from the imperialist West. East Berlin went even further into conspiracy theory territory when it accused Beijing of helping West Germany to ‘re-conquer’ GDR territory. In a *Neues Deutschland* article the Secretary-General of the Communist Party of (West) Germany (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands, KPD) Max Reimann⁵⁸ claimed – obviously⁵⁹ without providing any evidence - that Mao supports West German (aggressive) imperialism and Bonn’s alleged policies to seek to re-conquer lost territories in Poland and Czechoslovakia - this in turn aimed at re-creating a ‘Great German Reich’, Reimann concluded (all by himself)⁶⁰. And then Mao himself did his share to seek to drive a wedge between East Berlin and Washington – albeit in a very amateurish fashion.

⁵⁶ See *Der Weg, den uns Lenin wies. Aus der Rede Hermann Materns*, in “Berliner Zeitung”, April 23, 1964.

⁵⁷ A term the East German authorities used to describe the allegedly militarist government in Bonn.

⁵⁸ Reimann emigrated to the GDR in 1954, from where he continued to head the KPD until 1956 when the party was banned in West Germany.

⁵⁹ ‘Obviously’ as there existed no evidence pointing to Mao’s support for West German ‘imperialism’ (as there was no West German ‘imperialism’ that could have been supported).

⁶⁰ *Max Reimann: Auf einer Linie mit den aggressiven Kräften*, in “Neues Deutschland”, May 22, 1964.

During a meeting with a delegation from The Socialist Party of Japan in Beijing in July 1964 Mao maintained that East Germany too was a target of Moscow's territorial expansionism when he accused Moscow of having cut off a piece of (East) Germany after the end of World War II. Mao was referring to former German territories east of the *Oder Neisse Border*⁶¹, which Germany after World War II was obliged to render to Poland and the Soviet Union respectively⁶². What should in East Berlin have been brushed off as Mao simply not at all knowing why formerly occupied territories were rendered to Poland and the Soviet Union after World War II, instead led to East Berlin protesting. GDR ambassador in Beijing Liebermann informed the Politburo in East Berlin that Chinese diplomats spread the rumour that Khrushchev and Ulbricht are plotting to change the territorial status quo in Eastern Europe. The Polish city of Szczecin, Liebermann cited Chinese diplomats as saying, would be given to the GDR while Poland would in return receive a piece of territory close to the Lithuanian city of Vilnius⁶³. *Neues Deutschland* was then seemingly ordered to end the year of GDR-China relations 1964 on a positive note. The paper suggested in an article on December 31 that Beijing is still supporting East Berlin's position on the *Berlin Question*⁶⁴.

7. *From (Already) Bad to (Even) Worse*

In early 1965 Beijing continued to confirm that there are two German states, and urged Bonn to abandon its *Hallstein Doctrine*⁶⁵. Beijing declared that it would continue to fight alongside the GDR against the West German militarists' attempts to isolate the GDR through the *Hallstein Doctrine*⁶⁶. Bonn, however, did – unsurprisingly as it were - not take that advice and would adhere to the *Hallstein Doctrine* until 1969 when

⁶¹ Which since 1937 belonged to the German Reich and today is the border between Germany and Poland.

⁶² See *Gespräch während des Zusammentreffens mit Persönlichkeiten der Sozialistischen Partei Japans*; in H. MARTIN, (ed.), *Mao Zedong Texte, Schriften, Dokumente, Reden und Gespräche*, 5. Band, München/Wien, Carl Hanser Verlag, 1982, p. 324.

⁶³ SAPMO-BArch, ZPA NL 182/1222.

⁶⁴ See *DDR-Empfang in Peking*, in "Neues Deutschland", December 31, 1964.

⁶⁵ Adopted in 1955, stipulating that Bonn would not maintain diplomatic relations with countries which recognize the GDR diplomatically.

⁶⁶ See *Schluss mit der "Hallstein-Doktrin"*, in "Peking Rundschau", February 23, 1965.

German Chancellor Brandt abolished the doctrine in the wake of his *Ostpolitik*⁶⁷. Throughout 1965, Beijing continued its attacks against the Soviet Union and turned to name-calling. During a meeting with GDR ambassador Kohrt in Beijing in May 1965, Kohrt's Chinese interlocutors decided that Soviet leader Khrushchev is a 'revisionist' who is opposed to any form of war, including what Beijing called 'just wars'⁶⁸. Kohrt, however, was happy to report that his Chinese interlocutors expressed support for East Berlin opposing to allow West Berlin to become a constitutionally formal part of West Germany⁶⁹. In June 1965 then East Berlin accused Beijing of conducting what it called *differentiation politics*⁷⁰ towards European socialist countries. What East Berlin meant were Beijing's policies of getting other socialist countries to support Beijing's strategy to seek to drive a wedge between Moscow and its East European satellites⁷¹. East Berlin also complained about Beijing's accusations that Moscow did not react to West Germany holding a Bundestag session in West Berlin on April 7, 1965⁷². In reality, however, the Chinese accusations were baseless as Moscow reacted forcefully to Bonn's decision to allow the Bundestag to convene in West Berlin in April 1965⁷³. East Berlin complained that Beijing is deliberately seeking to discredit Moscow's commitment to defend East Berlin's sovereignty⁷⁴.

⁶⁷ See also J.W. GARVER, *China, German Reunification and the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence*, in "The Journal of East Asian Affairs", n. 1, 1994, pp. 135-172.

⁶⁸ Wars against western 'imperialists' were meant.

⁶⁹ SAPMO-BArch, ZPA NL 182/1222.

⁷⁰ The German term is 'Spalterpolitik.' There really is no good equivalent in English for that term, and what is meant is Beijing's attempt to drive a wedge between the GDR and the Soviet Union.

⁷¹ Mao chose out of tactical not to confront Eastern and Central countries directly. For details see e.g. J. Niu *China and Eastern Europe from the 1960 Moscow Conference to Khrushchev's Removal* in "Wilson Center Cold War International History Project", December 29, 2014; <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/china-and-eastern-europe-the-1960-moscow-conference-to-khrushchevs-removal> (last accessed March 2022).

⁷² See *Rede in der Aliarcham-Akademie für Sozialwissenschaften in Indonesien*, in "Peking Rundschau", June 15, 1965.

⁷³ Baseless as East Berlin and Moscow did indeed react to Bonn allowing the Bundestag to hold a session in West Berlin in April 1965. Both sustained that because West Berlin is not part of West Germany, the Bundestag session was illegitimate. When the session was held by the *German War Graves Commission* in West Berlin's congress hall, Moscow reacted by ordering low-flying MiG-19 and MiG-21 fighter jets to fly over West Berlin.

⁷⁴ The Western Allies reacted by ordering the West German government not to hold any further Bundestag sessions in West Berlin in order to avoid further tensions with Moscow.

8. *Chanting and Toasting with Bonn*

When Bonn and Beijing opted for rapprochement and Beijing's policymakers started to flatter Bonn's government and the opposition likewise telling both what they wanted to hear on West Berlin and West Germany in the early 1970s, it became clear that Beijing's position on West Berlin and Germany had moved beyond what would in any way be acceptable to East Berlin. In September 1972, one month before the adoption of West German-Chinese diplomatic relations, Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai declared: "No one can deny the German people the eventual realization of a unified Germany. Perhaps we can say through the *Basic Treaty* the relations between the two German states have taken a step forward"⁷⁵. In December 1972 East Berlin's ambassador in Beijing was ordered to react to Zhou Enlai and set the record straight on the *German Question*. There are still two German sovereign states: one socialist and one capitalist/imperialist, he declared⁷⁶. In July 1973 East Berlin felt obliged to remind Beijing to stick to East Berlin's claim that West Berlin de facto belongs to East and not West Germany. Then East Foreign Minister Oskar Fischer urged SED Politburo member Hermann Axen to convince his counterparts in Beijing to reconsider its plan to open an official representation (a consulate of some sort)⁷⁷.

In September 1974 then East Berlin 'lost' Beijing for good when the Chairman of the Christlich-Demokratische Union (CDU) Helmut Kohl spent 9 days in China and Beijing clearly told Kohl what he wanted to hear at a time when Chinese policymakers regarded him as a counterweight to Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik*. Mao reasoned in bad old zero-sum terms and feared at the time that *Ostpolitik* led to the improvement of West Germany's ties with the Soviet Union at the expense of China's ties with West Germany. Therefore, Beijing went out of its way and was preaching to the converted on the *Berlin/German*

⁷⁵ Cited in P. BRICK, *The Politics of Bonn-Berlin Normalization, 1972-74*, in "Asian Survey" Vol. 25, No.7 (July 1985), p. 773-791, here: p. 780.

⁷⁶ SAPMO B-Arch, ZPA JIV 2/2/1/1427.

⁷⁷ See July 18, 1973 Letter from the Deputy Minister of the GDR Council of Ministers to Comrade Herrmann Axen; Wilson Center Digital Archive International History Declassified; <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116837.pdf?v=fd36379b83d14ffa18481f7aa0e1fd22> (last accessed March 2022).

Questions. However, it was not a free lunch either as Kohl's Chinese interlocutors made it clear that they expected Kohl to lend an ear to Beijing's anti-Soviet propaganda during the visit. Kohl was among others encouraged "not to give up on Germany's national identity and insist on the right of self-determination and re-unification"⁷⁸. The highlight of Kohl's visit, however, was Beijing re-assuring Bonn that there is only one single German nation. In his banquet toast for Kohl Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Qian Guanhua drank "to the friendship between the Federal Republic of Germany and the People's Republic of China. A friendship between China and a single German nation"⁷⁹. Talking about two German nations, Beijing's interlocutors confirmed in the same breath, is nonsensical and concluded that Karl Marx too would have concluded that East Berlin's claim that there are now two German nations is absurd. What Karl Marx had to do with the *German Question* obviously remained unexplained. Needless to say that East Berlin reacted immediately smelling betrayal and conspiracy. *Neues Deutschland* was ordered to get onto the case and deliberately distorted and misreported what Kohl's Chinese interlocutors said on the *German Question*. While the aforementioned Vice-Prime Minister Teng and Vice-Foreign Minister Qian unambiguously said that there are two German states (but only one German nation), *Neues Deutschland* distorted what Chinese officials said by claiming that Beijing not only denied the existence of two German nations but indeed also the one of two German states. When German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt visited China in 1975, Beijing continued its charm offensive greeting Schmidt with "the Chinese are people deeply sympathizing with and supporting the German firm opposition to a permanent division of the German nation and their just desire for national unification"⁸⁰. German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher got another taste of Chinese hospitality on a visit to China in 1977 on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of West German

⁷⁸ Cited in H. MARTIN, *Peking. Neuer Garant Der Deutschen Einheit? Besuch des CDU-Vorsitzenden Helmut Kohl in der Volksrepublik*, China Aktuell (Oktober 1974); Institut für Asienkunde Hamburg, Germany, pp. 600-601.

⁷⁹ See also H. MARTIN, *Peking. Neuer Garant Der Deutschen Einheit? Besuch des CDU-Vorsitzenden Helmut Kohl in der Volksrepublik*, cit., p. 601.

⁸⁰ Cited in *Chancellor Schmidt Visits China*, in "Peking Review", No. 45, November 7, 1975.

– Chinese diplomatic relations. When Genscher urged his Chinese hosts to express support for German re-unification, Beijing delivered. Chinese Vice Prime Minister Li Xiannian declared that “the Chinese people always respect the German peoples’ righteous aspirations for national unification”⁸¹. By then it was about the money, so to speak. West Germany had the technology and investments China needed while the GDR had very little to offer beyond ill-fated battle calls against West German ‘imperialists’ and ‘militarists’.

Conclusions

In the 1950s and 1960s East Berlin got some carrots from Beijing: support for its claim that West Berlin does not belong to West Germany, that the division of Germany miraculously gave birth to a second German socialist and ‘anti-fascist’ nation and that shooting at unarmed civilians along the inner-German border is a legitimate act of self-defence. In the 1970s East Berlin ended up with Chinese sticks when Beijing decided to take the bait of West German capital and investments. Does all of the above matter, i.e. did China’s position on the *Berlin Question*, the *German Question* and eventually German re-unification in 1990 made a difference at all as to how history turned out? Most probably not, but as shown above, in the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s Chinese positions seemed to have mattered enough to drive East German propaganda, anxiety and disinformation campaigns into overdrive. The aforementioned Kohl, Schmidt and Genscher eventually took advantage of Beijing’s zigzagging on the *Berlin* and *German Questions*, and allowed Beijing to opt for West German aid, trade and investments in the 1970s in return for endorsing Bonn’s idea of two-German-states-but-one German-nation.

⁸¹ Cited in *Vice-Chancellor Genscher Visits China*, in “Peking Review”, No. 43, October 21, 1977.

Riassunto - L'articolo analizza i rapporti tra Repubblica Democratica Tedesca (RDT) e Cina sulla cosiddetta "Questione Tedesca" e sulle "Questioni di Berlino" negli anni '50, '60 e all'inizio degli anni '70. Lo scopo – sulla base di fonti d'archivio della Germania Orientale e di articoli del "Quotidiano del Popolo" (*Renmin Ribao*) – è quello di raccontare fino a che punto i politici e i funzionari di Pechino si sono schierati a favore della tesi (infondata) di Berlino Est

secondo cui la divisione della Germania nel 1945 avrebbe dato luogo non solo a due stati tedeschi, ma anche a due nazioni tedesche: la cosiddetta "Questione Tedesca". Inoltre, l'articolo analizza portata e qualità del sostegno di Pechino alla RDT mediante la decisione unilaterale secondo la quale Berlino Ovest non faceva parte della Repubblica Federale Tedesca (RFG), ma avrebbe dovuto diventare una città "smilitarizzata" e infine parte della RDT in quanto parte di una Berlino indivisa.