

'Egon Krenz — a reformer?' from Der Spiegel (23 October 1989)

Caption: In its issue of 23 October 1989, the German weekly magazine Der Spiegel profiles Egon Krenz, successor to Erich Honecker as General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED).

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Egon Krenz — a reformer?

The Socialist Unity Party (SED) jammed the brakes on. In an attempt to bring the popular protest under control, it replaced the ailing Honecker with a man 25 years his junior: Egon Krenz, ideologically Honecker's heir apparent. Krenz's introductory speech was a disappointment to the people of the GDR, but his first days in office suggested that change was on the way. A willingness to reform? Or just tactics?

Honecker's 18-year reign was over in less than 20 minutes.

The SED Central Committee (ZK) met at party headquarters in East Berlin's Werderscher Markt at 2 p.m. last Wednesday. By 2.16 p.m. a news flash was going out over the telex machine of the official GDR news agency ADN to the effect that, on Wednesday afternoon, the ninth meeting of the SED Central Committee had elected Egon Krenz General Secretary of the Central Committee.

That is how quickly someone can fall from power in 'real' Socialism.

The spontaneous reactions to the election of the new ruler of people and party were devastating.

In front of the Brecht Museum in East Berlin's Chausseestraße, a group of teachers cried out in horror when they heard on a car radio who would be directing the fortunes of the German Democratic Republic from now on. 'That just can't be true. Not him', one cried out. 'I just can't believe it', said another close by.

Bewilderment could be seen on people's faces as the news spread through department stores and bars, along the streets and around squares.

Great consternation was expressed, above all, by those GDR citizens who, in numerous resolutions and statements, in petitions, readers' letters and demonstrations between Greifswald in the north and Plauen in the south, had informed the SED powers-that-be in previous weeks of their growing displeasure at the situation in the country, at the lies propagated in the media and at the sorry state of the economy. These citizens included artists and intellectuals, workers and students. Tens of thousands of citizens throughout the country.

One person put his finger on the opinion of the vast majority of GDR citizens. He was someone whom the SED had expelled to the West almost exactly 13 years before: the poet and protest singer Wolf Biermann. In the West Berlin daily newspaper *Tageszeitung*, Biermann raged that Krenz was the lousiest of all possible candidates. 'Krenz — poor Germany, I thought, so we're first going to make mighty progress backwards.'

That is the sentiment of his numerous comrades throughout the country who had been longing for political change for months — although not this sort of change. Krenz's election dashed their secret hopes that the ailing Honecker's resignation would herald the start of a different, more humane, more honest Socialism in the German Democratic Republic. It is uncertain whether or when this vision can be recaptured.

Yet for the first time in recent German history the people have overthrown a leader within a short space of time, without force, with just peaceful protest or through migration — but this did not extend to a candidate of their choice. For the time being, the leaders are keeping themselves to themselves and do not seem willing to share their power.

The manipulator in this case was someone who understands how to pull strings better than anyone else in the GDR: Erich Mielke, at 81 years of age the oldest of the elder statesmen in the Politburo and, as Minister for State Security (MfS) for 32 years, the guarantor of party rule over the people of the GDR.

Mielke stage-managed the change in state and party leadership perfectly. The decision to force the ailing Honecker to resign was made as long ago as the Thursday before last, less than two weeks after big brother Mikhail Gorbachev had left East Berlin following dramatic clashes in the Politburo. Mielke argued that the party had to sacrifice a couple of leading figures if it did not want to run the risk of losing absolute power.

The Minister for State Security already knew who the scapegoats ought to be: Joachim Herrmann, Central Committee Secretary for Agitation and Propaganda, responsible for the GDR's cheerless media, and Günter Mittag, master of the East German economy and, therefore, mainly responsible for its decline, for the drastic shortage of consumer goods and for the deteriorating quality of industrial products.

Not satisfied with this, Mielke insisted that the man at the top also had to go — with all due honours, of course, and with the grateful thanks of the party. Only a new, younger comrade at the helm could persuade the people that the SED was prepared to learn lessons from the events of the past months, from the mass exodus and the demonstrations.

Herrmann and Mittag protested vociferously; the Minister for State Security and the Central Committee Secretaries called on each other to resign. However, Mielke's menacing reference to the loss of power impressed the veterans of the Politburo more than the complaints of the two Secretaries.

The king himself put up very little resistance to his forced abdication: Erich Honecker, who will shortly have to undergo a further operation, had no strength left. He agreed to an early replacement, although, initially, no date was set.

It was not difficult for the senior comrades to agree on a successor: they regard 52-year-old Egon Krenz as their natural successor in ideological terms. The elder statesmen of the Politburo — from Kurt Hager to Horst Sindermann, and including Willi Stoph and Honecker himself — trust Krenz and Krenz alone to pursue orthodox policy beyond their own period of office. The former head of the Free German Youth (FDJ) was still to be seen wearing the uniform blue shirt and Byron collar even in his mid-forties and has provided more than enough proof of his unconditional loyalty to orthodox policy right up to the present day.

It was he who ensured that, last October, four pupils were thrown out of East Berlin's Carl von Ossietzky academic high school. Their crime was that they had asked on an official school wall news-sheet whether the traditional military parade on 7 October, the national holiday commemorating the founding of the GDR in 1949, was really still appropriate in the age of disarmament proposals.

It was their bad luck that one of their fellow pupils happened to be Karsten Krenz, upstanding son of an SED father.

In June this year, it was Krenz who, as Central Committee Secretary responsible within the Politburo for both the internal and external security of the GDR, defended the massacre in Beijing's Tiananmen Square as a simple act of restoring order. The Chinese leadership thanked the visitor in September for showing solidarity with them.

Critics of the regime and opponents at home viewed the SED's solidarity rather differently. They saw it as a clear warning to the entire population of the GDR that they would suffer the same fate as the students in Beijing if they were to think of doing something stupid.

Finally, election officer Egon Krenz has to accept responsibility for the fraudulent electoral practices at the local elections of 7 May 1989. These are partly the reason why the masses are now bravely taking to the streets in their hundreds of thousands and why SED cadres are participating in the reform debate.

Krenz falsely announced on the evening of the election that the local elections in the 40th year of their workers' and peasants' state had constituted an impressive vote for the German Democratic Republic's National Front. The Central Committee Secretary assured the people that 98.95 % had voted for the Unity list.

On a visit to Saarbrücken a month later, Krenz declared without the slightest embarrassment that there was no doubt that the votes had been properly counted.

Krenz's lie proved to be a fateful mistake: in the first place, members of the East German peace and human rights groups had helped with the count when the votes were publicly sorted in some towns and, according to

their calculations, the electorate had not been so generous with its support. The Government in power responded to reports of election rigging with useless threats.

But the comrades in the Politburo had already dug themselves in by then, since Egon Krenz's gaffe did not damage his reputation. Quite the opposite: the old men in the Politburo cannot forget the workers' uprisings of 17 June 1953, and their protégé's tenacity made them all the more confident of his ability to ensure that such things would never happen again.

According to a close acquaintance of Krenz's, he has always been a champion of the hard line and a firm believer in nipping things in the bud, on the principle that, if 50 people are demonstrating today, tomorrow it will be 5 000.

Paradoxically, it was the people who were responsible for the members of the Politburo promoting their protégé so quickly to the highest party office last Wednesday. According to one comrade, Erich Honecker would probably have survived, had it not been for the 'power of the street'. But when, last Monday evening, 150 000 demonstrators were marching round the centre of Leipzig chanting 'SED, das tut weh' ('Unity means agony') or 'We are the people', Mielke and his cronies acted immediately: at the Politburo meeting on Tuesday, they called an urgent meeting of the Central Committee plenum for the following day.

The 163 members of the plenum have had nothing much to say for themselves for the past 40 years in the strictly centralistically organised SED, but, under the party rules, only the Central Committee plenum has the right to elect and dismiss the General Secretary and the members of the Politburo. The Central Committee usually follows the Politburo's recommendations.

The stage management was impeccable again on this occasion. The Central Committee elected Comrade Krenz General Secretary 'with one accord' — not unanimously, because the successful candidate himself abstained from voting.

Immediately following his election, Krenz showed his new style of leadership. For the first time in the SED's history, GDR television was allowed to film in the Central Committee plenum lobby. When Anja Ludewig, a reporter from the 'mass medium of television', courteously congratulated the newly elected General Secretary, Krenz replied with a set phrase worthy of the West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl: he said that he had taken on a difficult task.

How difficult a task was illustrated by the new party leader and future head of state for over 50 minutes that evening. He treated the 'dear citizens' to the speech which had been written long before his election and in which he had thanked his Central Committee comrades for the confidence that they had shown in him. It was a hotchpotch of noncommittal remarks.

Even the vocabulary was treacherous, and those with a good command of GDR jargon knew exactly what to make of his apparent desire for reform on the one hand and his constant 'buts' on the other. The meeting that day marked the initiation of change, he said — although evidently not one that led to reform but one that was to enable the party to regain the political and ideological initiative.

He conceded that the mutual trust between party and people had been broken. Yet, in the same breath, he attacked the opponents of Socialism — both at home and abroad — who were increasingly seeking to take advantage of this situation.

The Socialist society, he said, needed citizens who were self-confident and critical; in other words, mature. He added that the broad development of Socialist democracy in the GDR should not, however, be generally construed as a licence for irresponsible behaviour.

According to Krenz, the GDR media were of major importance for the dialogue that had now been called for between party and people, yet the press could not become a platform for aimless anarchistic talk.

Not a word to the 200 000 people who have taken to the streets and squares of East Berlin and Dresden, Magdeburg, Plauen, Greifswald, Zittau, Halle and Leipzig in the past few weeks in vociferous protest against their leaders and their conditions; and no invitation to talks to those tens of thousands of GDR citizens who have met in recent weeks to form political opposition groups.

Instead, only words as hard as the Berlin Wall itself: our power is the power of the working class and of the whole people under our party leadership ... We are holding on to this power, and we shall brook no interference by the forces of the past. Were those the words of a reformer?

Krenz smiled at the camera when he defined the limits of what he called Socialist democracy and warned against irresponsible behaviour. There could be only one response to such behaviour, he said, and that was to secure calm and order.

Egon Krenz — a reformer? Erich Honecker's successor is a man of many faces. He approaches people, quickly adopts the familiar 'du' form (harking back to the time when he was head of the FDJ) and laughs easily and loudly. According to Oskar Lafontaine, a leading West German Social Democrat who has met Krenz several times, he is affable and conciliatory but, when it comes down to business, he is dry and tough.

Krenz is a professional Communist: he was born in Kołobrzeg (Poland) in 1937, is a trained teacher who never taught and was always in the front line: as FDJ Chairman at local and district level, as a lieutenant in the National People's Army (NVA), and as Chairman of the Young Pioneers (JP) youth organisation (1971 to 1974) and of the Free German Youth (1974 to 1983). Following his studies at the Communist Party College in Moscow from 1964 to 1967, as befitted his rank, he ascended to the higher echelons of the Central Committee (1973) and Politburo (1983) with Honecker's support.

Amongst the SED elite, Krenz was long considered to be an 'eternal youth' because, even when he was older, he liked to wear an open-neck blue shirt and flirt with pretty girls in the FDJ. As a member of the Politburo, married to a teacher and with two sons, he enjoyed life and alcohol to the full. The veterans mocked his combination of FDJ-style blue shirt and grey hair.

Krenz did not become Honecker's heir apparent until after the deaths of the candidates who had been groomed for succession by the SED leader: Werner Felfe, with Politburo responsibility for agriculture, died at the age of 60 in 1988, while Werner Lamberz had been killed in a helicopter crash in Libya as long ago as in 1978.

Krenz moved into the walled compound reserved for officials on Lake Wandlitz, enjoying all the privileges: a mansion with servants, a Volvo 760 GLE and free use of special shops stocking Western delicacies.

Krenz is said to have been an alcoholic for a while, but SPD colleagues who have met him several times in the past few years did not notice anything. In SED circles, the word is that Krenz has undergone two courses of treatment for addiction — apparently with success.

After being elected SED General Secretary, he revealed details of his private life — a novelty in the GDR press — to the mouthpiece of the FDJ, the daily *Junge Welt*.

Editor-in-Chief Hans-Dietrich Schütt asked the 52-year-old whether he still went jogging regularly as he used to. Krenz replied that he did, that he tried to manage a few kilometres a day, usually very early in the morning. After all, he said, it was vital to keep in shape, on matters both major and minor. Although he always had to force himself, he said, he did not want to give up the habit.

During his career, the jogger never had time for deviationists. As Chairman of the Young Pioneers and the FDJ, he hammered it into young GDR citizens that a love of life includes a hatred of the imperialist system. Those same young citizens are now, as adults, escaping to the class enemy in their droves.

A reformer?

The self-confidence of the six-foot tall, thirteen-stone tailor's son occasionally left even his comrades in the West German Communist Party (DKP) speechless. At the last SED party congress, in April 1986, some DKP members asked him whether this terrible, rhythmic, precisely measured clapping was still in keeping with the times. Krenz, then already number two in terms of length of applause, raised his finger, saying, 'That is how it has always been, how it is, and how it will be.'

Just a stock phrase? Or an indication of the present Number One's will to reform?

His televised speech to the nation disappointed not only the opposition, who had expected nothing else. Artist Bärbel Bohley, spokeswoman for Neues Forum, the most prominent opposition group, told the West German daily newspaper *Tagesspiegel* that she was not interested, that it was not about who was at the top.

That was not so for the SED comrades, yet, in many instances, even they reacted with a helpless shrug of the shoulders to the new General Secretary's clichés that apparently closed the door to real reform.

Their disappointment is premature. Krenz's enthronement last Wednesday was only the start of the 'change' according to Mielke's plan.

On Tuesday this week, once the East German Parliament (*Volkskammer*), with one accord, has appointed Egon Krenz Chairman of the Council of State (Head of State) and Chairman of the National Defence Council, other things will happen in quick succession.

First, the entire Council of Ministers — apart from its chairman Willi Stoph — is to resign, including Honecker's wife Margot, the Education Minister. Krenz will then have a free hand to fill the departments of the machinery of State with his trusted allies.

Second, at the next Central Committee plenum in a few weeks' time (the date had not been set by the weekend), more old stagers in the Politburo will be asked to clear their desks. By the time of the party congress in May, most of the old guard will have retired.

Third, heads will also roll amongst the middle-ranking functionaries, at party headquarters and in the regions, in the machinery of State and in the industrial combines. Numerous terrified SED district secretaries were already holding long emergency meetings last week.

But we shall not see Krenz's mettle or his ability to assert his authority until we know whom the Central Committee, at its next meeting, will confirm in the four free Politburo seats vacated by Honecker, Herrmann, Mittag and Felfe. The functionaries have been playing a guessing game since Wednesday, trying their best to work out who will be doing what.

According to insiders, one thing is certain: the head of the Dresden region SED, Hans Modrow, has now become more of a force to be reckoned with. He will join the top echelons of the SED no later than at the Party Congress in May 1990, if only because Krenz wants to place responsibility on the shoulders of the man who carries the hopes of reformist comrades in order to safeguard his own power.

When it comes down to business, Krenz is again not content with empty phrases. He gave his people a taster in his televised speech when he told them that the Politburo had submitted a proposal to the GDR Government that preparations should begin for a Bill to enable GDR citizens to travel abroad.

What that actually means is that it will soon be easier for East Germans to travel to the West than it has been previously. This is one of the bones of contention, particularly for the many working men and women who neither have relatives in the Federal Republic nor enjoy any of the privileges that bring with them permanent passes or business trips.

Ronald Berus, a worker at the '7 October' machine tool combine in East Berlin, told the new party leader last Thursday that those who had no such things were 'buggered'. East German television did not edit out the

sentence — a sign of the new openness.

The central mouthpiece of the SED, the newspaper *Neues Deutschland*, had already anticipated how the new arrangements might work the Friday before last in its comments on the travel restrictions between the GDR and Czechoslovakia that had been in place since 3 October.

The most important point was that travel to Czechoslovakia could also be approved for stays in a health resort or for holidays, in response to invitations or ‘for urgent reasons’.

What signifies a harsh restriction of previous practice for tourist trips to Prague or to the thermal springs of Karlovy Vary (since the closure of the open border with Poland in 1980, Czechoslovakia had been the only country to which GDR citizens could travel without a passport or an official permit) would be tantamount to clearance for visits to the West. The number of those entitled to travel would rise overnight to incredible proportions.

But there is a snag in the arrangements which the apparatchiks are currently trying to decide how to implement: humane travel regulations have to provide GDR visitors to the West with sufficient foreign currency for them no longer to be dependent on the kindness of their hosts. The 15 West German marks which the GDR state bank has always exchanged for every traveller at a rate of 1:1 are enough for a coffee on the way and for the last few kilometres by bus to their destination.

But foreign currency is in short supply in the ailing East Berlin Treasury. According to an expert, Krenz cannot even keep his promise to improve supplies of consumer goods because the resources to do so are just not available.

He nevertheless has to try if he really wants to become a reformer; and perhaps the West could even give him a helping hand. After all, last Friday, Christian, Free and Social Democrats in Bonn were considering whether GDR visitors would, in future, be able to exchange up to 500 marks of their soft currency into West German marks in the West at a rate of 1:1 or whether they would be able to help themselves from an intra-German ‘currency pot’ (as Volker Rühle, General Secretary of the Christian Democratic Union, described it).

The Mayor of Berlin, Walter Momper, expects the new liberal travel law to be in place by Christmas — and is worried about the financial consequences for the Treasury.

Honecker’s successor showed his mettle, at least where tactics are concerned, just the day after his election. At seven o’clock on the morning of 19 October he descended on the early shift at the ‘7 October’ machine tool combine in East Berlin (the SED still cannot forget the workers’ uprisings of 17 June 1953) and listened to what the workers there really had to say. Only the week before, they had told Comrade Gunter Rettner, department head at SED headquarters, in no uncertain terms to push off, because the functionary’s party jargon got on their nerves.

On the same day, at the hunting lodge Schloß Hubertusstock, which — until the day before — had been Honecker’s favourite residence, Krenz entertained to afternoon tea Bishop Werner Leich, the head of the Conference of Governing Bodies of the Protestant Churches in the GDR (KKL). This was a clever move. If the new leader of the SED were to succeed in winning over the official church, he would deal a heavy blow to both the unruly peace and human rights groups and the fledgling political opposition. They are, in fact, very dependent on the support and protection of their spiritual leaders and on their parish halls as places of assembly and meeting points.

Since the change of power, the media have become more attractive, and a romantic attachment seems to be forming between the opposition groups and — local — functionaries in the official party. For example, Dresden’s Mayor Wolfgang Berghofer had a discussion with Protestants, and, in Potsdam, the Neues Forum opposition group was recognised as a party to talks.

It is, however, extremely uncertain how far Egon Krenz will succeed with tactics alone or whether the calculations of the SED proponents of change will prove successful and achieve any changes in the country

without power-sharing at any time, which would jeopardise the existence of the SED. Time is against Erich Mielke and his policy of flexible adjustment to world events.

The intelligentsia of the country are sceptical. GDR-based writer Stefan Heym claimed in an essay in *Der Spiegel* that credibility was gained by deeds not by words, and he called for sweeping changes to real Socialism.

The writers' association executive committee called for the public democratic dialogue on indifference, irresponsibility, mismanagement and paternalism to start immediately at all levels of society (and made this demand public on Monday last week in *Der Morgen*, the newspaper of the Liberal Democratic Party of Germany (LDPD)).

What was necessary now, however, was revolutionary reform, they added; it was not reform that was to be feared but the fear of reform.

The theatrical community of the GDR capital (Union of Artists) wants to organise a demonstration for all East Berliners on 4 or 19 November. The plan is for it to go right through the city to the Platz der Akademie, the site of Schinkel's prestigious concert hall, and to terminate there with a pro-reform rally. The lawyer Gregor Gysi, Chairman of the Bar Association's Council of Chairmen in the GDR, made an official application to the municipal authorities for a permit on behalf of the theatrical community.

Even the students, for years the trouble-free, controlled progeny of the party élite, have woken up in the past week. At East Berlin's Humboldt University on Tuesday, 6 000 undergraduates spent hours discussing the issue of a freely elected student council, independent of the FDJ, which is to represent their interests in future in place of the official state youth organisation.

The meeting, which took place simultaneously in nine lecture theatres, had been convened by the University's FDJ Secretary, Richard Schmidt, who had studied in Moscow and holds a doctorate in chemistry. Schmidt made no attempt to quieten the debate, in which intense mistrust of the FDJ was evident — not even when one of the students, to the thunderous applause of his fellow students, called out that they wanted Socialism, but a different one.

Nor did he attempt to quieten the debate when a reporter from the TV news programme 'Aktuelle Kamera', whom the students had initially drowned out with boos and catcalls, admitted that, if anyone told him again to cut something out of his news item, he would pack his job in.

The participants finally adjourned after three hours of heated debate. The plan is initially for the proposals for a democratically authorised student representation to be sorted and evaluated in small working parties, following which a further plenary meeting will take a decision on them.

Krenz and his mentor Mielke could also be brought down by their own people. Last week, for the first time, open resistance was offered to a caste which has always been not only largely outside the law in the GDR but also beyond criticism, namely the Minister for State Security's accomplices.

The country is gradually learning details of the brutality with which the state security services (Stasi) acted against those who had demonstrated for more democracy and a better quality of life ideologically in East Berlin and Leipzig, in Dresden, Magdeburg and Halle on the fringe of the celebrations held to mark the 40th anniversary of the founding of the GDR.

At a rock concert against force in the Erlöserkirche (Church of the Redeemer) in East Berlin, those who were on the receiving end gave details of the Stasi attacks. For example, a man who had stood against a wall for 16 hours with his hands raised was severely beaten when he collapsed, and another man was worked over with rubber truncheons in the toilets. Women had to undress fully for interrogation.

The writer Christoph Hein exclaimed bitterly during his reading to the Berliner Ensemble theatre company that

the GDR had become more cosmopolitan on its 40th anniversary. After all, he said, it must be cosmopolitanism if pictures previously transmitted only from Chile and China could now be seen on the streets of the GDR.

The whole country is outraged at what Hein called the ‘excess of the state security forces’. The Protestant Church has gathered 50 eyewitness reports, and the Executive Committee of the Academy of the Arts in East Berlin has over 20. Both the East Berlin Bishop Gottfried Forck and the Academy are calling for an investigation by an independent commission into the actions of the Stasi and riot police.

In a *Spiegel* interview, Christoph Hein even calls for the replacement of GDR Chief Public Prosecutor Günter Wendland. On GDR television last Tuesday, Wendland had declared that citizens’ complaints about the police were still being investigated, yet he announced the outcome of the investigation at the same time. He prejudged it succinctly, saying that the violence did not come from the police but was directed against the police.

To anyone who knew differently — for example, anyone who had seen riot police hunting down, beating up and dragging off harmless adolescents in the East Berlin district of Prenzlauer Berg, home to many dissidents, on 7 October — the Chief Public Prosecutor gave a warning that no slander of either a citizen or an organ of the State would be tolerated.

The attacks on the judiciary and the Stasi have brought things to a head: Mielke’s hated bunch of informers is the mainstay of the repression apparatus which has so far helped the SED to suppress any opposition movement in the country. Insiders reckon that the Ministry for State Security can call on over 30 000 full-time thugs and spies.

The people’s fear of them is visibly diminishing. One of the banners waved by Leipzig demonstrators last Monday called for the Stasi to be put to work on the production line — surprisingly daring in its mention of the Stasi by name and a clear call for the Stasi to be stripped of their privileges. At the demonstration of 7 October, young people chased off members of the Stasi who were dragging a young girl away and freed her from their stranglehold — scenes that would have been unthinkable a few weeks ago.

But, can Egon Krenz, as Central Committee Secretary jointly responsible for the unlawful practices of the security services, really afford to curtail the all-pervading power of the spies without putting himself at risk?

In his inaugural speech to the Central Committee, Krenz emphasised that the face of the Central Committee was turned towards the people. Whether or not the people will, at some time, turn their faces towards their leader Egon Krenz is something that he will be able to put to the test early this week. When the 150 000 Leipzig demonstrators disbanded last Monday, they agreed to meet again the following Monday. And, on Friday evening, two days after Honecker’s downfall, over 10 000 people marched through Dresden in silent protest.

They want reforms now — no ‘ifs and buts’ and no tactical evasions.

Otherwise they would prefer to leave the country: after all, on the day after the change of leadership, 1 119 GDR citizens departed for Hungary, leaving behind them a country freed from Honecker’s rule.

These numbers are in line with the numbers who left during Honecker’s last days in office.