

By Elan Klüger & David BlanchflowerA

Birth name: Erich Paul Honecker

Date of birth: August 25, 1912

Place of birth: Weibelskirchen in the Saarland, Germany

Date of death: May 29, Santiago, Chile 1994

Site of grave: Recoleta, Chile

Education: Two one-year sessions at the International Lenin School in the USSR

Marriage: Charlotte Schanuel, Edith Baumann, Margot Feist

Children: Erika and Sonja

Date of ascension to power: 3 May 1971

Date of loss of power: 18 October 1989

Length of rule: 18 years, 5 months, 15 days

Most famous quotation: “The Wall will be standing in 50 years and even in 100 years, if the reasons for it are not removed.” – 18 January 1989

On 13 August 1961, overnight the border between East and West Berlin was sealed. Razor wire stood temporarily for what would soon be replaced by a wall covering 155 kilometers. Its sole purpose: to make the 17 million citizens of East Germany

hostages. Just as shocking as its fall 28 years later, the construction of the Berlin Wall was a world-historic event, shocking everyone. The man behind it: Erich Honecker.

Honecker was not automatically the right man for the job. His major work on behalf of the East German state before the wall had been limited to running a failed march to West Berlin with the Free Communist Youth of Germany (FDJ). While a prominent young member of the Politburo, he was nonetheless not yet a major figure. But the construction of the wall was his time to shine.

Soviet Dictator Nikita Khrushchev had ordered the wall along with the then ruler of East Germany, Walter Ulbricht. There was a need, according to Khrushchev and Ulbricht, to stop the “human traffickers” (meaning refugees escaping to freedom) into the West. Also, goods from the West flowed into the East, what Honecker later described as “economic war”. The pain point for the GDR was West Berlin – an outpost of the enemy in the midst of East Germany.

At midnight on the 13th, Honecker sprang into action. The wall had to cover bridges, houses, railways. As a placeholder, razor wire was placed across it all. The U-Bahn and S-Bahn were divided, and barriers were put in the Spree (the river running through the center of Berlin) to stop those from swimming to freedom. By 5am, the border was secured.

The plan had been in the works for months. Honecker was chosen as the “chief-of-staff” for the project, leading a team of

five working to ensure the logistics worked out for one of the most daring moments in the 45-year Cold War. The orders came from Khrushchev to Ulbricht. Honecker implemented it.

This man, who would become the second dictator of East Germany, presiding over an unprecedented reign that involved strict rules on free speech but eventually freedom for many as the East German state began to collapse. This “unintelligent man”, as many would describe him, would preside over a lengthy, unremarkable, and often quite evil reign.

Honecker was not destined to lead a Communist state, and many were and are surprised at the length of his rule.

Erich Paul Honecker was born on 25 August 1912, in Wiebelskirchen in the Saarland, not far from the borders with France and Luxembourg. Communism ran in his blood – nobody was to ever doubt his credentials. His father was a miner, a tough job. His father turned to communism, according to Honecker, because it best represented the workers. At 16, he would follow in his father’s footsteps, and join the KJVD (Young Communist League).

Honecker displayed what would become a trademark of his character: industriousness. As a young leader in the Communist party, he moved up the ranks and in 1930 he was sent to the USSR to attend the International Lenin School, *the* place to be for communists in the 1930s. There he gained intellectually formative experiences, studying the texts of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, also gaining understanding of the political operations

required to be a successful communist operator. Also, at the Bolshoi Theatre, he caught sight of a figure who would inspire him throughout his career: Josef Stalin.

After this training, he went back to the Saarland and worked as an activist in the Communist party there, using the skills he had learned at the International Lenin school. When Hitler came to power in 1933, many members of the German Communist party were immediately arrested. Honecker was safe in the Saarland which was not formally a part of Germany following the Treaty of Versailles. Honecker continued his Communist activities. In 1935 however, Hitler incorporated the Saarland into Germany and Honecker was no longer safe. He initially fled to Paris and then returned to Germany, this time to Berlin, working as an underground newspaperman for the Communist party. This worked for a couple of months, but the Gestapo eventually caught up with him and he was thrown into jail. While he was considered too young to receive the death sentence, unlike many of his Communist comrades, Honecker was still stuck with a 10 year sentence to the end of 1945.

He served his time in many of Berlin's toughest prisons. While his parents repeatedly petitioned for his release in exchange for his service in the *Wehrmacht* he was determined stick to his Communist principles.

One of the common criticisms of Honecker was that he was not an intellectual. After all, he had not gone to university. In his memoirs, however, he emphasizes that prison was the time for

his education, and he singled out Goethe, Schiller, and Shakespeare as particularly influences on him. However, he would always be plagued by such accusations, especially in relation to his constant attacks on intellectuals of all kinds.

Another entertainment for Honecker in prison was a new girlfriend: a prison guard named Charlotte Schanuel. She became less than useful when he tried to leave prison. In 1945, as bombs fell on Berlin, he was able to make an escape.

However, without an identity card and lacking a place to stay, he moved in with Charlotte. Charlotte, however, was afraid of the Gestapo rounding her up as well, and turned Honecker back into prison, somehow without additional punishment.

He was freed from prison prior to the war ending. Walter Ulbricht, who had spent the duration of the Nazi regime in the USSR, became the leader of the new East German state, the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Honecker, hardened by his time in prison, was chosen to be a prominent member of the regime.

Honecker's first important role in the formation of the East German State was that of founding a youth movement, the Free German Youth (FDJ). The goal of the group was to channel the energy that hitherto was used for the Hitler Youth and bring it to Communism. At the first "World Festival of Youth and Students" in 1951, Honecker organized the "Peace March" from East to West Berlin. West German police opened fire on some students upon arrival and Honecker soon ordered everyone to

turn around. While Honecker was not fired, he was severely admonished by Ulbricht and other members of the politburo for this activity which could easily have led to escalation amid Cold War tensions.

Despite his poor performance at the Festival, Honecker's leadership of the FDJ was successful. By 1950 it had recruited more than 400,000 members. The FDJ proved to be Honecker's fast track to leadership. In 1955 he was sent to Moscow again for extended training, where he studied military and political tactics, as well as the classics of Communism: Marx, Engels, Lenin. In 1958 he became a member of the Politburo, the ruling committee of East Germany. By 1961 he was the perfect person for Ulbricht to turn to in the construction of the Berlin Wall. Hundreds of thousands of people had fled East Germany and the Eastern Bloc more broadly through the border of East and West Berlin. To the Communists, this was human trafficking, not "leaving to freedom" as those exiting considered it.

Once the border wall was constructed, the border was violently defended. More than 140 people died, either shot to death or various accidents trying to escape to freedom. Honecker was crucial in maintaining the position that those trying to flee to the West should be shot on sight.

In between the construction of the Berlin Wall and his time running East Germany, Honecker spent much time working on policy relating to the youth. Especially important to him was getting rid of Western music in East Germany and he got

Ulbricht to clamp down on rock bands after a brief period of liberalisation.

Ulbricht's time was up in 1971, and Honecker sensed he could take power. In January of 1971, he sent a letter to Brezhnev listing complaints about Ulbricht. In May of 1971, Honecker called a meeting of the Politburo and had him delivered from power.

Honecker made sure the fallen leader was humiliated. Ulbricht had a heart attack in June of 1971, Honecker made a strategically photographed holiday visit to show the weakness of the fallen leader. Ulbricht was shown as unwilling to lead, Honecker was needed.

What was the personal life of the person who was now to lead the front line of the Cold War? He was 5'6', just like Napoleon, and, like the little corporal, was a womanizer. Following the end of World War II, he married the prison guard Charlotte Schanuel. She died a few months later from a brain tumor. His second wife, Edith Baumann, was his deputy in running the FDJ. They got married and had a daughter, Erika, in 1948. The woman he was most often associated with was Margot Feist, whom he stayed married to the longest and who held important roles in the East German State. Their relationship had started while he was still married to Edith.

His two daughters, Erika and Sonja both had children, and Honecker loved his grandchildren dearly, especially Roberto, Sonja's son.

Honecker was a keen hunter and had a huge hunting lodge built and used it often for political meetings as well as pleasure.

Related to his womanizing, was Honecker's love of pornography. He had Günter Mittag, his economic secretary, smuggle it from West Berlin.

Honecker's other addiction was assisting dictators. Under Honecker's regime, the relation between the GDR and Palestine Liberation Organisation was tightened. While the state of Israel was initially recognized by USSR and arms were supplied by Czechoslovakia, the Eastern bloc had turned against it. Ulbricht, as always, took his policy straight from the USSR. Honecker did much to increase support for the PLO, even after the Munich Olympics of 1972, when 11 Israeli athletes and coaches were murdered, in a country where less than thirty years before had been murdering Jews by the millions.

Under the Honecker regime, closer ties were developed with murderers in Angola, Ethiopia, Libya and Mozambique. If the country was run by a brutal dictator, chances were Honecker's regime supported it.

Honecker's regime also trained members of the Red Army Faction (RAF), the famous group that in proclaiming an end to fascism, made use of its methods.

These ties with evil came in handy. At the end of 1977, there was a decline in supply of coffee, due to trade shortages. This made a need for "coffee diplomacy," that involved training



Vietnam workers in coffee production and various farming techniques in exchange for half of Vietnam's coffee production for 20 years. There was still a coffee shortage however, and a deal was made with the dictator of Ethiopia, Mengistu Haile Mariam, of coffee for guns. The deal was short-lived, but it showed the desperation of the East German state.

The economic desperation was reflected in other ways. The East German state traded political prisoners for cash, becoming the true human traffickers they had accused the West of being.

Honecker's reign was also known for the restriction of free speech. In November of 1976, Wolf Biermann, a famous East German singer, was giving a tour in West Germany and was informed that his citizenship in East Germany was revoked and he would not be allowed to return. Many intellectuals signed an open letter criticizing the Politburo's decision and they themselves were threatened and arrested. Hundreds of intellectuals would go on to leave East Germany following this act, as they were newly aware of their alien status in relation to now harsher controls by the East German state.

Part of this restriction was maintained through micromanaging. Every night Honecker would go over the content for the TV news *Aktuelle Kamera*, going over the tiniest details of the state media.

A major shift in Honecker's policy was a desire for legitimacy on the world stage. Honecker wanted East Germany to be considered a nation like any other, not just a Soviet outpost in

Central Europe. In 1975, Honecker let the GDR become a signee to the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). This act endorsed universal rights relating to travel, information, and the press, not necessarily rights that the GDR wanted guaranteed. Despite Politburo discussion on the deal, Honecker went forward with it, firstly because the USSR supported it, but also because it legitimated the East German State as equal in the world of nations. Honecker constantly touted his photographs with President Gerald Ford and looked for more and more opportunities to open embassies and establish contacts with the countries of the world. The last thing Honecker wanted was to appear as a pariah nation. This new legitimacy allowed him plenty of opportunity for jet setting. Unlike his predecessor, Honecker spent much of time visiting other heads of state. He earned numerous honorary doctorates because of this, including one at the LSE in 1984. He enjoyed especially a visit to France in 1987, which he had not seen since his resistance days in the 1930s.

Honecker's regime never lost the opportunity to use leftist propaganda to criticise the United States. Honecker also organized letters to Angela Davis, who was then imprisoned in the United States with thousands of letters streaming into Davis's jail cell as part of the "One Million Roses for Angela Davis" project. The idea was to align the GDR with the fight against racism worldwide.

Margot Honecker installed mandatory military science lessons in schools, inculcating true martial discipline. But military training could not stop the “winds of change.” Constant economic decline and a desire for freedom led to many more demands for change. Ronald Reagan made his famous ‘tear down this wall’ speech on 12 June 1987. In July 1988, in order to get the young people back on the GDR’s side as they had been in the 1950s, they organized Springsteen concerts in order to appease students. While Honecker was a leader of the FDJ, he had organized to get most rock music banned and encouraged all youth to cut their hair shorter. Now he was in no position to do so. Springsteen played to a crowd of 160,000. As the lyrics go for the Bob Dylan song, while he played they “gazed upon the chimes of freedom flashing.”

During the period of *Glasnost and Perestroika* Honecker consistently marked his opposition to these reforms. Gorbachev’s reforms explicitly turned their back on much of the Soviet history. Soviet journals began to criticize Stalin in explicit ways. Honecker, a dyed in the wool Stalinist until the end rejected this. When the Soviet organ *Sputnik* asked, “Would there have been Hitler without Stalin?” he had the publication banned on East German territory.

Honecker was getting old. At the beginning of 1989 he declared that “The Wall will be standing in 50 years and even in 100 years, if the reasons for it are not removed.” It would only have a few more months, as would his reign. On October 18, 1989, a

vote was taken in the Politburo and his protege, Egon Krenz was chosen to replace him.

The wall came down shortly afterward, on 9 November 1989. No significant political changes had happened since the beginning of the year when he predicted the wall's existence for years to come.

This would not be the last of Honecker. He fled to the USSR and remained there until the Germans repeatedly called for him back, when he then sought refuge in the Chilean embassy.

He was then put on trial in the now united Germany, for the order to execute those trying to cross the Berlin Wall. Here he would give one of his most stirring speeches, declaring no remorse for border killings and arguing that such decisions saved millions ultimately. He was a committed communist to the end.

He was declared too sick to stand on trial and left for Santiago, Chile where he was to spend the last of his days, and then die on 29 May 1994.