

# 'I'm still shocked about how little we knew'

**Much has been written about the "failure" of socialism in Eastern Europe, and particularly in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany). On a recent visit to Germany, Idasa's KEITH WATTRUS learnt about the reasons from the horse's mouth – a veteran GDR diplomat, Dr Hans-Georg Schleicher.**

to understand the capacity and ability of capitalism to develop," Dr Schleicher noted.

The lack of democracy had been the biggest failure of the system in the GDR, he said. "A society cannot be implemented against the will of the people."

The system had become a regulative one which operated purely on a top-down basis. "I remain convinced that Honniger (former GDR president) and others really thought that the policies they were implementing were the best for the people of the GDR; but they should have asked them!" declared Dr Schleicher.

**H**e believed that it was the persistent claim that socialism created a harmonious society that prevented people from confronting the hidden problems within their society. Moreover, the information policy and the complete lack of free speech in the GDR served to hide more deeply all problematic issues. "One of the absolute weaknesses of socialism was that it was de-democratised; creativity, and the ability of people, was suppressed," complained Dr Schleicher. Even emerging environmental groups were considered a threat.

The GDR maintained great solidarity with Third World countries, making a name in Africa because of this support. The former ambassador referred to many cases of conscious and unselfish assistance given to Africa. "Yet, in retrospect," Dr Schleicher asked, "how could we prescribe to Africa when we had not yet succeeded at home?"

"Back at home, the principles in which we believed had been violated by totalitarianism," he continued. State force had become a substitute for social structures, which were no longer in evidence.

"How could the GDR collapse so easily amidst all the security structures in existence?" was a question put to Dr Schleicher. He replied "Simply put, these structures of power were all hollow and nobody could be called to rally around in defence when it was required of them."

Dr Schleicher's second explanation dealt with the role of the Communist Party "There was never any question that the power of the state was in the hands of the Communist Party," he commented.

**T**he party began as a centralistic cadre party working under conspiratorial conditions, from thence it developed into "so-called" democratic centralism. Even in the 1950s, when the extremes of Stalin were removed, its undemocratic nature continued; the party elite monopolised socialism as a kind of "thing" which it owned.

"The apparatus of the party created a picture which the leadership wanted to see; that of a healthy, happy and successful society," said Dr Schleicher. In his opinion, the best example of this was the Youth Festival in Berlin in 1989, when hundreds of millions of marks were spent on a huge propaganda exercise. "Just six months later the people went to the streets and toppled the leadership."

The third explanation for the failure of socialism in the GDR related to the East German economy. Dr Schleicher told of the disproportionate efforts and results. For the individual there was also no balance between results and his/her earnings in terms of purchasing power. "It is now clear that social security doesn't in itself provide stimulation," he remarked.

"To simply tag capitalism as a dying society was to ignore how successful that dying society has been. Our reliance on dirigism and voluntarism has, on the contrary, proved disastrous."

The last factor in the failure of socialism, according to Schleicher, was the strong personal relationships between East and West Germans. "This is also one of the most important factors: it was really only a matter of time before the two countries were united." □

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**T**here is no simple answer to questions about the failure of the socialist experiment in East Germany, according to Dr Hans-Georg Schleicher, a former GDR Ambassador to Zimbabwe. "And I would be very sceptical of anyone who said they have one," he said. In fact, he pointed out that serious discussion of the issue was still limited in the former GDR, it being overshadowed by current political events.

As little as two years ago, the GDR had seemed to be a functioning society; yet now new facts and information about that period have surfaced. "We as diplomats were better informed, but I'm still shocked to realise how little we knew," was the former ambassador's lament. Schleicher, a GDR diplomat for 20 years, was also his country's representative in Namibia at the time of the implementation of UN Resolution 435.

As a consequence of the unification – because he had been a Communist Party ideologue – he has now lost his position, not being "trusted" with holding office in the new dispensation.

He could not point to any "road to Damascus" experience in coming to understand the shortcomings of the GDR. Since he started school in 1949, things had seemed to improve, although he was ever conscious of the insufficient supply of consumer goods. "And there was always the condition of social justice which justified acceptance of harsh conditions," said Schleicher.

From abroad, as a diplomat, the GDR had always looked "nice and stable". But during the restive 1980s he had become more critical, especially after Gorbachev's "perestroika" appeared to be having no impact in the GDR.

"So what failed? Socialism? Did we have a socialist society in the GDR?" Dr Schleicher asked. He put forward four possible explanations, but we were left with the overriding impression that the reasons were manifold and the problem had to be seen in its complexity.

His first explanation dealt with historical aspects. The Soviet model (which incidentally had been deformed by Stalin's despotism) became the paradigm from which Eastern countries could not escape. Among East Germans existed the vain belief that their country would become more powerful economically than West Germany. "We failed