Consentful Contention in Revolutionary Times: Debating Elite Corruption at Communist Party Congresses in Poland and East Germany

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ABSTRACT

Existing scholarship treats congresses of the ruling communist parties in the Eastern Bloc as staged performances intended to manufacture support and signal new policy trends. This article, using the examples of extraordinary party congresses held during revolutionary times in Poland (1981) and the German Democratic Republic (1989) offers another perspective. It looks at the events as spaces where rank-and-file delegates could contest particular decisions of their organization, while simultaneously straying away from more radical forms of dissent. This article follows and compares the actions of delegates in both countries by highlighting how they disrupted the agenda of the congresses over the question of elite corruption committed by former members of the party leadership and accountability for these wrongdoings. These episodes show that anti-corruption was a genuinely important moral preoccupation, as well as an argument for demanding change, and that, during the 1980s, ideas grounded in socialism still possessed major legitimacy.

KEYWORDS: corruption, Poland, GDR, congress, communist party, PZPR, SED, contention, revolution

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1 Introduction

"One might think that we intend to turn the congress's deliberations into a ruckus,"[1] said one delegate to the Ninth Extraordinary Congress of the Polish United Workers' Party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, PZPR) during a plenary discussion in July 1981. Another delegate, participating for the first time in a communist party congress, was bewildered by how disorganized and chaotic this most important gathering was. After observing a number of free-wheeling, improvised speeches and unsupervised motions, he asked whether the whole thing was "not a waste of time. I know that we are learning democracy, this is an admirable thing, […] but we will never finish this congress even in two or three weeks."[2]

Similar scenes took place during the plenary session of another extraordinary congress: this time in East Berlin, where, in December 1989, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, SED) held its last major event as revolutionary changes were happening in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). After a motion from the floor brought by rank-and-file delegates was repeatedly rejected by the presidium, one delegate raised an objection. "I promised myself never again to put up with falsely understood party discipline and I expect that voices [...] would be heard," he said.[3] Another delegate from Rudolstadt in the GDR's southwest rose to second him. Rejecting a motion from the back benches was, he claimed, "contradictory to democracy. We received a task from our voters to demand accountability."[4]

These snapshots from party congresses in Poland and East Germany offer a different, grassroot aspect of looking at such events, which are usually analyzed from an institutional, top-down perspective. Historically and contemporarily, scholars and commentators use congresses to analyze and read the internal situation in closed political regimes. Some of the congresses have received particular focus: Sovietologists and historians have often analyzed the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1956, for example, because they consider it a milestone event.[5] The metaphor

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1 Archiwum Akt Nowych (AAN) [Archive of Modern Records], Komitet Centralny Polskiej Zjednoczonej Partii Robotniczej (KC PZPR) [Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party], I/334: Stenogramy IX Nadzwyczajnego Zjazdu PZPR w dniach 14–20 VII 1981 r. [Shorthand Record of the Ninth Extraordinary Congress of the Polish United Workers' Party, 14–20 July 1981], p. 490.

2 Ibid., p. 508.

3 2. Beratungstag, 1. Session, Samstag, 16. Dezember 1989, in: LOTHAR HORNBOGEN, DETLEF NAKATH et al. (eds.): Außerordentlicher Parteitag der SED/PDS: Protokoll der Beratungen am 8./9. und 16./17. Dezember 1989 in Berlin, Berlin 1999, p. 203.

4 Ibid., p. 208.

5 For example: REINHARD CRUSIUS, ROJ ALEKSANDROVIČ MEDVEDEV: Entstalinisierung: Der XX. Parteitag der KPdSU und seine Folgen, Frankfurt am Main 1977; JURIJ AKSJUTIN: Der XX. Parteitag der KPdSU, in: Jahrbuch für historische Kommunismus-

of theater, as applied in the work of the political scientist Guoguang Wu, portrays congresses held under more ordinary circumstances as staged events with appointed roles and a top-down script. These staged events, however, often required much effort on the side of the organizers.[6]

The extraordinary congresses of the communist parties in 1981 in Poland and in 1989 in East Germany mentioned above are already the subjects of general overviews, academic analysis of their individual aspects, and personal recollections. Scholars have generally regarded these congresses as episodes of broader revolutionary changes in their respective countries. In Poland, the July 1981 congress, usually presented against the backdrop of the actions of the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union "Solidarity" (Niezależny Samorządny Związek Zawodowy "Solidarność"), is seen as an arena of infighting between the reformist and dogmatic factions within the PZPR in which neither of them clearly prevailed.[7] In the German discourse, on the other hand, the December 1989 congress is analyzed as the last act of the old ruling party, challenged by domestic and international adversaries, but at the same time as a relatively successful rebranding effort which allowed it to save a significant part of its material and political assets.[8] More detailed studies on the Polish case explore the official enunciations or the party's proposals to reform the justice system based on official documents.[9] Participants and con-

forschung (1996), pp. 36–68; ASHOK G. MODAK: Significance of the Twentieth CPSU Congress, in: International Studies 1 (1986), pp. 21–37.

6 GUOGUANG WU: China's Party Congress: Power, Legitimacy, and Institutional Manipulation, Cambridge 2015.

7 JERZY EISLER: Czterdzieści pięć lat, które wstrząsnęły Polską: Historia Polityczna 1944–1989 [Forty-Five Years Which Shook Poland: Political History 1944–1989], Warszawa 2018, pp. 373–375; ANDRZEJ PACZKOWSKI: The Spring Will Be Ours: Poland and the Poles from Occupation to Freedom, University Park, PA 2003, pp. 433–434.

8 ILKO-SASCHA KOWALCZUK: Die Übernahme: Wie Ostdeutschland Teil der Bundesrepublik wurde, München 2019, p. 42; ILKO-SASCHA KOWALCZUK: Endspiel: Die Revolution von 1989 in der DDR, München 2015, pp. 493–495; EHRHART NEUBERT: Unsere Revolution: Die Geschichte der Jahre 1989/90, München 2009, p. 436; CHARLES S. MAIER: Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany, Princeton, NJ 1999, p. 203; MANFRED WILKE: Die SED bricht 1989 mit dem Stalinismus, um Partei und Staat zu retten!, in: TILMAN MAYER, JULIA REUSCHENBACH (eds.): 1917: 100 Jahre Oktoberrevolution und ihre Fernwirkungen auf Deutschland, Baden-Baden 2017, pp. 177–204, https://doi.org/10.5771/9783845283753-176; CHRISTIAN BOOSS: Der Sonderparteitag der SED im Dezember 1989, in: Deutschland Archiv 42 (2009), pp. 993–1002.

9 PAWEŁ ROJEK: Semiotyka Solidarności: Analiza dyskursów PZPR i NSZZ Solidarność w 1981 roku [Semiotics of Solidarity: Discourse Analysis of PZPR and NSZZ Solidarność in 1981], Kraków 2009, pp. 167–195; KAMIL NIEWIŃSKI: Wymiar sprawiedliwości w świetle obrad i postanowień IX Nadzwyczajnego Zjazdu PZPR (14–20 lipca 1981 r.) [The Justice System in Light of the Debates and Decisions of the Ninth Extraordinary Congress of the PZPR (14–20 July 1981)], in: Miscellanea Historico-Iuridica 10

temporaneous commentators tend to emphasize their relatively democratic and open character, in comparison to the earlier congresses, and to present them as watershed events for the respective communist parties. Hence, in the East German case, the loudly pronounced "break with Stalinism" and an alignment with democratic socialism, instead of Cold War Marxism-Leninism, has been underlined in particular.[10]

Although studies on communist congresses, including those examining the Polish and East German cases, provide basic information and situate them in their respective historical contexts, they do not analyze the proceedings in detail. Very little agency, for instance, is attributed to the rank-and-file delegates. This article, instead of analyzing the two congresses from the vantage point of the approved programs and documents, changes in the statues (by-laws), or their leadership, expands these existing perspectives by focusing on the discussions that ensued during their plenary sessions. It addresses, specifically, how the rank-and-file delegates introduced unapproved motions to defy the party leadership and demand information and action in cases of elite corruption under the recently deposed respective leaders, Edward Gierek and Erich Honecker.

Instead of relying on the officially published and party-approved materials, I have referenced the unedited and unredacted minutes of the plenary sessions that better portray the actual dynamic of the discussion happening in the congress halls.[11] The differences between the officially published materials and the unedited transcripts are substantial. The use of the latter avoids limiting

(2011), 1, pp. 259–277. There are no similar in-depth studies focused on particular aspects of the East German 1989 congress.

10 JERZY J. WIATR: Poland's Party Politics: The Extraordinary Congress of 1981, in: Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue Canadienne de Science Politique 14 (1981) 4, pp. 813–826, https://doi.org/10.1017/S000842390004765X; JANUSZ ROSZKOWSKI: IX Nadzwyczajny Zjazd PZPR [Ninth Extraordinary Congress of the PZPR], in: MIECZYSŁAW F. RAKOWSKI (ed.): Polska pod rządami PZPR: Praca zbiorowa, Warszawa 2000, pp. 361–371; ELLEN BROMBACHER: Zum Sonderparteitag vom Dezember 1989, in: LOTHAR BISKY, JOCHEN CZERNY et al. (eds.): Die PDS—Herkunft und Selbstverständnis: Eine politisch-historische Debatte, Berlin 1996, pp. 147–150; MICHAIL NELKEN: Schwierigkeiten einer Emanzipation: Zur Stalinismusdebatte in der PDS, ibid., pp. 66–87; MICHAEL SCHUMANN: Vor fünf Jahren: "Wir brechen unwiderruflich mit dem Stalinismus als System!", in: JOACHIM BRUHN, MANFRED DAHLMANN et al. (eds.): Geduld und Ironie: Johannes Agnoli zum 70. Geburtstag, Freiburg i. Br. 1995, pp. 171–183.

11 In the Polish case the congress materials published in 1983 were strongly redacted and edited, when it comes to the voices in the plenary discussions: IX Nadzwyczajny Zjazd Polskiej Zjednoczonej Partii Robotniczej 14–20 lipca 1981 r.: Stenogram z obrad plenarnych [Ninth Extraordinary Congress of the Polish United Workers' Party, 14–20 July 1981: Shorthand Records of the Plenary Sessions], Warszawa 1983. Therefore, I rely on unedited shorthand records from the plenary sessions that were transcribed from an audio tape and stored in the PZPR's archives, AAN, KC PZPR, I/334. The minutes of the SED extraordinary congress are edited and published in: HORNBOGEN/NAKATH.

the exploration to the messages and communication that the respective leaderships wanted to convey. The unedited voices from the rank-and-file delegates examined in this paper provide new insights into the internal workings of the communist party at its grassroots, as well as the popular understanding of elite corruption in state socialism. Most specifically, this paper will scrutinize examples from these materials to show how claims related to corruption and abuse of their offices committed by the former top political figures were used to challenge the authority of the leadership, how corruption was interpreted at the grassroots level, and how demanding information about such cases was seen as a testament to rank-and-file members' participation in the congress.

2 Consentful Contention and Anti-Corruption

The rank-and-file delegates in both countries who applied pressure on the leadership by using the theme of official corruption practiced "consentful contention." The sociologist Jeremy Brooke Straughn introduced this term to explain contentious practices in state socialism without resorting to notions of an omnipresent control by the party-state, or seeing every non-conforming act as resistance based on a total rejection of the existing policies or an irreconcilable clash of values. For Straughn, consentful contention is a "genre of political engagement in which the claim maker enacts the persona of a dutiful citizen, while contesting specific actions or policies of the state."[12] Consentful contention could be practiced by writing letters and petitions or making statements to the authorities. While the American sociologist applies this category to the general population, the delegates to the extraordinary congresses who spoke out and introduced motions about elite wrongdoing were a specific, clearly-defined—although not homogenous—group. I assume that their consentful contention and the use of socialist phraseology was not practiced solely out of mimicry or as an instrument, but rather, as Straughn puts it, "for the purpose of bringing society into closer alignment with the official societal blueprint" of socialism.[13]

Consentful contention during the 1981 and 1989 party congresses was deeply rooted in the historical contexts of these moments, which bear many structural similarities, and will be here discussed jointly. Before disusing these similarities, however, two major differences in circumstances need to be named. The first concerns the domestic situation: Eleven months before PZPR opened its extraordinary congress in July 1981, the trade union Solidarity was officially registered in Poland. It began organizing at workplaces and

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12 JEREMY BROOKE STRAUGHN: "Taking the State at Its Word": The Arts of Consentful Contention in the German Democratic Republic, in: American Journal of Sociology 110 (2005), 6, pp. 1598–1650, here p. 1601, https://doi.org/10.1086/428818.

13 Ibid., p. 1609.

territorially, publishing, and creating its own structures aimed at controlling the government. Although Solidarity's ideas of self-management were in many ways aligned with socialist economic policies, its activity presented a clear alternative and competition to the existing order, since the union demanded participation in power and checks on the communist party. The existence and activity of Solidarity is therefore a necessary, although not an exclusive aspect of the revolutionary situation implied in this study.[14] The East German party leadership, on the other hand, faced challenges from the domestic dissidents and the West German actors. Both of these groups questioned the right of the SED to a single rule, up to creating political and legal ways to dissolve the East German state altogether and unite its territory with the Federal Republic of Germany. They have never, though, constituted an opposition bloc with a single organization competing for support and allegiance against the ruling communist party.[15]

Second, while the 1980/81 crisis may have influenced the situation in Poland's state socialist neighbors and beyond, it was nevertheless an isolated event, for nothing similar took place in other countries.[16] On the other hand, the East German congress took place in a much different international constellation. After years of defying Mikhail Gorbachev's ideas of *perestroika* and *glasnost'*, the communist party leadership and dissidents alike within East Germany now embraced these concepts. Nevertheless, Gorbachev withdrew his support for the East German communists in December 1989, and the communist parties in the Eastern Bloc (like in Poland and Hungary) had already lost their monopoly over political power.[17] For the SED, there was no prospect of returning to the pre-1989 arrangement, but rather a quest to now

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[14] The scholarly literature concerning the Solidarity angle of the 1980/81 revolution is extensive, and this article seeks to counterbalance this trend by focusing on examples from the communist party's grassroots. For recent works showing the interaction between Solidarity and the communist party in this period, see JACK M. BLOOM: Seeing through the Eyes of the Polish Revolution, Leiden—Boston 2013, pp. 237–261; ANDRZEJ FRISZKE: Rewolucja Solidarności: 1980–1981 [The Solidarity Revolution: 1980–1981], Kraków 2014, pp. 469–477; TOMASZ KOZŁOWSKI: Anatomia rewolucji: Narodziny Ruchu Społeczenego "Solidarność" w 1980 roku [The Anatomy of a Revolution: The Birth of the "Solidarity Social" Movement in 1980], Warszawa 2017, pp. 171–208.

[15] The differences between East German dissidents and West German actors are well described in: ANDREAS RÖDDER: Deutschland einig Vaterland: Die Geschichte der Wiedervereinigung, München 2009, pp. 118–147.

[16] For reactions to the Polish crisis around the world, see PAWEŁ JAWORSKI, ŁUKASZ KAMIŃSKI (eds.): Świat wobec Solidarności 1980–1989 [The World towards Solidarity, 1980–1989], Warszawa 2013. The influence of the Polish events of 1980/81 on East Germany is analyzed in: FILIP GAŃCZAK: "Polen geben wir nicht preis": Der Kampf der DDR-Führung gegen die Solidarność 1980/81, Paderborn 2020.

[17] JOHN CONNELLY: From Peoples into Nations: A History of Eastern Europe, Princeton 2020, pp. 715–740. PADRAIC KENNEY: A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe 1989, Princeton 2003.

reform and rebrand the communist party to function on a competitive political scene.

Against that backdrop, unsupervised motions during a party gathering were a mild form of protest compared to other behaviors witnessed in Poland and East Germany during these revolutionary times like street protests, strikes at major industrial plants, the occupation of public buildings, or illegal flight from the country. Disapproval within party structures became audible, moreover, when in both countries leaving the ranks of the communist party, disengaging from politics altogether, or choosing another point of reference (non-communist democratic socialism, liberalism, nationalism), emerged as a viable option practiced by hundreds of thousands of individuals.[18] In Poland, the PZPR lost 458,000 members between June 1980, when its membership peaked at 3.15 million, and December 1981, when the authorities introduced martial law and ended the period of revolutionary activity.[19] In December 1988, the East German SED had 2,324,775 members. Its membership declined throughout 1989, and the attrition accelerated in the fall of 1989; in October and November alone—around the time of mass flight from the GDR, the fall of General Secretary Honecker, and the opening of the Berlin Wall—220,000 members left the party. By January 1990, an additional 907,408 members had abandoned the SED.[20]

Charges of elite corruption seem to be a good example with which to explore consentful contention in state socialism, or, in other words, acts of defiance based on shared values and general political philosophy. This article deals with "elite corruption" as defined broadly by the political scientist Michael Johnston, namely as "abuse, according to the legal or social standards constituting a society's system of public order, of a public role or resource for private benefit."[21] To understand the historical context and the

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[18] For more on the exit-voice dynamic in general, as well as in the concrete case of the GDR, see ALBERT O. HIRSCHMAN: Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States, Cambridge, MA 1970; STEVEN PFAFF: Exit-Voice Dynamics and the Collapse of East Germany: The Crisis of Leninism and the Revolution of 1989, Durham, NC 2006.

[19] JAN B. DE WEYDENTHAL: The Communists of Poland: An Historical Outline, rev. ed., Stanford, CA 1986, pp. 229–230 (Appendix 1: Party in Figures).

[20] ANDREAS MALYCHA, PETER JOCHEN WINTERS: Die SED: Geschichte einer deutschen Partei, München 2009, p. 416. More on the dynamic of the party membership with detailed data: MICHEL CHRISTIAN, JENS GIESEKE, FLORIAN PETERS: Die SED als Mitgliederpartei: Dokumentation und Analyse, Berlin 2019, pp. 111–175. On the process of membership losses in a longer perspective, see SABINE PANNEN: Wo ein Genosse ist, da ist die Partei! Der innere Zerfall der SED-Parteibasis 1979–1989, Berlin 2018.

[21] The adjective "elite" should distinguish the behaviors indicated in this article from small-scale corruption in everyday situations, bribery, or other informal practices known in state socialism and beyond, see MICHAEL JOHNSTON: The Search for Definitions: The Vitality of Politics and the Issue of Corruption, in: International Social Science Journal 48 (1996), 149, pp. 321–335, here p. 331, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2451.00035. For a formulation of elite corruption as corruption or bribery "from

background of the delegates' statements regarding this issue, it is important to articulate exactly what kind of acts were branded as corruption (*korupcja* / *Korruption*) or an abuse of office (*nadużywanie stanowiska* / *Amtsmissbrauch*) at the moment of discussion.[22] Accusations of corruption have involved political figures (including the heads of the party-state) using their influence or officially granted entitlements to receive easier access to scarce goods (e.g., automobiles, home appliances) for free or at favorable rates, to purchase state property (apartments, homes, summer homes) at low prices or use these facilities as if they were the owners.

Corruption was a genuine concern during the congresses, and the delegates developed their own language to talk about the issue. At the same, such allegations were a useful strategic tool to demand change and more participation. It was possible to contrast the behavior of the elites with the values of socialism such as equality, frugality, and sacrifice for the cause. In this type of critique, the standard to which concrete occurrences were compared was inherent in the state socialist system. This internal dissent could be performed without outside points of reference such as nationalism, liberalism, or human rights.[23] This enabled level discussion between the rank-and-file and the elites, wherein the latter were not able to refute the grievances as anti-socialist or imposing external standards.

At these particular moments, moreover, the voices of the ordinary party members were crucial for the legitimacy of the regimes and the new leadership teams. Stanisław Kania and Egon Krenz, since they had ascended to power as a result of a palace coup,[24] broadly appealed to the party member-

above" in the East German context, see ANDRÉ STEINER: Corruption in an Anticorruption State? East Germany under Communist Rule, in: RONALD KROEZE, ANDRÉ VITÓRIA et al. (eds.): Anticorruption in History: From Antiquity to the Modern Era, Oxford—New York 2018, pp. 293–305, here p. 296.

22 Recent literature on these phenomena in state socialism underlines the importance of historical and contextual understanding of corruption and its perceptions, see JAMES HEINZEN: The Art of the Bribe: Corruption under Stalin, 1943–1953, New Haven—London 2016; GYÖRGY MAJTÉNYI: Luxury and the Ruling Elite in Socialist Hungary: Villas, Hunts, and Soccer Games, Bloomington 2021. For a broader recent overview, see RONALD KROEZE, ANDRÉ VITÓRIA, GUY GELTNER: Introduction: Debating Corruption and Anticorruption in History, in: KROEZE/VITÓRIA, pp. 1–21.

23 KLAUS BUCHENAU: Der dritte Weg ins Zwielicht? Korruption in Tito-Jugoslawien, in: Südosteuropäische Hefte 4 (2015) 1, pp. 23–45, here pp. 40–42, shows the differences in corruption critiques as practiced by Yugoslav citizens domestically (a deviation from the norms amendable through the return to socialist values) and abroad (total rejection of the system).

24 Kania became First Secretary of the Central Committee of the PZPR on 5 September 1980 after a late-night plenary session of the CC relieved his predecessor Gierek, who at the time had been hospitalized with a suspected heart attack, of this position. Krenz was appointed General Secretary of the Central Committee on 18 October 1989, after a surprise Politburo vote of no confidence against Honecker, which was pre-arranged during informal talks with other Politburo members.

ship and the public for support. Kania and Krenz, both of whom had for decades been members of innermost circle of power, encouraged discussion within the party and the public at large about the mistakes of the past. Media reports regarding elite corruption of the former administration were not subjected to strict state censorship, and editors and journalists had considerable leeway to publish such stories.[25] This seems to corroborate Leslie Holmes's assumption, based primarily on Soviet and Chinese examples, that drives to report and investigate corruption in communist regimes were usually coupled with the ascension of new leadership.[26]

Corruption, the abuse of office for personal gain, and excessive material privileges enjoyed by former leaders were therefore acceptable topics of discourse. On 4 October 1980, a month after he replaced Gierek, Kania gave a speech declaring that the main tenets of his policies were taking hold in the PZPR, as demonstrated by the lively discussion about the failures of the past decade. He had furthermore observed a "particularly strong sensibility in the questions of ethics and morality," a sensibility he felt they "should deepen and strengthen."[27] In the same vein, Krenz, after assuming power on 18 October 1989, called in a televised speech for a "stronger public confrontation with events that contradict the essence of socialism and our policies"[28] and encouraged the editorial teams of party-owned media to inform their audiences about such contradictions between the ideas of socialism and their practical application. Krenz's advisers suggested that he should present himself as modest and frugal and criticize the material privileges of the Honecker political elite.[29] Then, on 3 November 1989, after the first major stories about elite corruption were published in the East German press, Krenz went a step further and claimed that the critique of excessive ostentation and special privileges was justified.[30] A space for consentful contention in the area of critique

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25 The Polish case is described in-depth in: JAKUB SZUMSKI: Rozliczenia z ekipą Gierka 1980–1984 [Reckoning with Gierek's Team, 1980–1984], Warszawa 2018, pp. 69–76.

26 The Polish and East German cases were special, however, because debates and actions against corruption coincided with a revolutionary situation. This circumstance, apart from the last period of the Gorbachev rule in the USSR, was not present in the cases analyzed by Holmes. See: LESLIE HOLMES: The End of Communist Power: Anti-Corruption Campaigns and Legitimation Crisis, Cambridge 1993, pp. 203–212, 268–269.

27 VI Plenum KC PZPR [4–5 October 1980], in: Nowe Drogi (1980), 10/11, p. 40.

28 9. Tagung des ZK Der SED, 18. Oktober 1989, in: HANS-HERMANN HERTLE, GERD-RÜDIGER STEPHAN (eds.): Das Ende der SED: Die letzten Tage des Zentralkomitees, Berlin 2014, pp. 103–134, here p. 118.

29 Bundesarchiv Berlin (BArch), Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv (SAPMO), DY 30/IV 2/2.039/317: Einige Fragen und Probleme, die Bürger der DDR in Diskussionen vor dem Staatsrat aufgeworfen haben, 1989-10-25.

30 Egon Krenz's Television and Radio Address to the Citizens of the GDR (November 3, 1989), in: RICHARD T. GRAY, SABINE WILKE (eds.): German Unification and Its Dis-

of elite corruption was opening, and those who wanted to practice it, without totally rejecting the achievements of the socialist state, were using that opportunity. The encouragement from the top was exerted exactly through such gentle means and soft suggestions, there was no outright official announcement, no loud opening of an anti-corruption campaign.

3 The Election of Congressional Delegates

After initial resistance from the Kania leadership and pressure from the party's rank-and-file, the PZPR's Central Committee decided on 2 December 1980 to convene the extraordinary congress in the summer of 1981.[31] The election of the delegates was held in 49 PZPR Voivodship organizations, in the Armed Forces, as well as in party units in large factories and universities.[32] Unlike previous congresses, the delegates in this case were elected from an unlimited number of candidates. In addition to the candidates selected by the election commission, which consisted mostly of representatives of the incumbent leadership, ordinary members from the local organizations were allowed to nominate alternative contenders. Every candidate for the congress was obliged to be a member of the party in the region in which they sought nomination, and to be known to the voting party members. Exceptions to this rule were allowed only through a special vote. The candidates were also expected to openly state their views, programs they planned to propose, and their goals for the congress's sessions. These presentations were then supposed to be a subject of discussion.[33]

During these regional conferences, a conflict unfolded between the party base and major figures who had held executive posts during the 1970s and were now identified with erroneous decisions and corruption. The congressional electors preferred new candidates, who in the past had not held high office and were thus not associated with the administration during the 1970s, especially with the deposed Voivodship First Secretaries.[34] This was the case especially when candidates hailed from outside the region they sought to re-

contents: Documents from the Peaceful Revolution, Seattle 1996, pp. 40–43, here p. 41.

31 While in East Germany all party congresses with the exception of 1989 were held in statutory terms in four- or five-year intervals, the PZPR congresses of 1954 and 1971 were convened outside of regular dates to respond to a changed political situation.

32 WIATR, p. 815.

33 More on the new election procedures and the course of regional conferences in Poland in: WERNER G. HAHN: Democracy in a Communist Party: Poland's Experience since 1980, New York 1987, pp. 47–49, 60.

34 ALEKSANDER ŁUCZAK: Dekada polskich przemian: Studium władzy i opozycji [The Decade of Polish Transformations: A Study of Power and Opposition], Warszawa 2012, p. 234.

present and were introduced by the central party leadership as the favored choice.[35]

The Kania administration regarded the regional conferences before the congress with unease, since any unexpected results could have derailed their plans for cautious reform. The internal debate in the PZPR escalated into a plethora of personal feuds. Criticizing the former Gierek administration in personal terms, something now allowed in an otherwise stymied communist party's institutional life, was one of the available ways to talk about the crisis of the state without questioning the socialist *raison d'être*.[36]

Similar to the PZPR, the SED's last Politburo was initially against convening an extraordinary congress.[37] The SED's regional committees, smaller party organizations, and individual members interested in organizing the event as soon as possible in 1989 applied pressure: they organized rallies and sent telexes and letters to the Central Committee.[38] On 12 November 1989 Krenz's Politburo accepted the demand.[39] On 3 December 1989, however, both the Politburo and the Central Committee resigned and a newly appointed interim Working Group began managing the affairs of the communist party until the congress.[40] Although initially planned for 15–17 December, the congress was rescheduled at the last minute for 8 December.[41] The members of the Working Group saw it as a priority to end the provisional period and elect a new leadership, among which defense attorney Gregor Gysi was their favored candidate for the new chairperson.[42]

According to the resolution of the Central Committee, which had passed under Krenz's tenure, delegates to the congress were supposed to be elected by 3 December 1989. One delegate was to be elected by 750 members of the

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35 TOMASZ KOZŁOWSKI (ed.): PZPR a Solidarność 1980–1981: Tajne dokumenty Biura Politycznego [PZPR towards Solidarity, 1980–1981: Secret Documents of the Politburo], Warszawa 2013, pp. 608, 614; FRISZKE, p. 469.

36 These stronger forms of critique were present in the Solidarity trade union, especially at its grassroots, as well as in organized dissident groups, most of which identified as anti-communist. ROJEK, p. 177.

37 EGON KRENZ: Wenn Mauern fallen: Die friedliche Revolution—Vorgeschichte, Ablauf, Auswirkungen, Wien 1990, in coll. with HARTMUT KÖNIG and GUNTER RETTNER, p. 25.

38 10. Tagung des ZK der SED, 9. November 1989, 2. Beratungstag, in: HERTLE/STEPHAN, pp. 242–380, here p. 323; HORNBOGEN/NAKATH/STEPHAN, Einführung, p. 19.

39 11. Tagung des ZK der SED, 13. November 1989, in: HERTLE/STEPHAN, pp. 439–460, here p. 442; HEINRICH BORTFELDT: Von der SED zur PDS: Wandlung zur Demokratie?, Bonn—Berlin 1992, p. 111.

40 HORNBOGEN/NAKATH/STEPHAN, Einführung, p. 19.

41 BORTFELDT, p. 133.

42 ANDREAS MALYCHA: Die SED in der Ära Honecker: Machtstrukturen, Entscheidungsmechanismen und Konfliktfelder in der Staatspartei 1971 bis 1989, München 2014, p. 432.

SED, and these elections were to take place in *Kreis*[43] committees, in city committees, or inside major factories and other institutions.[44] The original deadline, however, because of the time-consuming character of the new democratic and multi-level elections, proved to be infeasible, especially considering that the Politburo and the CC resigned on that very day what introduced extra chaos, and the conferences were still convening in many *Kreis* organizations.[45]

The rank-and-file members, tasked with appointing the delegates, similarly to in Poland, envisioned a transparent process in which potential delegates would present their programs.[46] The questions of privileges, office abuse, corruption, and the SED's leadership were discussed all around the country, and those full-time apparatchiks who felt responsible for an undisturbed process reported to their supervisors that the measures against the former statesmen, seen on the ground as halfhearted, could result in the derailment of the election.[47]

In Poland, among 1,955 delegates, 91 percent were elected to the congress for the first time, 61 percent were engineers, administrators, clerks, or other educated, blue-collar workers.[48] Moreover, 21 percent of the delegates to the congress simultaneously belonged to Solidarity,[49] but they did not stand out during the congress as a unified bloc, for they were rather scattered among regional delegations. In both parties, the open election procedures meant that regional committees could put forward and elect delegates with little control from the top. This created a bond between the delegates and their shrinking, though nonetheless committed, constituency. Most of the first-time delegates did not belong to any of the organized reform factions within these parties at

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43 *Kreis* was the second tier of the regional party (and administrative) structure of the GDR, after *Bezirk*.

44 BORTFELDT, p. 127.

45 The elections of the delegates in the SED were highly decentralized and improvised, to a much greater extent than in Poland. In some of the *Bezirks* delegates were appointed rather than elected. The Working Group had no way of controlling the validity of the individual delegates' mandates or the exact procedure in which they were elected. See MALYCHA, p. 428.

46 An example from *Bezirk* Schwerin in the GDR's north: Landesarchiv Schwerin, Bezirksleitung Schwerin, 4037: Zur politischen Lage im Bezirk Schwerin, 1989-11-23, p. 88.

47 BArch, SAPMO, DY 30/IV, 2/2.039/330: Abteilung Parteiorgane des ZK der SED: Information über weitere Fernschreiben, Briefe und Anrufe an das ZK und Genossen Egon Krenz, 1989-12-01.

48 WIATR; JADWIGA STANISZKIS: Poland's Self-Limiting Revolution, Princeton, NJ 1984, p. 204, writes of "populist" features of the delegates. There is no similar summary data or analysis on the East German delegates.

49 NORBERT KOŁOMEJCZYK: Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza 1948–1986 [Polish United Workers' Party 1948–1956], Warszawa 1988, pp. 263–265.

the time.[50] The lack of an organized program opposition during the congresses shows that they did not represent a coherent ideology. Their main motivation was representation ("being heard") and emancipation ("doing something") as such, and a general discontent with the current state of affairs formulated in a socialist language and pursued within the existing structures of the communist party. The demands of the delegates were therefore situated between the cautious reforms carried out by the respective leadership under Kania and Krenz and the revolutionary movement that aimed to deprive the communists of their political monopoly, represented in Poland by Solidarity and in Germany by the East German dissident groups and various West German actors. This created the perfect breeding ground for consentful contention, as soon became evident in the congresses' plenary discussions.

4 The Plenary Debates

The congress in Poland took place from 14 to 20 July 1981 in Warsaw's Congress Hall at the Palace of Science and Culture.[51] In his opening speech, First Secretary Stanisław Kania addressed the topics of the responsibility of the PZPR for past mistakes and the already implemented political consequences. He claimed that the errors committed during the 1970s did not impair state socialism as a political or governing principle, since "it was not socialism that failed us, but rather upsetting its rules."[52] Kania lauded the party's readiness to investigate the questions of elite corruption in an institutional setting and reminded his audience that the PZPR's Central Committee had

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50 Toruń became a center of the "horizontal structures" movement in the PZPR. The horizontal structures movement advocated the idea of direct cooperation between party cells aimed at expanding internal party democracy. The high point of their activity was the national conference held in Toruń on 15 April 1981. The conference gathered 750 people. The activists held a press conference and issued declarations and documents, but these actions did not have any significant consequence for countrywide politics. In Berlin's television factory, 170 party members from different organizations met on 30 November 1989 and formed the "WF Platform" which acted as an internal opposition within the communist party. After the meeting, they issued a declaration which called for a change of party leadership, new statues, plurality of opinion, moral renewal, and open elections. This message was broadcast in East German radio and sparked interest and support from other cities as well. Gründungserklärung der SED-Platform WF im Berliner Werk für Fernsehelektronik vom 30. November 1989, in: ANDREAS HERBST, GERD-RÜDIGER STEPHAN et al. (eds.): Die SED: Geschichte, Organisation, Politik. Ein Handbuch, Berlin 1997, pp. 825–826; JAKUB SZUMSKI: What Happened in 1980? Memory Forging and the Official Story of Martial Law in the Polish United Workers' Party, in: AGNIESZKA MROZIK, STANISLAV HOLUBEC (eds.): Historical Memory of Central and East European Communism, New York 2018, pp. 165–192.

51 PRZEMYSŁAW GASZTOLD: Towarzysze z betonu: Dogmatyzm w PZPR 1980–1990 [Comrades of Concrete: Dogmatism in the PZPR 1980–1990], Warszawa 2019, p. 433.

52 IX Nadzwyczajny Zjazd Polskiej Zjednoczonej Partii Robotniczej, pp. 105–106.

convened an investigative commission in April 1981 led by Politburo Member Tadeusz Grabski. Throughout May and June 1981, directly before the congress, this commission had held hearings of former Politburo members from the 1970s and produced an extensive report on the causes of the crisis, which was made available to the delegates.[53] "All wrongdoing and instances of corruption ought to be punished with all severity. All cases of moral transgressions must be dealt with according to the rules of party justice," Kania underlined again during his opening speech.[54]

Soon after Kania's address, however, it became clear that the rank-and-file delegates had a different understanding of what "dealing with moral transgressions" could potentially mean. A series of contentious acts in a form of motions from the floor disrupted the prearranged agenda of the congress. The first motion called for Grabski to personally present his commission's report prior to the election of the new PZPR leadership. Second, the delegates from the Katowice Voivodship put forth a motion to remove the ousted First Secretary Edward Gierek and his closest associates from the party through a summary vote of the congress. Third, the delegates demanded that the Supreme Control Chamber (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli), a state audit institution responsible for the legality and soundness of budget spending, among other things,[55] provide information about potential abuse of offices by former and incumbent party and state officials.

The insistence that the Politburo member responsible for the anti-corruption commission should take the floor and answer questions showed that simply disclosing the commission's report was seen as insufficient and the report itself (for those who read it) as disappointing. When he took the floor, Grabski only repeated the report's theses and refrained from explicitly declaring which party leaders had engaged in corruption.[56] When the delegates talked about elite corruption, they brought up images of "palaces," "villas," or even "rotating bathtubs," apparently an element of the residences enjoyed by the former leaders and their cronies.[57] More often, however, they were using corruption to "take the party at its word," to paraphrase Jeremy Brooke Straughn.[58] If the crisis was caused by the distortions of socialism and moral transgression, how was it possible that these wrongdoings were limited only to the already-deposed former leaders? Therefore a demand emerged—all incumbent members of the party leadership, as well as candidates for party

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53 For more on the Grabski Commission, see SZUMSKI, Rozliczenia z ekipą Gierka 1980–1984, pp. 76–93; MAREK JABŁONOWSKI (ed.): Komisja Tadeusza Grabskiego (1981) [The Tadeusz Grabski Commission (1981)], Warszawa 2013.

54 IX Nadzwyczajny Zjazd Polskiej Zjednoczonej Partii Robotniczej, p. 112.

55 On the Supreme Control Chamber, see ANDRZEJ SYLWESTRZAK: Najwyższa Izba Kontroli [Supreme Control Chamber], Warszawa 1997.

56 AAN, KC PZPR, I/334, p. 405.

57 Ibid., pp. 420, 424, 434.

58 STRAUGHN.

posts appointable by the congress, were supposed to be vetted regarding their potential engagement in corrupt behavior in the past. "We need a chance to assess the accessory accountability of other individuals in these offenses. Because it is my impression that these wrongdoings were not a case of one or two persons,"[59] claimed one rank-and-file delegate. Another asked whether "representatives of the former leadership who are running for party offices are in any way burdened with holding official posts in the past."[60] Many delegates received clear instructions from their constituents in local party organizations to further investigate the scope of corruption and abuse of office. To illustrate that point, a delegate from Bielsko-Biała said that without a guarantee that the new leadership was free from corruption charges and participation in political errors of the 1970s, he would not be able to show up in his town and, instead of returning home through the main street, would have to do it "through back alleys."[61]

When it came to the proposal to remove the former leaders of the party and state from the PZPR by a vote of the plenary session, the conveners of the congress strongly opposed this idea, since it would introduce additional chaos, and furthermore such a procedure was not provided for in the party's statutes.[62] One Politburo member, moreover, claimed that the rank-and-file lacked an understanding of the functioning of the state and were thus not able to determine the accountability of the former leaders. Such statements seemed to have strengthened the resolve of the delegates, who indeed believed themselves fully capable of judging such cases for themselves.[63]

The leadership's arguments did not resonate. The political and moral outrage, the fundamental values of socialism, stood higher than the formal rules of the party. During a plenary discussion, Gierek, who had led the party in the 1970s, and his closest confidants were called "pseudo-communists," "thieves," "rogues," "scoundrels," and "enemies of the socialist system."[64] The Upper Silesian delegation, from which many members of the 1970s political elite had come, threatened to occupy the congress hall and stay there for the night unless the plenary session voted on the matter immediately.[65] After many hours of discussion in which the demands to remove Gierek and

59 AAN, KC PZPR, I/334, p. 16.

60 Ibid., pp. 447, 451.

61 Ibid., p. 449.

62 According to the existing party statues, the sanction of removal from the PZPR could be determined only with the individuals under scrutiny being present and only through proper institutional channels, the Central Control Commission or the basic party organization to which he or she belonged.

63 Edward Skrzypczak: Wspomnienia byłego I Sekretarza KW PZPR w Poznaniu [Recollections of the Former First Secretary of the Regional Committee of the PZPR in Poznań], n.p. 1984, p. 35.

64 AAN, KC PZPR, I/334, pp. 412, 414–416, 427, 418, 420, 430, 432.

65 Jan Broniek: Gra bez asów: Zapiski z lat 1950–1990 [A Game without Aces: Records, 1950–1990], Kraków 2002, p. 95.

his five closest collaborators were repeated, a recess was called. The presidium, consisting of 200 delegates, but dominated by the incumbent Politburo, held a meeting in a separate room, where, after some initial resistance, a plenary vote to remove the members of the old guard was allowed.[66] The rank-and-file won a small victory. After the recess, with midnight approaching, the presidium itself submitted the motion to remove Gierek, Edward Babiuch, Jerzy Łukaszewicz, Tadeusz Pyka, Jan Szydlak, and Zdzisław Żandarowski from the PZPR and furthermore to confirm an analogous earlier decision of the party conference in Katowice regarding Zdzisław Grudzień.[67] The vote to remove the seven members of the Gierek administration was passed with a huge majority after midnight on 15 July 1981.[68]

In many statements, the delegates alluded to previously unknown and potentially damaging revelations about persons running for party offices to be soon revealed by Mieczysław Moczar, President of the Supreme Control Chamber, who was gathering information and investigating abuses of political offices independently of the Grabski commission.[69] The delegates wanted to listen to a detailed account of the Chamber's activity immediately on the first day, but the presidium managed to postpone it. Moczar's deputy did not appear before the congress until 19 July 1981, after the initial anti-corruption zeal had waned and the new party leadership had already been appointed. His address was received very unfavorably by the audience. The Supreme Control Chamber, an institution which was bestowed with much trust and authority, was unable to present a clear picture of the situation, raised doubts, and was reluctant to provide any unambiguous judgments about the former and incumbent officeholders. An unnamed delegate's statement was particularly representative of this new emerging mood: "Comrades, out of respect for ourselves and for the seriousness of the issues, we are talking about Poland, and it all sounds like a court trial. Let us end this court trial and start thinking about what awaits us, think about the program, and truly end this settling of accounts."[70] This statement was understood as a signal to end the discussion after the presentation and so ended the inquiry into the corruption of the party elite.

The 2,714 delegates of the SED's extraordinary congress met in the sports arena Dynamo in Berlin's northeast district of Hohenschönhausen. The congress convened in two weekend sessions, on 8–9 and 16–17 December 1989. Contrary to Poland eight years prior, the first leg of the East German congress

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66 The closed session of the Presidium is described in the memoirs of the participants: KAZIMIERZ BARCIKOWSKI: U szczytów władzy [At the Hights of Power], Warszawa 1998, p. 249; STANISŁAW KANIA: Zatrzymać konfrontację [To Stop the Confrontation], Warszawa 1991, p. 176.

67 AAN, KC PZPR, I/334, pp. 474–475.

68 Ibid., p. 473.

69 Ibid., pp. 486, 488–489.

70 Ibid., p. 1196.

proceeded without major interruptions. The new chairperson (Gregor Gysi) and all the governing bodies were appointed during its second day. Prime Minister Hans Modrow and Gysi addressed at length the question of elite corruption, and Gysi talked about the party's investigative anti-corruption commission, which he chaired.[71] In reaction, the delegates criticized Modrow and Gysi for their alleged lack of resolve in facing the wrongdoings of the Honecker elite and questioned whether the new party leadership was revealing the whole truth.[72] Similarly to the Poland case, some delegates presented themselves as representatives of their constituents and claimed that without some spectacular, but usually unspecified, measures against corrupt officials, they would not be able to convince their comrades to remain in the SED.[73] There were many emotionally-ridden statements directed against the old elite. One delegate from Leipzig demanded "toxic substances from the past" to be removed from the party and the expulsion of "careerists, people obsessed with power, all bureaucrats, for they are and were mortal enemies of socialism and humanism."[74] At that moment, however—and here there is a marked difference from the Polish case—no motions were raised that aimed to derail the stated agenda of the congress. Even though both congresses happened in structurally similar situations, in the East German case, no one formulated specific postulates to enhance the delegates' participation. Because, with few exceptions, the East German candidates for executive party offices had never held them before, no one questioned their integrity as had been done in Poland. There could have been also no postulate to remove selected figures from the old administration from the party, since the most prominent members of the Honecker team were let go before the congress by a vote of the Central Committee.[75] Whereas the presidium of the PZPR's congress had called a recess to take control of the motions aimed at removing the old comrades, the new SED's elite paused the congress to successfully dissuade the delegates from voting to dissolve the SED and create a new socialist party in its place.[76]

Nevertheless, consentful contention manifested itself very strongly during the second leg of the congress. On 16 December 1989, Michael Schumann, a philosophy professor at the Academy for State and Legal Science, a college for state administration and diplomatic service, presented a report on the

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71 1. Beratungstag, 1. Session, Freitag, 8. Dezember 1989, in: HORNBOGEN/NAKATH, pp. 38–39.

72 Ibid., pp. 67, 84–85, 87.

73 Ibid., p. 71.

74 Ibid., p. 87.

75 12. Tagung des ZK der SED, 3. Dezember 1989, in: HERTLE/STEPHAN, pp. 461–481, here p. 475.

76 MARKUS WOLF: In eigenem Auftrag: Bekenntnisse und Einsichten, München 1991, p. 305.

causes of the crisis of the party and state.[77] The main theme of his speech, as well as the main message of the congress, was the critique of Stalinism, seen as the source of deformations of the original ideas of socialism.[78] The Honecker administration's abuse of power, according to Schumann's presentation, had been possible because of the "entanglement of the structures of the omnipresent apparatus and an apologetic ideology."[79] Corruption and the abuse of office (*Amtsmissbrauch*) was therefore interpreted as a particular manifestation of abuse of power (*Machtmissbrauch*). Even though Schumann addressed the topic of past mistakes in a highly distanced and academic way, his speech opened, if much later in the course of the congress than in its Polish predecessor, a space for consentful contention regarding the SED's stance toward the misconduct of its previous leaders.

During the previous weekend's session (8 December 1989) a delegate from a town of Worbis along the southwestern edge of the GDR reflected in his speech on his decision to join the SED to escape the dire economic conditions his family had suffered. "The party gave me the ideals to do that," he said. He then pointed to the upper sections of the congress's arena where some former Politburo members sat. He spoke of those who had "betrayed us, precisely our ideals." "[T]hey must take responsibility," he said, continuing, "they sit on the benches up there, though they should be talking."[80] This was the first articulation of the idea that members of the former Politburo, since they were present in the congress hall, some as elected delegates, some as guests, should take the floor and answer questions from the delegates. Schumann's presentation, in the mind of the delegates, confirmed the validity of the scathing assessment of Honecker's tenure and this initially isolated idea was picked up. "We already decided [last] Saturday that here today, former Politburo members, the party's leadership cadre, will explain themselves. […] That would be the actual point of today's debate. I believe we can spare ourselves other speeches. We will need them tomorrow for the program and statute discussion and whatever we have planned,"[81] claimed a delegate from Magdeburg.

In response, Wolfgang Berghofer, the mayor of Dresden and a member of the Working Group who was presiding over the plenary discussion, strongly denied that anything of that sort—the idea that the former leaders of the party might be subjected to interrogation during a plenary session with all delegates

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77 SCHUMANN, pp. 173, 176.

78 KOWALCZUK, Endspiel, p. 495. De-Stalinization and the return to the Leninist roots was a major preoccupation of state socialist reformers since the late 1950s. As Vladislav Zubok shows, this theme was also the backbone of Mikhail Gorbachev's original understanding of perestroika, see VLADISLAV ZUBOK: Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union, New Haven—London 2021, pp. 21–33.

79 2. Beratungstag, 1. Session, Samstag, 16. Dezember 1989, in: HORNBOGEN/NAKATH, p. 179.

80 1. Beratungstag, 3. Session, Samstag, 9. Dezember 1989, ibid., p. 131.

81 2. Beratungstag, 1. Session, Samstag, 16. Dezember 1989, ibid., pp. 198, 200, 214.

present—had ever been decided and announced that the motion of Magdeburg's delegate would not even be considered. When a new motion with the same demand was submitted, the newly elected SED leadership, which Berghofer represented, decided not to allow this motion to pass. "[We] do not preside over a tribunal," Berghofer reminded the delegates.[82] As in Poland in 1981, the organizers of the congress, the incumbent leadership, were interested in an efficient execution of the party elections and confirmation of their program proposals. Therefore, they saw the delegates' spontaneity and repeated motions to investigate the party's past and discuss corruption as a nuisance, in this particular case hindering the SED's future electoral chances in the reformed GDR.[83] As a representative of the newly elected leadership, Berghofer was very strongly against re-litigating conflicts of the past. He addressed all delegates to resolve the issue: "I have the following question to ask: would it [questioning of the members of the old Politburo] bring us anything in this round [of discussion]?" The answer from the delegates, as the minutes of the congress demonstrate, was a resounding "no." Berghofer urged closing the topic once and for all, and, after hearing applause coming from the delegates, considered it over, declaring: "So today we will not have anyone from the old leadership. That way our congress will remain the congress of renewal."[84]

The issue was, however, far from resolved, and Berghofer's announcement had the opposite effect. One by one, delegates took the floor to fume about the Honecker team and its errors and corruption. A delegate representing Berlin's construction workers talked about the elite corruption in a manner very similar to the Polish delegates eight years prior, suggesting that the old leaders had, by enjoying the privileges of power, engaged in behaviors reminiscent of bygone social formations: "[We have learned] how they filled their bellies with delicacies, what went on from Narvik to Crete, about their perverse obsession with hunting the best-fed wild animals and immersing themselves in plush and velvet, crystal, and fine woods. With this disgrace, they humiliated and deeply insulted our people. And while they were living it up, they ruined our economy."[85]

Others sought to use the accusations of corruption more instrumentally to urge a new vote to question the old Politburo. Schumann's report, which identified Honecker's tenure as Stalinist, gave them grounds for that.[86] The minority of delegates in favor of questioning the old Politburo tried to convince the rest of the delegates to support the motion, using various arguments. The opinion of the minority shall not be quashed, they suggested, as had been

82 Ibid., p. 201.

83 WOLF, p. 314.

84 2. Beratungstag, 1. Session, Samstag, 16. Dezember 1989, in: HORNBOGEN/NAKATH, p. 201.

85 Ibid., p. 200.

86 Ibid.

the practice in the Stalinist past. Challenging the old leaders was legitimate, and the delegates saw it as their prerogative. Moreover, their constituents expected them to do so. Another delegate claimed that the envisioned hearings were not an act of revenge but a chance for the former leaders to defend themselves. "Why do we deny that [right] to our comrades?," asked a delegate from Dresden, in reference to the Honecker group. "We have condemned them here, and done so scathingly. But they also have a right to a defense, that belongs to democracy and justice."[87] In this manifestation of consentful contention, the chance to be heard and respond to allegations was supposed to be a newfound principle of the reformed SED, explicitly lauded by the high-profile speakers during the congress.[88] Berghofer used a new counterargument as well. This time the chair of the debate claimed he could not force anyone to appear before the delegates. These members of the old leadership who were appointed as delegates to the congress and were present had every right to raise their hands and ask to be heard, but decided not to do that. Berghofer once again called on the congress to drop the subject altogether.

As a consolation for the lack of appearance of the old leaders, Berghofer informed the congress that a group of former Central Committee members had prepared a report on the causes of the crisis in the SED and in wider society. This report, however, was not to be presented during a plenary session and was not subjected to a debate. All cases revolving around disciplinary and financial accountability of the former Central Committee were to be dealt with by the newly elected disciplinary body, the Arbitration Commission.[89] In the end, the delegates were unable to push through their demand to question the members of the old Politburo. They had found a worthy adversary in Berghofer, who staunchly rejected all motions and did not move an inch even though the issue was repeatably brought to his attention. In a similar vein, after the congress, Berghofer was criticized for the way he had dealt with the motion to dissolve the SED and form a new party; a recess had been called exactly after the motion was proposed, in order to avoid discussion and delay a vote until after the idea had lost momentum.[90] Berghofer, for his part, never acknowledged his crucial role in these events. In retrospect he recalled that the discussion during the congress had been lively and fierce, and at times it was difficult to "get [it] back on the right track."[91] As this analysis shows, Berghofer was extremely effective in controlling the discussion and "getting it back on the right track" according to the plans of the new SED leadership.

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87 Ibid., p. 208.

88 Ibid., p. 208.

89 Ibid., p. 223.

90 GREGOR GYSI, THOMAS FALKNER: Sturm aufs Große Haus: Der Untergang der SED, Berlin 1990, p. 107.

91 WOLFGANG BERGHOFER: Keine Figur im Schachspiel: Wie ich die "Wende" erlebte, Berlin 2014, p. 114.

5 Conclusions

The Polish delegates in 1981 succeeded in removing the members of the old Politburo from the party by persisting in their use of socialist phraseology and directly referring to the leadership's promises and statements. This brought the rank-and-file a brief sense of accomplishment but in the long run did not translate into the formulation of a broader alternative project within the communist party. The East German delegates in 1989 started from a similar situation and circumstances (change in leadership, revolutionary activity, loss of membership, grassroots elections), but their efforts proved unsuccessful to enforce even their modest demands.

Despite these and other contingent elements of these two structurally similar Polish and East German cases, we can draw significant conclusions. Looking at them from a comparative perspective improves our understanding of how, in previously closed political systems, guidelines from above can be interpreted and instrumentalized at the grassroots level. In both countries, by initially allowing the theme of elite corruption as a remnant of the past to enter the discussion in the party and the media, the authorities created a space for consentful contention. This opportunity was used during the highest gatherings of the respective communist parties. The congresses became a platform for the rank-and-file delegates to refer to and twist the words of the leadership in order to express their grievances and demand more participation. The discussion of past mistakes, at the beginning welcomed, was ultimately curbed.

Corruption played out as a genuinely important moral preoccupation, as well as an argument to demand change.[92] In these two communist countries, the language of socialism provided ways to criticize corruption of the officialdom. With the use of images and metaphors, the behavior of the former elites under the Gierek and Honecker regimes was equated to feudalism or capitalism. The delegates spoke of palaces, villas, hunting privileges, and exotic travel, as well as the fact that the elites were, metaphorically or geographically, detached from the population. The sole drive to hoard personal belongings, to own houses or other material goods, was seen as representative of a capitalist mindset in its consumerist form. At the same time, criticizing corruption was an effective strategy to demand change and more participation and was used timely and skillfully. With anti-corruption arguments or with such relating to inadequate reactions to this corruption, the delegates questioned the previous ideas of their party's democratic centralism and discipline. References to elite corruption could justify or demand almost anything.

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92 Recent literature shows how anti-corruption discourses, instead of simply serving more accountability and transparency, were used and abused in different political and economic regimes. The best synthesis of this literature is in: JENS IVO ENGELS: Die Geschichte der Korruption: Von der Frühen Neuzeit bis ins 20. Jahrhundert, Frankfurt am Main 2014, pp. 210–211.

Finally, when the delegates singled out concrete behaviors as corruption, they understood these as a deviation from the norm. Corruption was a bug, not a feature of the socialist state.[93] This outlook, far from a cynical assertion that elites would profit from the state regardless of political and economic regime, shows that the late socialist system, even in deep crisis, still possessed some legitimacy. A possibility of imagining state socialism as corruption-free and running according to its original rules still existed.

[93] In a similar vein, from a Marxist perspective, the political scientist Stephen Maher discusses whether "political corruption," understood as excessive lobbying and corporate influence is a "bug" or a "feature" of the American political system. STEPHEN MAHER: The State Organizes the Capitalist Class: The Working Class Will Have to Organize Itself, in: Jacobin from 2022-05-14, https://jacobin.com/2022/05/capitalism-neo liberalism-state-ge-business-roundtable (2022-12-20). For an elaboratation on the example of World War II war production planning: STEPHEN MAHER: Corporate Capitalism and the Integral State: General Electric and a Century of American Power, Cham 2022, pp. 112–119.

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