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Cadres on the Diplomatic Stage. The Social Origins and Career Patterns of GDR's Ambassadors

*Ronald Gebauer**

Abstract: »Kader auf dem diplomatischen Parkett. Soziale Herkunft und Karrieremuster der DDR-Botschafter«. After the Second World War the Soviet-occupied part of Germany was forced to follow the Marxist-Leninist paradigm. Thus, the acceptance of communist domination by the East German people was low and from the very beginning the SED regime was additionally confronted with a considerable lack of international recognition. Just after the founding of the GDR, the leading SED realized the very importance of international representation for their project of an alternative, “peaceful” and “progressive” Germany. Thus, significant steps were taken towards the construction of a fully functioning Foreign Ministry. This contribution analyses the near completely recorded population (n = 204) of GDR ambassadors in the Central Cadre Database (CCDB), mirroring their individual job biographies. The aim of the study in this respect is to deepen the knowledge of career paths and determinants of the diplomatic body of the GDR by using techniques of sequence analysis (optimal matching).

Keywords: Communism, GDR, diplomatic corps, ambassadors, biographical data.

1. GDR's Foreign Policy and the Construction of a new Diplomatic Corps

“Ambassadors of peace” – this was the ambitious self-image of the ambassadors of the German Democratic Republic. When the GDR was founded back in 1949, the first foreign policy declaration on October 24th was as follows:

In an endeavour of the German people to take its place among the free and peaceful people again and in order to consolidate peace and to maintain and promote friendly relations with all nations, the provisional government of the GDR considers the establishment of diplomatic, economic and other relationships as desirable and necessary (Muth 2000: 7).

Apart from this noble aspiration, however, foreign policy in general had been an integral part of the SED power system and an expression of the actual

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SED party line and was last but not least, particularly in the first years of GDR's existence, completely dependent on Soviet foreign policy and *Deutschlandpolitik*. So it comes by no surprise that GDR's diplomatic activity was first and foremost determined by East-West confrontation and shifts in the balance of superpowers (cf. Lemke 1994). At least three periods of diplomatic activity can be distinguished (cf. Muth 2000: 100): First, the initial phase of constructing GDR's foreign policy and consequently a diplomatic corps in the time between 1949 to 1953/55, second a long period best circumscribed by GDR's considerable efforts to extend diplomatic activities during the time of her struggle for international recognition between 1955 and 1972, and third a consolidation phase with increasing inflexibility until 1989. The following comments will focus only on the first two periods.¹

Ad 1) In the initial phase of the GDR the Stalinist approach was enforced on the whole of East Germany. This means that there had been created an administrative apparatus by selecting cadres signalling high loyalty and readiness to adapt to the up-to-date party line.² Additionally, the founding myth of the second German state as that of an antifascist and progressive Germany urged the SED leadership to destroy any continuity to the National Socialist regime. This, of course, was only partly realistic for several reasons (cf. McLellan 2004, Best / Salheiser 2006, Best 2010). Particularly, foreign policy, as the window towards the international community was to reflect this antifascist ambition in a radical way. Any impression of a personnel continuity to previous Nazi Germany's Foreign Office, which the new West German Foreign Office was blamed for (cf. Conze et al. 2010, Jacobsen / Smith 2007, Döscher 1987), had to be avoided. Thus, in accordance with ideological principles, an entirely new and loyal staff had to be recruited and the 'ideal' GDR diplomat was imagined as that of proletarian origin, long-term member of Germany's CP and even better, albeit not necessary, as a member of antifascist resistance, or in the case of POWs (former Wehrmacht soldiers) at least attracting attention by pro-Soviet activities as a member of the National Committee Free Germany (Nationalkomitee Freies Deutschland, NKFD) or the Union of German Officers (Bund Deutscher Offiziere, BDO). This new shaped elite could not draw from own foreign policy experience and so GDR's Foreign Ministry had been continuously changed, in order to quickly adapt to the international stage. Between 1949 and 1955 five reforms were conducted, which resulted in a structure of five major departments, in essence three country departments (I. socialist countries, II. capitalist countries and III. Deutschlandpolitik and additionally de-

¹ For an English introduction to GDR's foreign policy, cf. Winrow 1990: 15-32, for the final years of the SED regime, cf. Scholtyseck 2003: 28-52, Siebs 1999.

² In relation to empirical evidence on cadre selection and advancement criteria in various GDR employment sectors, cf. Best 2009, Salheiser 2009a.

partments for IV. consular affairs and V. press and propaganda).³ This was the general frame in which GDR's diplomatic corps launched diplomatic missions in foreign countries. For the first eight missions of the GDR (USSR, Poland, ČSR, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, China and North Korea). SED chose only experienced, partly famous, communist antifascists, for example the writer Friedrich Wolf as ambassador to Warsaw. Decisions of cadre selection and advancement in general had to be confirmed via nomenklatura-principle by the SED power apparatus and not – as one can think of – by GDR's government: Ambassadors, councillors of commerce and executives of commercial agencies committees (*Handelsvertretungen*) had to be confirmed by the SED-Politbureau, and all other diplomatic staff of diplomatic missions either by the secretary of the SED Central Committee (embassy staff in Moscow) or by the department of foreign policy at the SED CC (all other embassies) (cf. Muth 2000: 151-152).

Ad 2) In the second half of the 1950's, foreign policy became a pivotal component in SED's new agenda of an alternative "peaceful" and "progressive" German state. In this respect, increasing cooperation with developing countries seemed to be a promising strategy on the road to international recognition. The usual sequence of action was to launch commercial bureaus or agencies first, then to enhance the status of this bureau to that of a consulate general and finally to exchange ambassadors. In this way commercial bureaus were set up in Egypt (1953), in Syria (1955), in Sudan (1956), and in Iraq (1958). This, however, was perceived with growing discomfort in Bonn, because of West Germany's claim of sole representation of German interests (*Alleinvertretungsanspruch*). After chancellor *Konrad Adenauer's* successful visit to Moscow in 1955 and Soviet recognition of the Federal Republic of Germany, fears were raised in Bonn, that this would encourage Third world's states to establish diplomatic relations with both Germanies. In december 1955 West Germany's Foreign Minister *Heinrich von Brentano* proposed the break off of all diplomatic relations with states that recognized GDR's government (cf. Winrow 1990: 37-72). This attitude later came to be known as Hallstein Doctrine and determined the difficult relationships between the two German states for more than one decade. Nevertheless, GDR's strategy to gain international recognition was very successful and so normalization of bilateral relations had been prepared already in the late 1950's and early 1960's. But the ultimate breakthrough in foreign affairs was substantially brought forward by West Germany's changing attitude towards the East under the government of Chancellor Willy Brandt, expressed in the Basic Treaty (*Grundlagenvertrag*) in 1972.

³ For further details, cf. Wentker 2007: 36-38.

Despite major efforts, GDR's diplomatic staff in the era between 1955 and 1972 still lacked fundamental qualifications such as foreign language competences, or negotiation and diplomatic skills (cf. Muth 2000: 169). For example, in 1956 still 70 % of all country experts of GDR's Foreign Ministry had never been abroad. Although two years courses in foreign policy already had been established at the Institute for International Relations (*Institut für Internationale Beziehungen, IIB*) in 1950, the motivation to enrol in foreign policy studies was low. Nevertheless, until 1971 1,233 students took foreign policy courses at the IIB and graduates became to a considerable extent part of GDR's foreign policy elite.

2. The Social Profile of the GDR's Diplomatic Corps

Yet, what were the main characteristics of GDR's diplomatic corps? This question relates to the social profile of the GDR's ambassadors. For the final phase (1972-1989) this population is nearly completely recorded (n = 204) in the Central Cadre Database (CCDB, *Zentraler Kaderdatenspeicher, ZKDS*), a data set recorded by the Council of Ministers, the GDR government.⁴ It provides with biographical and prosopographical information on a variety of elites, including ambassadors. Besides the job histories of ambassadors, their social and political background, party affiliations, marital statuses, vocational / professional qualification and other characteristics can be analyzed.⁵ Thus, first, one can answer the question, if the original recruitment principles are mirrored in the biographies of ambassadors. Second, the question can be tackled, which changes in the social profile occurred between the older and the younger cohorts.

Ad 1) Data of the CCDB monitor the composition of the diplomatic corps in the 1970's and 1980's. 53 out of 204 ambassadors belonged to the older birth cohort, born between 1912 and 1927. All other ambassadors, i.e., 151 persons, were born between 1928 and 1953, whereas ambassadors born after 1942 are the exception (only five ambassadors). My analysis focuses on two birth cohorts, the generation that had already experienced the start of the Second World War as adults or at least the end of the war and the generation of ambassadors who experienced their adolescence or early adulthood only after the war. Start-

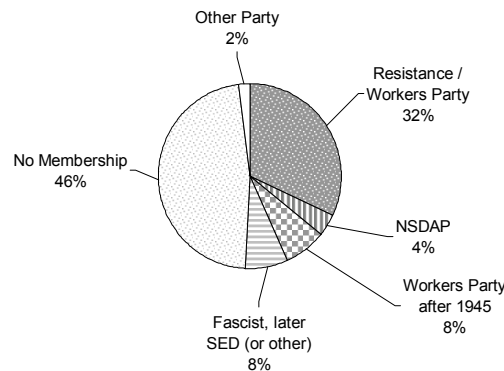
⁴ The Central Cadre Data Base (CCDB, *Zentraler Kaderdatenspeicher, ZKDS*) comprises around 700,000 personal records; 180,000 out of them refer to leaders at elite and sub-elite level from almost all employment sectors of the GDR and contain information about the social profile, cadre's function and the change of functions during a cadre's life. For a brief history of the data selection process, cf. Remy 2003. For printed biographical information on members of GDR's diplomatic corps cf. Radde1977.

⁵ Cadre selection and advancement criteria of diplomatic personnel can also be analyzed by advanced techniques of data analysis, cf. Gebauer 2009.

ing with the older generation of ambassadors, it is remarkable that only six ambassadors had originally been members of Germany's CP or of a foreign CP (one case). Also there is evidence of two ambassadors who had been members of the NSDAP before 1945. After 1946 all ambassadors of the older birth cohort became member of the SED, but some of them no sooner than in the 1950's. Data also reveal the social and political origin of the older GDR-ambassadors: By the majority of 85 %, older GDR-ambassadors had a working-class blue or white collar family background. Their parents mostly had no party affiliation, for only one third of ambassadors a workers party membership of the father (or mother) was recorded (see Fig. 1).

Additionally, from a cultural capital perspective there might have been an educational deficit or lack of skills in the early years of the GDR. But later, in the era of the 1970's or 1980's the older ambassadors obviously caught up: Almost all of them (92.5 %) finally held a university degree.

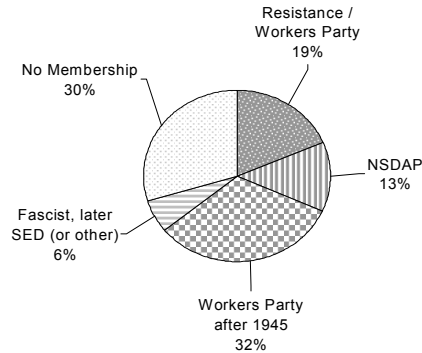
Figure 1: GDR Ambassadors (born before 1928) – Political Origin (in %)



Source: Central Cadre Data Base (selection), author's calculation.

Ad 2) With the succession of a new generation of ambassadors, cadre characteristics changed little. Again, more than 85 % of ambassadors born 1928 and later had a working class origin and, nearly all of them held a university degree. However, there is more diversity with regard to political origins: While among older ambassadors, there prevailed families with no party affiliation at all or system adequate workers party memberships, now the recruiters also admitted sons from families with a former alignment to the NSDAP (13 %, see Fig. 2).

Figure 2: GDR Ambassadors (born 1928 or later) – Political Origin (in %)



Source: Central Cadre Data Base (selection), author's calculation.

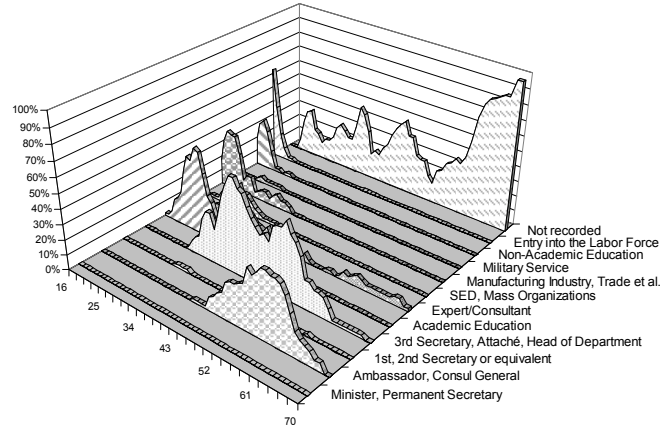
3. Career Patterns of GDR Ambassadors and Consul Generals

Empirical analyses of cross sectional data are inspiring, but the CCDB also provides longitudinal data that can be analyzed from a life course perspective. In order to trace different career patterns Sequence analysis (Optimal Matching) was applied.⁶ So we are able to determine what percentage of the caseload was educated or filled relevant specific positions in the diplomatic corps at a given age. At least three career patterns could be identified. A first pattern essentially mirrors careers of 53 ambassadors predominantly born in the 1920's and in the early 1930's. This pattern is best described by "climbing the career ladder from the bottom". Generally, biographical data around the entry into the workforce are insufficiently recorded. But this is usually no major problem. As can be seen in Fig. 3, there is a quite high percentage of later ambassadors, starting with a non-academic education or even without any vocational training altogether at the age of 16 years.

However, this for many was only a short episode. At the age of 23, already almost 50 % had been enrolled at universities and also later on a quite high proportion of ambassadors was on the way to graduate, particularly, if starting from a more disadvantaged position.

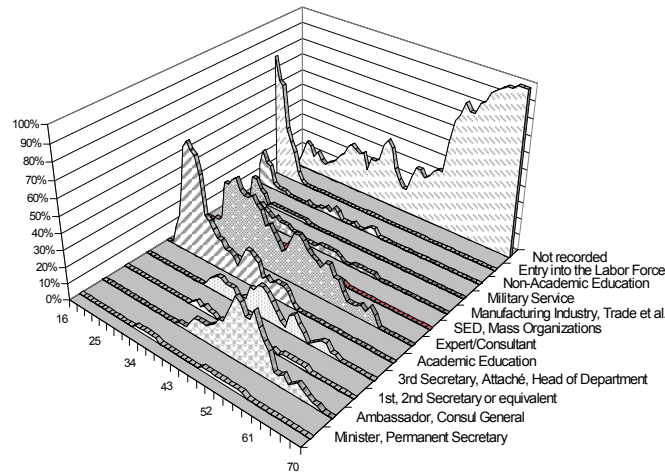
⁶ For a critical introduction to sequence analysis (optimal matching) cf. Abbot/Tsay 2000; in relation to the CCDB data optimal matching has already been applied to careers of East German managers, cf. Salheiser 2009b: 234-258. A further analysis was carried out on the 441 First and Second SED Party Secretaries in the Thuringian districts of the GDR, cf. Gebauer / Mestrup 2008.

Figure 3: “Old Hands”: From the bottom to the top – becoming ambassador as “old hand” of the Foreign Ministry (n=53)



Source: Central Cadre Data Base (selection), author’s calculation.

Figure 4: “Country Experts” From the university to the top – becoming ambassador as experienced country expert (n=48)



Source: Central Cadre Data Base (selection), author’s calculation.

After their study, graduates took significant career steps, by filling positions as country experts or assistants at the age of 30 years, or, later (at an age of 40 years), to a remarkable extent (up to two thirds), on higher ranking positions at

GDR's Foreign Ministry or abroad as member of the diplomatic corps (e.g. Attaché or 3rd Secretary), before the majority of them were finally appointed as head of a mission or as ambassador (about one third at an age of 52 years). A different career pattern can be recognized in the case of the younger generation of ambassadors, born mainly in the 1930's or later (see Fig. 4).

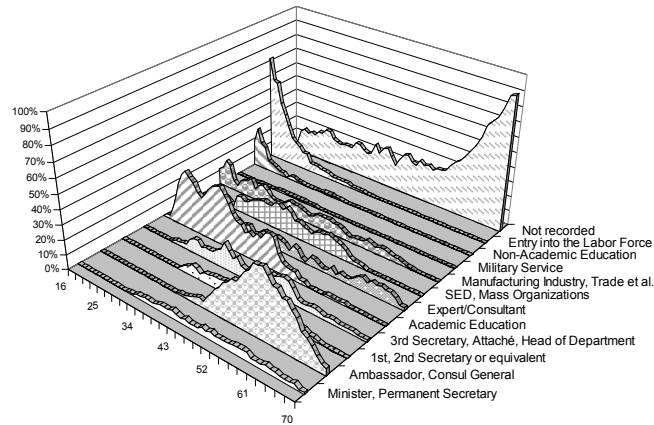
This pattern applies to 48 ambassadors. For these persons academic education had been of increased relevance (almost 70 % had enrolled at universities or university-like institutes at the age of 23 years), even though non-academic education or/and vocational training for many of them was still a significant episode in their lives. After graduating, usually a sequence of lower rank positions in the Foreign Ministry followed, e.g. as country expert or assistant. Here the quantitative relevance of this sequence is surprising and differentiates this career pattern quite clearly from the former. In general, ambassadors of this career pattern reached their career destination earlier than ambassadors of the first career pattern (one third at an age of 49 years), some by skipping several hierarchical steps.

Last but not least, there is a further career pattern, applying to 88 former GDR-ambassadors (see Fig. 5) who form the most successful stratum of GDR-ambassadors. Many ambassadors of this career pattern belonged to the older generation (n=39, this is a share of three quarter of all older ambassadors). But this type of career is also prevalent among the younger generation of ambassadors. The typical sequence is similar to the first career pattern already discussed above: Usually, these ambassadors started working life by vocational training or an even longer episode as employee within such employment sectors as processing industry or domestic trade or even, very interestingly, at the ideological branches e.g. the SED-party apparatus or ideological dominated mass organizations like the Free German Youth (FDJ), East German Union Federation (FDGB) or German Soviet Friendship (DSF). This stage of career was a very important one, and relevant steps on the career ladder were taken already before entry into the diplomatic corps, obviously often paralleled by an academic education.

After significant steps were taken, by a short sequence of relevant functions, like country expert or e.g. head of a department at the Foreign Ministry or as a Deputy Chief of a diplomatic mission, these cadres moved up and reached top positions at the diplomatic corps. Some also crowned their careers with the appointment as minister.⁷

⁷ Presumably, this career pattern corresponds to repeated qualified personnel increases in the 1950's and 1960's which came to be known as 'cadre theft' (Kaderklau), because these cadres had been enticed away from or even assigned by other departments and mass organizations (cf. Muth 2000: 163-184, Wentker 200-205).

Figure 5: “Apparatchics” – party activists becoming ambassadors (n=88)



Source: Central Cadre Data Base (selection), author’s calculation.

4. Conclusion

This contribution focussed on the importance and structure of GDR’s Foreign Ministry and, particularly, the social profile of GDR’s ambassadors as part of the diplomatic body and various relevant career patterns. Even though the diplomatic body of the GDR was dismissed after reunification, the relevance of the results of these analyses can still be discussed in respect to the diplomatic bodies of the other satellite states of the former Soviet empire. Here, the conditions for continuing careers of the diplomatic personnel were far better. This is only one additional research perspective. Another one is to address the biographical trajectories of the dismissed diplomatic personnel after German reunification.

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