

## Changing Time(s) in the Cold War

### An Inter-German Farce

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Walls, barbed wire and time zones: They all marked Cold War borders that had to be overcome, or, perhaps, prevented in the first place. Daylight savings time (DST) was introduced during the First and Second World Wars in hopes of conserving energy. Moving clocks forward by an hour in spring also seemed like a welcome way to save resources following the energy crisis of the early 1970s. France enacted DST in 1976, joined the following year by the Benelux states. West Germany hesitated, hardly enthusiastic about adding a temporal border with the GDR to the existing geographical and political division of the two German states. Doing so would make cross-border transportation even more complicated than it already was.

An initial inquiry in June 1976 regarding a possible introduction of DST in East Germany, together with a reminder that Poland was intending to do so, was not completely discouraging. The counselor approached at the East German Permanent Representation, Meissner, confirmed that the Polish initiative had taken them by surprise. "Since, however, according to his knowledge the CSSR had similar plans, he expressed the belief that the GDR would hardly be able to resist enacting a comparable



measure once the Federal Republic also introduces daylight savings time." (Memo of 24 June 1976, vol. 115022)

On 16 February 1977, the Bonn cabinet approved a draft law empowering the West German government to introduce DST. The government, however, still undecided whether to begin DST in 1978 or 1979, held back on the matter. The West German representation in East Berlin was instructed to "inform the GDR at a senior level regarding the intentions of the Federal Government in hopes of carefully encouraging a cooperative stance in this manner. [...] In light of travel- and transit traffic to and from Berlin (West) we urgently wish to avoid differing times in the bilateral relationship." The West German government therefore requested "a statement from the GDR on the question of whether it plans to introduce DST in 1978 or perhaps 1979. For technical reasons, a decision by the Federal Government on introducing DST for 1978 would have to be taken by mid-May, 1977." (Note from the Federal Chancellery of 8 March 1977, vol. 115022). There was no response from East Berlin.

The procedure was repeated in 1978, this time at an even higher level. On 13 March, West German deputy chancellery minister Hans-Jürgen Wischnewski informed the Director of the East German Permanent Representation in Bonn, Michael Kohl, that the Bundestag had postponed passing a DST law to allow the East German side's position to be taken into account. The official reply came on 23 May. A letter from East German leader Erich Honecker to Chancellor Helmut Schmidt "confirmed the opinion that introduction of DST would yield no advantages, but indeed practical disadvantages for people's lives and



work in the most diverse respects." (Memo of the Federal Chancellery of 23 May 1978, vol. 116435). The Bundestag passed the legislation authorizing DST on 22 June 1978. The Bonn government stated, however, that it would forego enacting DST because uniform regulations in Western and Central Europe could not be achieved.

East Berlin did not exercise any such consideration. On 11 October 1979, long after Bonn's mid-May deadline for making the necessary adjustments, Honecker informed Schmidt that DST would take effect in East Germany from 1980 (see also AAPD 1980, p. 1583, note 34). In contrast to the opinions conveyed in Honecker's letter of May 1978, East Berlin was suddenly singing the praises of the opportunities for energy savings and leisure activities (see also <http://www.mdr.de/damals/archiv/sommerzeit-ddr100.html>). The West Germans, meanwhile, were forced into a mad rush. Timetables for rail connections with East Germany had to be revised and reprinted at top speed.

The very next year, again, everything changed. On 16 October 1980, the East German government announced it would not implement DST in 1981. Official reasons were e.g. that, instead of resulting in savings, the time shift actually increased gasoline consumption, thanks to a spike in excursions during the daylight evening hours. The Foreign Office in Bonn, however, suspected that developments in Poland were the real cause, especially the successes of the Solidarnosc labor movement, which it said had led to a more hardline stance in East Berlin with negative effects including relations with the Federal Republic. Chancellor



Schmidt vented his anger at Honecker during talks with Margaret Thatcher on 17 November 1980: "He's now going to be the only one in Europe to not introduce daylight savings time, probably just to annoy us" (see also AAPD 1980, p. 1721). However, East Germany proved unable to remain Europe's "island in time" – along with the other eastern bloc states, even the Soviet Union had decided to adopt the time change. Hence, in the spring of 1981, the clocks were moved forward after all.

Yet even in subsequent years, coordinating time would not be problem-free between the two Germanys. While Bonn had decided in 1982 to implement DST through the mid-1980s as part of an EC-wide arrangement, East Berlin kept matters suspenseful every autumn. Negotiations proved especially rocky in 1983. On 21 October, West Germany's Permanent Representation reported having been informed by East German Foreign Ministry official Karl Seidel that "his side had decided not to implement daylight savings time in 1984." The Representation said the East Germans had concluded that DST had caused nothing but trouble in schools and agriculture (Telex Nr. 1568 from 21 October 1983, vol. 132628).

In the following weeks, talks over cross-border rail traffic between the East- and West German railway authorities broke off twice without result. The East Germans wanted to negotiate only on the basis of Central European Time and demanded Bonn take on all costs incurred by bridging the time difference. On 23 November, the East German government complained to the Chancellery over the "destructive stance of West German Rail" and pointed out that each state had the right "to



decide for itself which time regulation to apply to its own territory" (Telex Nr. 2000 of the Federal Chancellery of 23 Nov. 1983, vol. 132628). Only on 29 December did the Permanent Representation in Bonn officially inform the Chancellery that East Germany would keep DST in 1984.

Whereas routine set in Western Europe – in December 1984 the EC's Committee of Permanent Representatives backed extending DST through 1988 – East Germany's official note informing Bonn of its decision to implement DST in 1985 arrived only on 18 February 1985. Yet even East Germany was too closely tied to its western neighbor to actually risk going it alone. Both German states would from then on synchronize changing their clocks until reunification in 1990 finally solved this problem as well.

#### Notes:

The 1980 edition 1980 of the Files on Foreign Policy of the Federal Republic of Germany (AAPD) can be ordered as an [e-book](#).

The six-figure volume numbers identify volumes in the Political Archive of the Foreign Office, intermediate archive (Zwischenarchiv).

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