Honecker's Last Parteitag

When asked by the World Services of the BBC to predict, before the Eleventh Party Congress of the SED, how Honecker and his colleagues in the Politburo would conduct their Parteitag, I replied that although the general line would be optimistic, stressing their successes, they would pay lip-service to the need to improve the way the Party went about its business: 'I think that they will say that their work could be more effective, particularly in the economy, that perhaps the media could improve their activities, that perhaps the state bureaucracy could give more attention to the needs of the individual citizens and the same with the representatives in the town halls of the GDR. So on the whole it will be optimistic but there will be certain admissions that not all is a 100 percent in order'. Of course the SED leaders did not even pretend to genuflect to the Gorbachev line of self-criticism, choosing instead to heap praise on themselves for their real and imagined successes since the last Party congress in 1981. Most of the congress, as is usual, was taken up with speeches by the Party leaders, greeting from fraternal parties, and contributions from a small number of delegates (five as against fifty-five in 1981) who sing their leaders' praises and bind themselves and their colleagues back home to even greater efforts. The mood at all Honecker's congresses (1971, 1976, 1981, 1986) 'alters between the humourless marathon of dry statistics and exhortations about the Five-Year-Plan to the pageantry and spectacle of the military parade. Hundreds of members drawn from all branches of the NVA greet the congress as the strains of Beethoven's Yorck March fill the hall'.

The leadership

Honecker's robust complacency in the presence of his senior, younger, brother from Moscow was in large measure due to what looks, superficially, like an impregnable position in the Politburo. In November 1985 he had booted out Konrad Naumann, First Secretary of the Berlin SED organisation, a critic of Ho-
Honecker's more conciliatory policies and sometimes called Berlin's most prominent drunk. He was replaced by Günter Schabowski (already in the Politburo) on Honecker's nomination. Herbert Habeher also left the Politburo after only a brief membership. In his case it was not certain whether it was due to health reasons or because his was associated too closely with the 'Bonn express faction'. On the way down Habeher passed Werner Eberlein, Siegfried Lorenz, and Gerhard Müller all heading for candidate membership of the 'Council of Gods'. These three had been promoted by Honecker as first secretaries of the Magdeburg, Karl-Marx-Stadt, and Erfurt Party organisations in 1983, 1976, and 1980 respectively. At the Eleventh Congress Eberlein and Lorenz were given further promotion to full membership of the Politburo. There were two other promotions to full membership at the Eleventh Congress; these were General Heinz Kessler, who replaced Heinz Hoffman as Defense Minister of Hoffmann's death in December, and Hans-Joachim Böhme, First Secretary of the Halle organisation of the SED (and not to be confused with his namesake who is Minister of Higher Education and also a member of the Central Committee). Of the twenty-two full members of the Politburo elected at the Eleventh Congress, eight belong to the so-called 'FDJ faction' of Honecker, that is, of those who have made their way as functionaries of the youth movement when Honecker was its leader. Half the membership of the Politburo has joined it since Honecker took over in 1971; of these seven have been promoted to full membership or promoted from candidate membership since the last congress in 1981. The Politburo remains totally in the hands of the professional functionaries. No less than nineteen of its twenty-eight full and candidate members are full-time SED officials. Of these thirteen are members of the Central Secretariat, the other six are first secretaries of Bezirk organisations (of which there are fifteen). Of the rest, six are leading members of the government, one is head of the trade unions, one serves as President of the Volkskammer, and one, Margarete Müller, a long-serving candidate member, there were only two female members, the other being Inge Lange, a member of the Central Secretariat elected in 1973. The Politburo is then overwhelmingly a group of aging functionaries who have little experience outside the SED or indeed the GDR. Despite the promotions the average age of the members is getting older. When Honecker took over the average age of the full members was 58.7, by 1976 it had risen to 60.2, and by 1981 to 62.9. After the