

OBITUARY

Erich Honecker

ERICH HONECKER, 81, the former East German head of state and architect of the Berlin Wall, died in Chile on Sunday, unrepentant and still an avowed old-school communist.

Ironically, the cancer which eventually took his life also saved him from being judged for his part in the deaths of 49 people shot while trying to cross the wall to non-communist West Berlin.

After a trial of two months, the unified German judiciary decided last January that Mr Honecker would probably die before a verdict was reached.

With a compassion that was absent during his 18-year reign, they allowed him to flee to his wife, Margot, and daughter, Sonja, who had settled in the Chilean capital of Santiago.

Mr Honecker, an orthodox communist from an early age, proved to be even more rigid than the concrete barrier he erected in 1961 to stop East Germans fleeing to the West.

He was unable to grasp the move away from hard-line communism in the late 80s as frustrated citizens of the Soviet Union and the rest of Eastern Europe started demanding economic reforms.

In the end, it was this intransigence that brought both him and the awesome symbol of his rule, the 100km wall, crashing down in 1989.

He sought refuge in the Soviet Union, but found no sympathy from newly elevated Boris Yeltsin and, after spending eight months holed up in the Chilean Embassy in Moscow, was sent back to Germany to stand trial.

A small man, Mr Honecker was no great orator, but was taken under the wing of party leader Walter Ulbricht. He trained at the Communist Party School in Moscow and in 1960 was put in charge of security. It was in this position that he organised the building of the wall in an attempt to stem the flow of workers quitting East Germany.

A decade later, he was instrumental in having Mr Ulbricht removed from his post and stepped into the top job with the backing of the Soviet Union.



ERICH HONECKER

He quickly won recognition for East Germany as an independent country and, as it prospered, he solicited financial help from West Germany's business leaders.

His policies were a little more lenient than his predecessors, as was evident on his stand towards fashion, artists, writers, musicians and those East Germans caught watching West German television programmes.

The growth and economic success of the 70s waned in the 80s and with it his popularity.

As he aged, he became more resolute and unwavering.

When Mr Gorbachev visited East Berlin in 1989 to mark its 40th anniversary, he warned Mr Honecker that history would punish those who came too late. Mr Honecker was toppled a week later.

It was only then that East Germans said they realised he had been leading a relatively luxurious life.

His stint in jail during the first two months of his trial was not the first time he had been imprisoned. He had served 10 years in a Nazi prison during Hitler's rule and was freed only at the end of World War 2, when the Red Army arrived in Berlin.

He had been an active communist from the age of eight.

He quit school at 14 and tried his hand briefly as a labourer. It was not long before he devoted himself completely to politics through the communist youth movement in the Saarland.

Cherilyn Ireton