



Stefan Thiele drives a customised Range Rover built for the leader of the former East Germany – and discovers its twin

# TOTALITARIAN

Below: Raised roof and extra rear legroom are clear in this view



## delights

When the Berlin Wall came tumbling down on November 9, 1989, thousands of East Germans poured across the border in their small Trabant saloons. Reflecting the creative survival spirit of its owners, the tail-finned "Trabi" with its modified lawn-mower engine looks like the spitting image of Donald Duck's car.

However, for the people who lived and suffered under communist rule, the Trabi was a status symbol and an illusion of personal freedom. Erich Honecker, the former head of state, never tired of praising the virtues of the little plastic-bodied car – but for himself, only a fleet of western limousines would do. Few people know that he also was a big fan of the Land Rover marque.

Honecker spent a good deal of time pursuing his passion for hunting in a state-owned forest north of Berlin. For this, he used four-wheel drive vehicles such as



a number of Romanian-built AROs, a pair of Mercedes-Benz G-Wagens, a Lada Niva, and a 1976 Series III Land Rover 109 which had started life as a Station Wagon. All of these vehicles had been turned into convertible "Jagdwagen" (hunting cars) by a West Berlin company, Karosserie Friedrich Rometsch.

The 109 had been shortened by 80 cm (31.5 inches) aft of the rear axle, making room for a folding metal grid to carry the game which Honecker and his cronies had bagged. It also had a canvas top and special seating for fellow-hunters who went along with the great man himself. Total cost of the conversion – which also included a host of other modifications – came to roughly 150,000 German Marks, or four times the original value of the vehicle! It was delivered to Honecker in 1979.

The current owner of this vehicle is currently putting it through an engine overhaul. He plans to sell it on for a profit, and we can only hope that it ends up in the hands of a real Land Rover enthusiast.

Bernd Brückner, personal bodyguard of Erich Honecker for 20 years and now owner of a security company in Berlin, remembers that Honecker preferred the Land Rover to all his other hunting vehicles. So when Günter Mittag, second highest ranking member of the East German Politburo and a close friend of Honecker, wanted to find a way of impressing his boss, he decided that a much bigger and more stately looking hunting vehicle would make a great surprise present. From

there, it was but a short step to settle on a Range Rover, the undisputed king of all four-wheel drive vehicles. In early 1985, Mittag struck a deal with Rometsch for a special Range Rover unlike any the world had ever seen before.

Karosserie Friedrich Rometsch had been founded in 1924 as a coachbuilding enterprise. In the 1950s a reputation for skillful conversion work on Volkswagen Beetles had earned Rometsch widespread international acclaim. Hollywood stars such as Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn were seen driving the "Beeskow", a specially-designed sports cabriolet based on the Beetle, and Rometsch's business flourished.

Then, in 1961, the Berlin Wall went up. Half of the company's specially-trained workforce was effectively fenced off in the eastern sector of the city, unable to travel to work at the Rometsch premises in the west.



Rometsch never recovered from this blow but lingered on, surviving on some rather unglamorous accident repair work. It must have come as a sign from heaven then, when a state official of the GDR approached him with a plan for a Range Rover conversion where money was going to be no object.

Rometsch started with a brand-new 1985 four-door Range Rover, on chassis number SALLHAMV8BA-154946. After unceremoniously cutting the body in half, the coachbuilder stretched the chassis by 50 cm (19.7 inches) and had new panels manufactured to extend the body to match.

The original roof and the rearmost pillars were discarded, while new A- and B-posts were specially manufactured to accommodate a 5 cm lift in the roofline which was designed to give the interior a more airy feel. This was to be a landaulet-style

Convertible top is power-operated and is a modified Rolls-Royce item; large parcels shelf behind seats

Lambswool seat covers add an air of opulence in the rear





**Above: Winch (on the second vehicle) and special wheels. Honecker had the original BF Goodrich tyres turned back to front so that the raised white lettering would not show and hint at Western origins!**

**Right: The second vehicle is now part of a Berlin museum collection**

**Below: Each rear door has an electrically-operated gun rest**



conversion, in which the front passengers would sit under a fixed roof while those in the rear would be able to sit in the open when the hydraulically-operated soft top was lowered.

Manfred Quillfeld, senior coachbuilder at Rometsch for 40 years remembers, "The convertible hood is from a Rolls-Royce Corniche and we had to completely rebuild the mechanics to adapt it to the Range Rover. That gave us some sleepless nights! All the side-panels behind the B-post, and the rear doors, are handmade. So are all the window frames and the window glass.

"However," he continues, "the most remarkable detail is the variable-height gun-support that we accommodated into the rear doors. It has a windshield wiper motor from a Mazda, which drives a geared lifting mechanism, so allowing the hunters to vary the height of the cushioned support-bar electrically.

"Outside, the hefty bull-bar and a powerful Warn electric winch are matched by two Bosch searchlights mounted on the windscreen pillars. It all gives the vehicle serious off-road competence. While we left the 3.5-litre V8 untouched, we did install an extra battery, a high-

output alternator and a Webasto heater in the engine bay. The rear propshaft was specially made, too, as was all of the electrical wiring."

These were the days of the Cold War, of course, and there were fears that the enemy in the west might try to get access to the vehicle (which was being built in the western sector of Berlin) to attach surveillance equipment to it. So Honecker's vehicle was built in a specially sealed area of the Rometsch works to deter intruders. It took about a year to complete and, when it was finished, the East German secret service paid Rometsch 290,000 German Marks in cash, loaded the new Jagdwagen onto a truck and shipped it across the border.

Erich Honecker seemed to like what he saw and a second, identical looking Range Rover was ordered. As Bernd Brückner tells the story, this follow-up had to be an exact copy of the first, the reason being that Günter Mittag had planned to puzzle Honecker on his birthday with an



identical looking twin. We presume the East German chief enjoyed the joke; one way or another, Mittag managed to get him to agree to the building of a third vehicle, this time for Mittag's own use. The justification for a stretched vehicle, it seems, was that Mittag's diabetes had necessitated the amputation of one of his legs, and he seems to have argued that he needed the extra leg-room to be comfortable during his

hunting trips!

And so it was that a third Range Rover Jagdwagen was paid for and delivered. But by this time, the Soviet empire had started to implode, and East Germans were publicly voicing their objections to the totalitarian Honecker regime.

After the demise of East Germany in 1990, Honecker's two Jagdwagen Range Rovers ended up in the western part of Berlin. Today, the first one built is in the hands of 66-year-old Wenzel Nowak, who bought it from a car dealer in 1994.

Last autumn, I had the fabulous opportunity to drive Herr Nowak's prized possession. My first impression was that of a brand-new car with immaculate paint and with straight and

undented body panels. With only 8300 kilometres (5157 miles) on the odometer, this is a car in "as new" condition. The engine purrs silently without missing a beat, and the gear lever in the five-speed manual box is tight and precise.

Parking this giant can be a real chore in Berlin, but the length of the Jagdwagen allows for a very smooth and well-controlled ride. Stop a moment, open those custom-made back doors and you find yourself in lambswool heaven. Settling into the deeply cushioned seats feels like good insurance against even the coldest of Siberian winters. Bernd Brückner told me that Honecker must have felt the same way as he instructed his driver to leave the hood down at all times – even on the frostiest of days. And, as I imagined what it must have felt like to have totalitarian power at my fingertips, I tried out the switches which made that majestic hood rise into position.

But I wanted more – and a little investigation enabled me to find the second Range Rover Jagdwagen, the copy which Günter Mittag had made for Honecker's birthday. Ulrich Kubisch, head of the department of motor vehicles at the Deutsches Technikmuseum Berlin, led me to a secret depot

and lifted the covers on the second of Honecker's astonishing Range Rovers.

Dusty and forgotten, this second vehicle was indeed an exact copy of the first – and its odometer reads just over 13,000 kilometres (about 8100 miles). Better yet: the plan is to get this incredible vehicle tidied up and, with the support of Herr Kubisch and the museum, I intend to drive it over to the LAND ROVER enthusiast Show at Billing this summer.

I hope that Herr Honecker,



who died in 1994, might have managed a wry smile at this westerner getting such a kick out of his vehicles. And if he had been still around today, I would certainly have asked him if he knew what had happened to the third Range Rover, the one built for Herr Mittag. For the moment, there are no traces whatsoever – but you can rest assured that I haven't given up looking! ■



**Top: Bosch searchlight**

**Above centre: 13,000 km on the second vehicle and just 8300 km on the original!**

**Above: Honecker's Series III 109 was also a Rometsch confection; current owner is refurbishing prior to sale**

**Left: Range Rover and Russian T-34 tank are both symbols of their times**