

**Constructing Socialism in East Germany:
An Early History of the GDR; 1945–1955**

Stephanie B. Engelhard

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Honors Director: Dr. Ronald Granieri; Faculty Advisor: Dr. Jonathan Steinberg

For Francis

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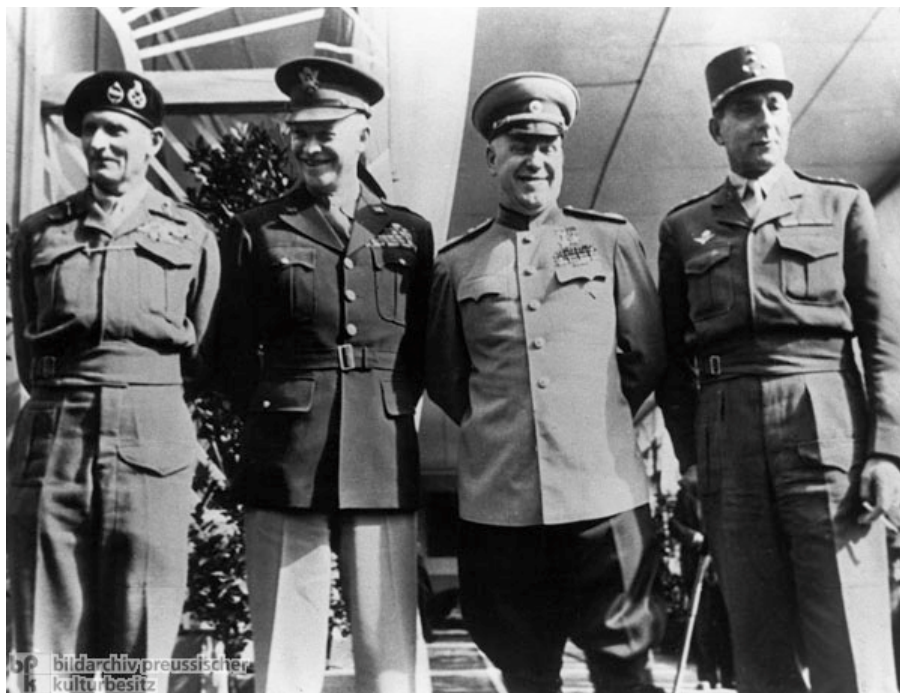
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ABBREVIATIONS

ACC	Allied Control Council
CDU	Christian Democratic Union of Germany
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
EDC	European Defense Community
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany
GDR	German Democratic Republic
KPD	Communist Party of Germany
LDPD	Liberal Democratic Party of Germany
MfS	Ministry of State Security; Stasi
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDPD	National Democratic Party of Germany
NSDAP	National Socialist German Workers' Party
SBZ	Soviet zone of occupation
SCC	Soviet Control Commission
SED	Socialist Unity Party of Germany
SMAD	Soviet Military Administration in Germany
SPD	Social Democratic Party of Germany
USPD	Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany
ZK	Central Committee
ZPKK	Central Party Control Commission



On June 5, 1945, the commanders of the Allied forces met to sign the “Declaration regarding the defeat of Germany.” Here (from left to right) Field Marshall Montgomery (Great Britain), General Eisenhower (United States), Marshal Zhukov (Soviet Union), and General de Lattre de Tassigny (France).

The Potsdam Conference was held between July 17 and August 2, 1945. Here (from left to right) British Prime Minister Clement Attlee, United States President Harry Truman, and leader of the Soviet Union, Josef Stalin.





The founding of the SED on April 21, 1946. Here (front left) Wilhelm Pieck (KPD) and Otto Grotewohl (Eastern SPD) shake hands. Seated on right, Walter Ulbricht.

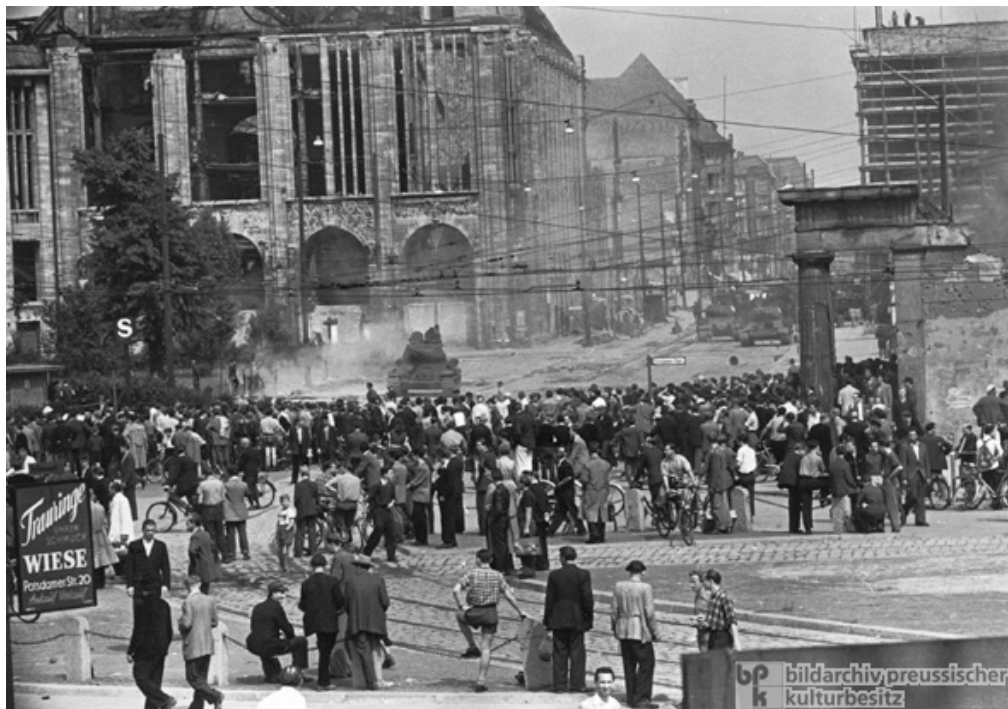
A warning to commuter train (*S-Bahn*) passengers that Spandau is the last stop before entering the Eastern Zone. The sign goes on to say that continuing on places one at risk for imprisonment.





East German Uprising, June 17, 1953. Demonstrators fleeing down Leipziger Straße and across Potsdamer Platz into the adjacent British sector.

East German Uprising, June 17, 1953. Onlookers from the British side of Potsdamer Platz. Notice the Soviet tanks in the background.



INTRODUCTION

On April 30, 1945, Adolf Hitler committed suicide in a bunker under Berlin, ending a long and devastating war that claimed the lives of at least 55 million people worldwide, half of which came from the Soviet Union. The city of Berlin, the capital of Hitler's would-be Germania, lay in ruins. While the Allies celebrated their victory against Nazism, shell-shocked Germans returned to what remained of their homes to pick up the pieces of their fallen nation. Yet even as the smoke began to clear, Germans faced not only the task of physically rebuilding their nation, but also faced the task of rebuilding themselves, accepting guilt for Nazi atrocities, and re-constructing what it meant to be German. As one dictatorship came to an end, however, another was rising from the ashes.

Using German archival documents, as well as American and Soviet sources, this thesis traces the development of this new dictatorship in the Soviet Occupation Zone (SBZ) and later in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and focuses on the process of Stalinization in the SBZ/GDR, with particular attention toward Walter Ulbricht's agency in both the radical Stalinization of the East German state, as well as his position as the primary driving factor behind the ultimate division of Germany. In tracing these developments, four primary chronological divisions are used. The first chapter spans the period from the end of the Second World War in the spring of 1945 until the establishment of the German Democratic Republic on October 7, 1949. The chapter focuses on the transition of SBZ administration from the Soviet to German hands in the early weeks and months following the war's end, with particular attention to Ulbricht's early attempts to ensure that German communists established a sizable contingency in the

new administration. Furthermore, the chapter also provides a discussion of the reemergence of political parties in the SBZ and the merger of the socialist and communist parties. The chapter ends with a discussion of the founding of the GDR.

The second chapter looks at the period from late October 1949 until Stalin's death on March 5, 1953. The chapter focuses on Ulbricht's centralization of power and his establishment as the single most powerful leader in the GDR. Of particular importance in this period was Ulbricht's rapidly increasing proclivity for purges and show trials. As a backdrop to Ulbricht's political wrangling in the GDR, the chapter also looks at the crumbling relations between the United States and the Soviet Union and seeks to prove that this increasing global tension only contributed to Ulbricht's ability to cement himself at the helm of the GDR.

A sizable portion of the third chapter is dedicated to the East German Uprising on June 17, 1953, and the actions and events that led up to it. Focusing on Ulbricht's agency in the causes of the uprising, the chapter also highlights Ulbricht's ability to manipulate the fallout from the uprising to advance his personal position in the eyes of Moscow. In addition, the third chapter outlines the power struggle in the Kremlin after Stalin's death and the impact of the new Soviet leadership on the GDR.

The final segment looks briefly at the period from early 1954 through the end of 1955, and traces the GDR's fight for official sovereignty, thus extinguishing any lingering hope for German unity. This segment parallels the Federal Republic's incorporation into the NATO alliance and the GDR's position as a founding member of the Warsaw Pact and seeks to place Ulbricht's legacy in context.

In order to do justice to this ten-year period, it is first essential to appreciate fully the German situation at the end of the war and to develop an understanding of Stalin's plans for post-war Germany. As the nature and development of Stalin's vision for post-war Germany is complex, it is necessary first to look at the 'non-negotiables,' in other words, issues that Stalin and the Soviets wanted resolved immediately. After having lost about 27 million Soviet citizens in the war against Hitler, Stalin was understandably concerned about the prospect of German militancy and rearmament. His first priority, then, was security against Germany. In August 1944, Stalin remarked to the Polish Prime Minister Mikolajczyk:

The Germans will rise again ... Who knows if they won't be ready for battle again in twenty or twenty-five years? Yes, Germany is a strong land although Hitler is in the process of weakening it. We're convinced that a threat from the German side will repeat itself. It is for this reason the talks on collective security currently being conducted in Washington are so urgent. I myself am for every possible and impossible measure to suppress Germany.¹

An issue of equal importance to Stalin was the question of reparations. The war had crippled the Soviet economy. In order to begin reconstruction, the Soviets desperately needed money. The First Deputy Prime Minister N. A. Vosnessenskii estimated that at the end of the war, the value of the damages to the Soviet Union was 700 Million rubles, or about \$128 billion.² The Soviet Union was considerably more devastated by the war with regard to both the number of casualties and the value of the damages than the other Allies.

Lastly, Stalin and the leadership of the Soviet Union found that as soon as the specter of Nazism began to fade, a new conflict arose, one that posited the United States,

¹ Wilfried Loth, *Stalins ungeliebtes Kind: Warum Moskau die DDR nicht wollte* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1994), 14.

² *Ibid.*, 15.

Great Britain, and France against the Soviet Union. In a meeting with the leaders of the Socialist Unity Party on April 1, 1952, Stalin reflected on a moment near the end of the war, which illustrates not only the Allied desire to cripple Germany, but also, and more sinisterly, the American anticipation of a possible conflict with the Soviet Union in the future:

When the Soviet troops approached Berlin, the Americans asked the Soviet command to allow them to bomb the territory 10 kilometers to the west of the line of Soviet troops. At first we did not understand the meaning of that, and told the Americans: --No, you should not do this; there are troops here. But the Americans kept asking for permission to bomb. Then we understood that they wanted to obliterate the German plants. We responded that we could not allow the bombing. Nonetheless, they sent in the bombers, and we sent Soviet destroyers to meet them; we shot down several American bombers, and only then they left.³

Realizing even before the end of the war that Germany served as an invaluable buffer zone between the East and West, Stalin wanted to ensure that all of Germany did not fall into Western control.

Given these concerns, it is necessary in order to gain a wider understanding of Allied policies with regard to the German question to look at the two major Allied agreements on the topic, which were synthesized at the Yalta and Potsdam Conferences. The Yalta Conference took place from February 4-11, 1945. At the conference, the Allies committed themselves to the unconditional surrender of German armed forces and provided that each of the Allied Powers would receive a zone of occupation in post-war Germany. An Allied Control Council, consisting of the Supreme Commanders of the

³ *Record of Conversation of Leaders of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany W. Pieck, W. Ulrich, and O. Grotewol with J.V. Stalin.* In Christian F. Ostermann, ed., *Uprising in East Germany 1953: The Cold War, The Germany Question, and The First Major Upheaval Behind the Iron Curtain* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2001), 32-3.

Three Powers (and France if it so desired), was responsible for questions regarding the nation as a whole. The Allies further committed to:

Destroy German militarism and Nazism and to ensure that Germany will never again be able to disturb the peace of the world. ... To disarm and disband all German armed forces; break up for all time the German General Staff that has repeatedly contrived the resurgence of German militarism...and take in harmony such other measures in Germany as may be necessary to the future peace and safety of the world.⁴

Other provisions of the Yalta Conference included the necessity of denazification and the extraction of reparations from Germany through a new Commission for the Compensation of Damage.⁵ Given the great cost of damages to the Soviet Union, Stalin's request for \$10 billion in reparations from Germany was quite modest. Additionally, the Allies drafted "A Declaration on Liberated Europe," which stated: "The establishment of order in Europe and the re-building of national economic life must be achieved by processes which will enable the liberated people to destroy the last vestiges of Nazism and Fascism and to create democratic institutions of their own choice."⁶

The next major Allied Summit was the Potsdam Conference, which was held from July 17-August 2, 1945. The Potsdam Agreement reiterated, more strongly this time, many features already discussed at the Yalta Conference. In the Potsdam Agreement, the Allies agreed on the following points about the restructuring of German government: "(i) local self-government shall be restored throughout Germany on democratic principles and in particular through elective councils as rapidly as is consistent with military security ... (ii) all democratic political parties ... shall be allowed

⁴ *The Yalta Conference, Report of the Crimea Conference*, 11 February 1945, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1945 (<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS>), 970.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 971.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 977.

and encouraged throughout Germany; (iii) representative and elective principles shall be introduced.”⁷

However, did Stalin really desire a “democratic” and united Germany as he and the other Allies had agreed at the Yalta and Potsdam Conferences? The answer to this question is both yes and no. Throughout the post-war years, Stalin was consistent only in his inconsistency. Although he did express on many occasions his desire for a united Germany, he would do so only if unification did not mean that Germany would fall into the Western bloc. However, he was also doubtful that communism would flourish in Germany. In a report after his defection to the West, Soviet Reparations Minister Vladimir Rudolf stated that in 1945: “The Politburo had no confidence in the possibility of successfully Sovietizing even those parts of Germany occupied by Soviet troops. It was considered probable that the United States and Great Britain would insist on conditions of peace under which the Sovietization of Germany would be impossible.”⁸ However, by April 1945, Stalin seemed to have warmed to the idea of a divided Germany: “This war is unlike those of the past; whoever occupies an area also imposes his own social system there. Everyone introduces his own system as far as his army can advance. There can’t be any other way.”⁹ From 1945 until the early 1950s, even as the prospect of German unification grew dimmer and dimmer, Stalin still entertained hope. His interactions with the Western powers illustrate his inability to commit to any final answer to the German question.

⁷ *Protocols of the Berlin (Potsdam) Conference, August 1, 1945*. In *Documents on Germany, 1944-1961*. Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 32.

⁸ Loth, *Stalins ungeliebtes Kind*, 19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

This indecision played directly into the hands of Walter Ulbricht, who, in 1945, began a power struggle in the SBZ that eventually led to the creation of a Soviet satellite state in East Germany. Ulbricht was born on June 30, 1893, in Leipzig to a working class family. Both of Ulbricht's parents were active members of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). After only eight years in primary school, Ulbricht remained true to his working class roots by training to be a joiner. On May 23, 1915, Ulbricht enlisted as an infantryman in the German Army in the First World War in which he fought in Macedonia, Serbia, and the Balkans. In letters to his family, Ulbricht expressed his unhappiness in the Army and decried "Prussian militarism." In 1917, he deserted and was imprisoned until November 1918. In 1917, he became a member of the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), a splinter group of the SPD, and then in 1920, he became a member of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), and the Central Committee of the KPD in 1923. During the years 1924 and 1925, Ulbricht studied in Moscow at the International Lenin School of the Comintern. Once back in Germany, he moved quickly up the ranks of the KPD, and by 1929 he was the KPD's Berlin chairman. When Hitler came to power in 1933, he issued massive purges of KPD and SPD functionaries. Ever power hungry, Ulbricht appealed directly to Moscow to allow him to replace Ernst Thälmann as the leader of the KPD after Thälmann's arrest by the Gestapo in 1933. Ulbricht spent the Hitler years first in Paris, then in Prague, and waited out the war in the Soviet Union from 1937 until the spring of 1945.¹⁰

It is at this moment, the moment Ulbricht returned to Berlin from exile in the Soviet Union that this thesis begins. In May 1945, Ulbricht remarked: "When we arrived

¹⁰ Mario Frank, *Walter Ulbricht: Eine deutsche Biografie* (Berlin: Siedler, 2001).

in Berlin we could barely find our way through the rubble because of the smoke.”¹¹

Ulbricht was not content, however, once he could find his way through the streets of Berlin. Instead, he began climbing the ladder of power. Motivated equally by his own potential to achieve power and his hard-line Stalinist ideology, Ulbricht, unlike his Soviet counterparts, had a relatively clear vision for post-war Germany. Understanding the complexities involved in the search for an Allied settlement on the German question, Ulbricht took advantage of Stalin and the Soviets’ noncommittal position on the issue to advance his Stalinist policies in first the SBZ, and later in the GDR, and began the process of cementing East Germany’s status in a divided Germany.

¹¹ Ulbricht to Pieck, May 17, 1945, SAPMO-BArch, ZPA, NL 182/246. b. 5.

“It must look democratic but we must control everything”

The Postwar Years

“The unity of the socialist movement is the best guarantee of the unity of Germany! It will secure the victory of socialism! Socialism is the banner of the future! Under this banner we shall triumph!” Principles and Aims of the Socialist Unity Party (April 21, 1946)

In the spring of 1945, the leaders of the KPD left the Soviet Union, where they had spent the war years in exile, and returned home to Berlin. Beginning immediately in the days and weeks following the official surrender of the German army to the Allies, KPD leaders Walter Ulbricht, Anton Ackermann, Gustav Sobottka, and Wilhelm Pieck began corresponding with Stalin and the Soviet government in Moscow to discuss the German question. Walter Ulbricht stood out among these leaders. Armed with the belief “It must look democratic but we must control everything,” Ulbricht utilized his position of power in the KPD to establish himself as a powerful and radical voice within the party. From 1945 to 1949, Ulbricht came to power through a series of events within the SBZ, the failure of the KPD to gain broad-based support throughout the whole of Germany and the Tito-Stalin split and Stalin’s subsequent decision to speed the process of Stalinization in the SBZ, essentially giving Ulbricht a mandate to enact his radical policy. Capitalizing on his newfound ascendancy within the East Germany power structure, Ulbricht began purging the party of vocal dissidents, namely, Anton Ackermann and the former Social Democrats. Ulbricht also took advantage of the Soviets’ failure to develop a firm policy with regard to German unity and steered the country to division. This chapter traces Ulbricht’s rise within the KPD, and later within the Socialist Unity Party (SED), from 1945, when he led a small, yet radical faction, to 1949, when the GDR was founded under the principles of Ulbricht’s radicalism.

THE SBZ: FROM SOVIET TO GERMAN HANDS

During the initial weeks and months following the collapse of the Third Reich and the end of the Second World War in Europe, Germany's future was unclear. Although Stalin signed the Potsdam Agreement in July 1945, which specified that the Allied Control Authority would govern Germany as a single economic unit, while each occupying power was responsible for its respective zone, Stalin's own views on the German question were far from clear. At once, he stated that he expected the eventual establishment of "two Germanies," while at the same time, stressed the importance of securing German unity through centralization: "a unified KPD, a unified Central Committee, a unified party of working Germans, a unified party at the center."¹² Publically, Stalin assured Germans of his desire only for the establishment of a unified, democratic Germany; while privately, he commented "All of Germany must be ours, that is, Soviet, communist."¹³

In the early post-war period, these larger concerns for Germany's future were offset by the immediacy of the need for administration in the SBZ, and the Soviet desire for retaliation in both economic and human terms. In addition to the establishment of government, the Soviets, who had been dramatically wounded by the war, demanded reparations totaling \$10 billion and access to the Ruhr's coalfields. In addition to monetary reparations, the Soviets kidnapped German scientists and stole technology and weaponry to send back to the Soviet Union. The Soviets wanted to ensure that Germany would never again be able to wage war of aggression against the Soviet Union. With

¹² Bericht-Walter, Ackerman, Sobottka am 4.6.1945 um 6 Uhr bei Stal, Mol, Shdan. SAPMO-BArch, ZPA, NL 36/629/62-4.

¹³ Milovan Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin* (London: Harvest, 1962), 139. Djilas was a member of the hierarchy of the Yugoslav Communist Party. For four years beginning in 1944, he periodically met with Stalin in Moscow.

demilitarization and denazification came a crude form of redistribution of wealth. In the name of antifascism, the Soviets nationalized many non-NSDAP Junkers' land holdings and redistributed the funds to their own bank accounts in the Soviet Union.

In contrast to the Soviets' firm priorities in terms of material goals, political reorganization of the SBZ was less of a priority, at least initially. During the war, the Soviet communists groomed exiled German KPD leaders including Walter Ulbricht, Wilhelm Pieck, and Anton Ackermann to participate in a "bloc of militant democracy," which was to be a union of anti-fascist forces under the leadership of the occupation powers.¹⁴ Although the plan did not provide for the creation of separate parties, the reality of the occupation forced the Soviets to rethink the endeavor and to create a plan that allowed for the creation of parties in an "antifascist democratic bloc," which the Soviets hoped would gain broad based support in Germany as a whole.

For the Soviets, who waffled between desires for a united Germany under Communist rule or a divided Germany, one member of the fledgling German administration, Walter Ulbricht, made up their minds for them. Capitalizing on the uncertain nature of Soviet policy with regard to the SBZ, Walter Ulbricht began to consolidate power and push for the creation of a separate East German state.

On June 6, 1945, the Council of People's Commissars of the Soviet Union established the Soviet Military Administration in Germany (SMAD) with Marshal Zhukov as commander-in-chief. In its founding document, SMAD was charged with the administration of the SBZ in the economic, political, and military spheres and had

¹⁴ Horst Laschitza, *Kämpferische Demokratie gegen Faschismus: Die programmatische Vorbereitung auf die antifaschistisch-demokratische Umwälzung in Deutschland durch die Parteiführung der KPD* (Berlin: Deutscher Militärverlag, 1969), 193-209.

authority to enforce Soviet policy in the Zone.¹⁵ Three days later, on June 9, Marshal Zhukov made public SMAD's mission, which was three-fold: to oversee Germany's unconditional surrender, to be the primary administrative body in the SBZ, and to ensure the implementation of Allied political, economic, and military decisions.¹⁶ Despite its lofty goals, however, SMAD was wracked with problems from the start. From the outset, rivalries developed in SMAD's administrative divisions, as commanders often organized their own 'independent initiatives,' and overlapping efforts to deal with German complaints made SMAD less efficient. Perhaps one of the greatest problems plaguing SMAD was its difficulty maintaining specialized Soviet Cadres, who were politically reliable, to enact SMAD policy in the SBZ. As a result, the Soviets enlisted the help of German Cadres.

The necessity of reliance on Germans in the process of rebuilding played directly into the hands of Ulbricht and other German communists, who had recently returned to Berlin from exile in the Soviet Union. Back in Berlin, Ulbricht undertook the duty of rebuilding a German-led government in the SBZ. Ulbricht urged German communists to take positions in the local administrations and worked hard to convey to the Soviets that the KPD was 'the party of order.' Although the Soviets had not yet allowed the

¹⁵ *Anordnung für die Sowjetische Militäradministration über die Verwaltung der Sowjetischen Besatzungszone in Deutschland*, 6. Juni 1945. In *Dokumente aus den Jahren 1945-1949* (Berlin: Staatsverlag der DDR, 1968), 51. During the period from the German surrender on May 9, 1945 until the creation of SMAD on June 6, 1945, the SBZ had no centralized administration. Conflicting orders came from a variety of *kommandanturas*, or local commandants, army units, and even newspapers. Even after the creation of SMAD, which eliminated a large degree of the chaos from the SBZ, local *kommandanturas* still held a relatively powerful role in administration of the SBZ.

¹⁶ *Befehl Nr. 1 des Obersten Chefs der Sowjetischen Militäradministration in Deutschland über die Bildung der Sowjetischen Militärverwaltung*, 9. Juni 1945. In *Dokumente aus den Jahren 1945-1949*, 53.

reestablishment of political parties in the Zone, Ulbricht, armed with Stalin's dictum "Cadres are everything," streamlined the party's bureaucracy and instituted a Personnel Policy Department, which acted like the Cadres Department of the Soviet Central Committee. Its main functions were to investigate party members and approve of administrative appointments.¹⁷ In addition, he asked the Soviets to release and return to Germany for rebuilding purposes, all 'antifascist POWs,' a request that the Soviets obliged. Although the Soviets urged political balance within the zone, Ulbricht, ever power hungry, sought to impose communist dominance in the administration.¹⁸

Angry at the continued interference from SMAD and conflicting orders coming out of the Soviet Union, Ulbricht redoubled his efforts to ensure that good communists received positions in the administration, while concentrating on the removal of political enemies from the administration. However, the main issue at hand for Ulbricht at this stage was the centralization of power in the new administration. Ulbricht believed that if he won the approval of the Soviets through competence and reliability, the Germans, under his leadership, of course, could assume control over their own affairs without constant Soviet meddling.¹⁹ It was not long before Ulbricht got his chance at absolute power.

PARTY POLITICS AND THE CREATION OF THE SED

To create the illusion of a commitment to a Western-style democracy, Stalin authorized the reestablishment of parties in the Zone. On June 10, 1945, SMAD issued order no. 2 allowing for the establishment of a "bloc of anti-fascist parties" and free unions and

¹⁷ Norman Naimark, *The Russians in Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 46-7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

organizations in the SBZ.²⁰ In the Potsdam Agreement, the Allies reinforced the Soviets' decision to reestablish political parties in Germany: "All democratic political parties with rights of assembly and of public discussion shall be allowed and encouraged throughout Germany."²¹ By July of that year, four parties had reemerged: the KPD, the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), the Christian Democratic Union Party (CDU), and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDPD). For the Soviets, the reestablishment of the SPD, CDU, and LDPD in the Zone served interests other than purely 'democratic' ones. In reality, SMAD order no. 2 did not stop at creating parties in the Zone. Rather, the order allowed the Soviets to control and monitor the parties.²² Although each of the four parties was ostensibly independent, the similarity of the KPD, SPD, CDU, and LDPD party platforms also points to the conclusion that the parties existed merely as a way for Stalin to appear to follow the agreements of the occupying powers and to create the illusion of fostering democracy in the SBZ. In the founding documents of each of the four parties, all decried Nazism and supported democracy and peace. The SPD and KPD refrained from the use of communistic rhetoric;²³ in the platforms of the 'bourgeois' parties, the CDU and LDPD, there were no mentions of capitalism or free enterprise.²⁴

²⁰ *Befehl Nr. 2 des Obersten Chefs der Sowjetischen Militäradministration in Deutschland über die Zulassung antifascistischer Parteien und Organisationen*, 10. Juni 1945. In *Dokumente aus den Jahren*, 54.

²¹ Potsdam Agreement, Protocols of the Proceedings

²² Ibid.

²³ *Befehl Nr. 2 der Sowjetischen Militäradministration in Deutschland über die Zulassung antifascistischer Parteien und Organisationen*, 10. Juni 1945, 54, and *Aufruf des Zentrallausschusses der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands zum Aufbau eines antifaschistisch-demokratischen Deutschlands*, 15. Juni 1945, 67. In *Dokumente aus den Jahren*.

²⁴ *Gründungsaufruf der Christlich-Demokratischen Union Deutschlands*, 26. Juni 1945, 88, and *Gründungsaufruf der Liberal-Demokratischen Partei Deutschlands*, 5. Juli 1945. In *Dokumente aus den Jahren*, 88.

During the war, the Soviets primed the KPD to step into the role of creating a Soviet-friendly government in Germany, although the form that government would take was unclear. The KPD, the most powerful of the parties, received backing, both monetarily and politically, from the Soviets. A considerable portion of SMAD financial assistance was available only to the KPD, which served essentially as Moscow's eyes and ears on the ground in Germany. Germans were, and had good reason to be, wary of the KPD's sudden affinity for democracy. The official party platform of the KPD preached democratic unity, betraying the party's notoriously dictatorial and revolutionary history and did not call for the establishment of a one-party regime. In the KPD's first declaration in the Zone on June 11, 1945, the language was markedly softened from the KPD's rhetoric in the 1920s and 30s. The new KPD trumpeted itself as a party of unity: "Let us not make the mistakes of 1918! No more driving a wedge into the working population! No leniency for Nazism and reactionary forces!"²⁵

The reason for the softening of the KPD's public image was that the Soviets, as well as the leadership of the KPD, were keenly aware that selling the Germans radical revolution would never secure a broad base of popular support for the party. The Soviets hoped that the KPD would be successful in the upcoming free elections, legally triumphing over the SPD, CDU, and LDPD, and thereby receiving public mandate to implement their real plans for the Zone.²⁶ According to the notes of Wilhelm Pieck, any

²⁵ *Aufruf des Zentralkomitees der Kommunistischen Partei Deutschlands an das deutsche Volk zum Aufbau eines antifaschistisch-demokratischen Deutschlands*, 11. Juni 1945. In *Dokumente aus den Jahren*, 56.

²⁶ The Soviet goal for Germany at this point was to achieve broad-based public support for the KPD in the whole of Germany. If German-wide support proved impossible, the next best option would be the democratic election of the KPD in the SBZ only. After

hope for German unity depended at this point on KPD dominance of the political arena throughout the whole of Germany.²⁷ Domination of the whole of Germany remained a possibility as long as the party maintained a firm base of support within the SBZ, in case pan-German domination did not prove feasible. However, the creation of competing parties in the Zone compromised the KPD's status within the Zone and prevented the KPD from achieving its goal—the legal creation of a one-party government.²⁸

Threatened with losing dominance both within the Zone and within Germany as a whole, the KPD, for the time being, sacrificed plans for the whole of Germany to concentrate on solely the Eastern Zone, much to Ulbricht's liking.²⁹

The KPD leadership worried that the SPD might try to step in, rally public support in both the Western and Eastern Zones, and unite the country under SPD leadership. In order to prevent this, the KPD enthusiastically supported a merger of the KPD and the SPD. The Soviets and KPD expected the new Socialist Unity Party (SED)

achieving power in the Zone, the KPD would reorient the Zone into a one-party system and implement a plan for Sovietization.

²⁷ David Pike, *The Politics of Culture in Soviet-Occupied Germany, 1945-1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 4.

²⁸ Although the Soviets could monitor the SPD, CDU, and LDPD, they could not change public opinion. When the Soviets realized their public support was paltry at best, they moved to strengthen support within the Zone only. The KPD's position within the Zone, however, was also failing, partially because of competition from the very parties the Soviets had allowed to reemerge for appearance purposes. Not long after the establishment of the SPD and the CDU, for example, the Soviets realized, to their horror, that in the elections, the workers' vote would split between the KPD and SPD, leaving the CDU with the vote of the remainder of the population. As a result, Soviet Communist political liaison officers established the second 'bourgeois' party, the LDPD.

²⁹ Although the trend within the KPD, and later the SPD, primarily under the influence of Ulbricht, moved further and further away from German unity, Stalin had not completely given up hope for a KPD-controlled, united Germany. For a time in 1947, Stalin considered setting up a branch of the SED in the West. In so doing, he hoped the SPD would split, breaking Kurt Schumacher's grasp of the West German SED and reopening negotiations for German unification under the SED.

to create an illusion of a united workers' party with equal participation from social democrats and communists through which the KPD could centralize power and dominate the new party.³⁰

Although the KPD worried that the SPD might step into the KPD's 'rightful' place and win the support of Germans both East and West, in reality, the SPD was not as strong as the KPD had believed. In fact, the SPD had begun to face internal divisions of its own and feared for the future of a unified SPD spanning all of Germany. In early October 1945, Kurt Schumacher, head of the Western SPD, and Otto Grotewohl, head of the SBZ-SPD, met in Hannover to discuss the state of the party. Although each recognized the other as the leader of his respective segment of the party, Schumacher, a staunch nationalist, refused to cooperate with the Eastern wing of the party for fear that the Easterners were colluding with the Soviets. The SPD did not initially want to unite with the KPD for fear that with party unification the prospect of a unified Germany would be lost. However, faced with continued pressure from SMAD and the KPD, the SPD finally agreed to unite with the KPD in the Zone. The SPD, like the KPD, hoped to dominate the unity party, believing that the new party would reflect the goals of the former Social Democrats and hoped that Marshal Zhukov would remove Ulbricht before the parties merged, thereby increasing Grotewohl's chances of becoming the leader of the party. However, General Sokolovsky, aligned with Tuilpanov and Ulbricht and supporter of Stalinization in the Zone, replaced Zhukov as Supreme Commander and Military

³⁰ Although the KPD had confidence that it would dominate the SED, and eventually did, KPD dominance was not a foregone conclusion, nor was the SED's radicalization. Only external factors after the merger led to the eventual dominance of Ulbricht's ideology in the SED.

Governor in spring 1946. Zhukov had been something of a protector of the SPD, and his replacement signaled ill for the endurance of a strong SPD influence in the SED.

On April 21, 1946, Wilhelm Pieck, leader of the KPD, and Otto Grotewohl, leader of the SED, clasped hands in a symbolic gesture signifying the unity of the KPD and SPD into one Socialist Unity Party, with Pieck and Grotewohl serving as co-chairmen. Even as the parties merged, however, it was unclear whether the KPD or the SPD would dominate the new party. The SED presented itself as a Marxist party committed to parliamentary democracy. The new party promised democratic elections and the protection of the rights of individuals, but maintained that socialism was still the desired end for Germany and would not exclude the possibility of radical revolutionary means to achieve socialism:

“The working class will unite all democratic and progressive groups of the people. It is the most consistent democratic force and the most resolute fighter against imperialism...The working class alone has a great historical aim: socialism...The Socialist Unity Party of Germany has as its long-term aim liberation from all exploitation and suppression, from economic crises, poverty, unemployment, and from the imperialist threat of war. This aim, the solution of the vital national and social questions of our people, can only be achieved by socialism...The Socialist Unity Party of Germany aims at the achievement of socialism by democratic means; but it will resort to revolutionary means if the capitalist class departs from the basis of democracy.”³¹

In the last free elections in the SBZ in 1946, Soviet hopes for a strong SED victory were shattered. Although the SED won 47.5 percent of the popular vote, making it the largest party in the Zone, it did not have a majority. Furthermore, in Berlin, the

³¹ “Principles and Aims of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany”. In *Occupation and the Emergence of Two States, 1945-1961*, edited by Volker Berghahn and Uta Polger, volume 8, *German History in Documents and Images*, German Historical Institute, Washington, DC (www.germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org).

SED won only 19.8 percent of the vote.³² For the Soviets, the results of the election were disappointing, and pushed Stalin to reevaluate the German question. Faced with the possibility that Germans would not put themselves willingly into the hands of a party that they believed might be answering directly to Moscow, Stalin reluctantly decided to hasten the speed of the SBZ's transition to socialism and thereby gave Ulbricht's radicalism Stalin's backing.

A PARTY OF THE NEW TYPE

Throughout 1947, relations between the East and West were growing cooler. The adoption of the Marshall Plan and the Truman Doctrine in the West were met with the creation of the Cominform in the East. The Allies also began limited consolidation of the Western Zones in June 1947, with the establishment of the Bizonal Economic Community (*Wirtschaftsrat*), which was shortly followed by several similar developments in the West. These developments and increasing East-West tensions coupled with the failure in the elections pushed Stalin to adopt a new plan for the transformation of the SED into a 'party of the new type', which meant, a Marxist-Leninist party based on the model of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU).³³

Although Ulbricht's power had already increased immensely, the real push for the transformation of the party and Ulbricht's rapid centralization of power came after the Tito-Stalin split in 1948, when Yugoslavia was expelled from the Cominform because of the Yugoslav leader's, Josip Broz Tito, alleged treason against the Soviet Union and

³² H. Weber, *DDR. Grundriß der Geschichte, 1945-1990* (Hanover, 1991), 24, 286.

³³ Prior to this point, only the Marxist character of the party advertised. The shift from Marxism to Marxist-Leninism, and the invocation of Marxist-Leninism by Grotewohl, who was a former member of the SPD and a firm believer in German unity, indicate a fundamental shift in the party's ideological climate.

socialism itself, so-called “crimes of nationalist deviation.” The real reason, however, was Tito’s national pride and refusal to enact Stalin’s will in his country. In July, the Central Secretariat of the SED published a statement in *Neues Deutschland* saying: “The most important lesson of the events in Yugoslavia for us, German Socialists, is to put every effort into the transformation of the SED into a ‘party of the new type’ and that the mistakes of the Yugoslav Communist Party show [the SED] that a clear and unambiguous pro-Soviet position is the only possibility for every socialist party.”³⁴

In political terms, the SED, as a ‘party of the new type,’ recognized and adhered to the Stalinist interpretation, which happened also to be Ulbricht’s interpretation, of Marxism-Leninism and the commitment to modeling German socialism on the Soviet model. In addition to ideological changes, the SED also faced organizational and functional changes including a greater focus on government centralization as well as the modeling of the central party organs of the SED on the Soviet politburo, the secretariat, and the central committee.³⁵ Additionally, the reorientation of the SED brought with it a new cadre policy, which radically altered the membership of the SED. The party leadership put an end to its policy of mass recruitment, and instead targeted skilled workers and scientists and for active members of the mass organizations. In January 1949, in order to prepare new recruits “for membership and protect the party from intrusion by elements alien to the party,” the SED introduced a candidacy period for

³⁴ “Erklärung des Zentralsekretariats der SED zur jugoslawischen Frage,” *Neues Deutschland* (July 1, 1948).

³⁵ Monika Kaiser, “Change and Continuity in the Development of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany” *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Oct., 1995), 691. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/261088>.

membership, which lasted between one and two years. In addition, only if two long-term members of the SED vouched for a candidate could one become a party member.³⁶

For Ulbricht, the reorientation of the SED into a ‘party of the new type’ meant that his Stalinist stance had become the order of the day. For many other party members, however, the hard-line Stalinization at work in the SED was threatening. Armed with Soviet support, which made his radicalism the de facto party doctrine, Ulbricht took aim at his most vocal opponents within the party, Anton Ackermann and the former Social Democrats. They proved powerless to stop him.

THE DEFEAT OF ANTON ACKERMANN’S ‘SPECIAL GERMAN PATH’

Even as the KPD prepared for the merger with the SPD in 1946, there was not one, but two dominant ideologies within the party. Leading a small, but dedicated group of hard-line Stalinists, Walter Ulbricht represented the radical faction, while Anton Ackermann led a larger, more moderate group advocating a “German path to socialism.”

Ackermann’s views were far more popular than Ulbricht’s in the party in the early post-war period. The shift in attitude within the KPD and later the SED, with regard to the “German path” indicates a transformation of allegiances within the party. By 1948, Ulbricht’s radicalism became the dominant disposition in the SED.

Born in 1905 in the Erzgebirge, Anton Ackermann (née Eugen Hanisch) was a high-ranking member of the KPD. A teenager, Hanisch joined the Free Socialist Youth and the Communist Youth Association. In 1926, he joined the KPD and rose quickly in the party. After graduating from the Lenin School in Moscow, he worked in the German division of the Comintern. After Hitler came to power in 1933, Hanisch, now ‘Willi’

³⁶ Ibid.

worked illegally for the KPD in Berlin. In 1935, Anton Ackermann (as he was henceforth called) was elected to the Politburo and Central Committee of the KPD at the party's Brussels' conference. Over the next several years, he enacted change in the KPD's youth organizations and fought in the Spanish Civil War. In 1940, the Soviets smuggled him back into the Soviet Union where he worked for Radio Moscow and edited a newspaper for German prisoners-of-war.³⁷ In 1944, Ackermann drafted a program for "the democratic reconstruction of Germany." His activities before and during the war made him a frontrunner in the KPD, alongside Walter Ulbricht, to succeed Wilhelm Pieck, the current Chairman of the KPD.

While Ulbricht wanted to move the SBZ closer to the Soviet Union, Ackermann rejected the Soviet model in 1946. He instead advocated a "broad-based initiative from below," which included the creation of voluntary anti-fascists committees.³⁸ He was also instrumental in the drafting of the "Proclamation by the Central Committee of the German Communist Party" of June 11, 1945, which took a decidedly moderate tone in opposition to the pro-Soviet Ulbricht.³⁹ The document outlined the guilt of the German people for the atrocities committed by the Hitler regime and also acknowledged the KPD's guilt for failing to unite with the SPD to defeat Hitler, an issue very close to

³⁷ Peter Grieder, *The East German Leadership 1946-1973* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 9.

³⁸ SAPMO-BArch, ZPA, NL 109/10.

³⁹ There are, of course, two reasons for the document's moderate tone. Anton's Ackermann did have a large role in the drafting of the document, which reflects his viewpoints. However, it is necessary to remember that the KPD wanted to maintain a non-radical image in documents that the public would read.

Ackermann's heart.⁴⁰ Most importantly, the document urged a program of development in Germany distinct from the Soviet model:

“We must break completely new ground! Every German must become aware that the path our people took previously was a false path ... We are of the opinion that forcing the Soviet system onto Germany would be a false path, for this path does not suit the present conditions of German development. Rather, we are of the opinion that the most compelling interests of the German people in the present situation call for Germany to take a different path, the path of establishing an anti-fascist, democratic regime, a parliamentary, democratic republic with all the democratic rights and liberties for the people.”⁴¹

Although Ulbricht's influence in the party had grown, up until this point, he remained the leader of a fringe faction of radicals. However, after Stalin's order to restructure the SED on the model of the CPSU, Ulbricht began to express more freely his position. In particular, prior to 1947, Ulbricht had more or less concealed his opposition to the Ackermann plan, but with Stalin's mandate, which was a slap in Ackermann's face, Ulbricht vocalized his opposition to the 'separate path' and began centralizing power by attacking Ackermann and his wing of the party. The ideological climate within the SED was changing. On May 7, 1947, the Bavarian Minister President, Hans Ehard, called a conference in Munich for the purpose of promoting 'inter-German' dialogue. Ackermann and the majority of members of the central secretariat wanted to attend the conference, but Ulbricht prevented East German participation calling Ehard 'an American agent.'⁴² At the eleventh session of the party executive on May 22, 1947, Ackermann railed at the SED for ignoring all-German interests; he urged the Allies to

⁴⁰ It had been believed that if only the SPD and KPD had joined forces they could have prevented Hitler's rise to power and saved the German nation from the devastation of the Second World War.

⁴¹ “Proclamation by the Central Committee of the German Communist Party”. In *Occupation and the Emergence of Two States, 1945-1961*.

⁴² Grieder, *The East German Leadership 1946-1973*, 15.

look for new solutions to the German question that did not make division of Germany necessary. At the same time, Ulbricht reemphasized the necessity for division from Western ‘reactionary influences.’

The Tito-Stalin split, more than any other event in the early post-war years, signified a change of course in Moscow with regard to the Eastern Bloc as a whole, and most importantly, greatly influenced the adoption of Stalinization in Eastern Germany. Without the Tito-Stalin split, followers of Ulbricht’s radical ideology within the SED would have remained few. Even Otto Grotewohl, himself a former member of the SPD who had previously been a critic of Soviet behavior in the SBZ and had supported German independence, now professed support for the Ulbricht faction. Further evidence of Grotewohl’s shift to the radical wing of the party is evidenced by his unity with the communists in the invocation of Leninism, which had never been a tenet of the SPD. At the Second Party Congress, Grotewohl followed Ulbricht’s example and looked to the Soviet model for constructing socialism in the Zone: “We will and must learn from the experiences of the Russian Workers’ Movement ... We must learn from the achievements of Leninism and adapt those elements appropriate for Germany.”⁴³ The references to Leninism further signified a transformation of thought in the party leadership. With the exception of the Ulbricht faction, the SED had always presented itself as a purely Marxist party. Now, the party had become Marxist-Leninist, drawing it still closer to Moscow. “In our party,” Grotewohl stated, “no one can be a Marxist who is not a Leninist.”⁴⁴

⁴³ Ann L. Phillips, *Soviet Policy Toward East Germany Reconsidered: The Postwar Decade* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 39.

⁴⁴ Otto Grotewohl, *Die Politik der Partei*, 48-50.

Ulbricht now had the backing of both the Kremlin and SED to commence a final, fatal assault on Ackermann and his 'separate path.' On September 15-16, 1948, a beaten-down Ackermann, forced to acknowledge that the transformation of the SED into a party of the 'new type' had been completed, but unsure about the consequences, addressed his colleagues: "I ask the question whether the false theory of a special German way to socialism is identical with the question of the possibility of a democratic road to socialism...On this point I have not yet decided, here I have certain doubts...It is still an open question whether we have the right to describe this revolutionary road to socialism as the democratic way."⁴⁵ Ackermann did not believe, as others in the party did, that the Soviet model was a "new form of democracy." Instead, he insisted, the Soviet model, and now the SBZ model, lacked a "legal framework," but Ulbricht insisted that socialism could only be achieved through violent class struggle and the "total elimination of capitalist elements." Ulbricht attacked Ackermann, condemning him for not issuing an outright recantation and asserting that the 'separate path' had never even been a part of the KPD official policy.⁴⁶ Finally, on September 24, 1948, Ackermann issued a full recantation of his position: "This theory of a special German way to socialism has turned out to be absolutely false and dangerous...Wherever people are fighting for peace, democracy and socialism in the world, the Soviet Union is the basis for this fight...this theory opened up a split, through which nationalism and anti-Bolshevism could penetrate even the ranks of our party."⁴⁷ Prior to 1948, Ackermann's 'separate path' thesis had been a viable and popular option within the leadership of the SED and enjoyed support of

⁴⁵ Grieder, *The East German Leadership 1946-1973*, 16.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Anton Ackermann, "Über den einzig möglichen Weg zum Sozialismus," *Neues Deutschland* (September 24, 1948), 2.

a substantial segment of the party leadership. Ulbricht's defeat of Ackermann's 'separate path' signifies the completion of the transformation of the party in to that of the 'new type.'

DEFEAT OF THE FORMER SOCIAL DEMOCRATS

Ulbricht's growing prominence in the party afforded him the ammunition he needed to defeat what was left of the Social Democrat contingency in the SED. The change in membership that accompanied the transition of the SED into a 'party of the new type' represented not only an ever-increasing number of resignations, but also a targeted de-selection policy.⁴⁸ In June 1948 at a meeting of the party executive, Ulbricht railed against what he called the "Schumacher agents," whom, he believed, had infiltrated the SED and were trying to destroy it from within.⁴⁹ A purge of former SPD members, or 'enemy' and 'degenerate' elements, as they were called, as well as any member of the SED that expressed misgivings about Stalinization, began in July.⁵⁰ The only member of the Central Secretariat to flee the Soviet Zone was Erich Gniffke, a former SPD member and close friend of Otto Grotewohl. Gniffke, along with Ackermann, was perhaps the last hope of moderation in the party. The former SPD member had a history of standing up to Ulbricht. When Ulbricht first announced his support for Stalinization in the Zone at the Second Party Congress in 1947, Gniffke stood up and said, "We need neither a Social Democratic nor a Communist Party in our zone!"⁵¹ Furthermore, when asked on March 12, 1948, to make a speech commemorating the one-hundredth anniversary of the

⁴⁸ Kaiser, "Change and Continuity in the Development of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany," 692.

⁴⁹ SAPMO-BArch, ZPA, IV 2/1/48.

⁵⁰ SAPMO-BArch, ZPA, IV 2/1/50.

⁵¹ SAPMO-BArch, ZPA, NL 90/99.

Communist Manifesto, Gniffke made sure it was clear that he believed Lenin and Stalin had distorted the meaning of communism and praised only Marx, Engels, Bebel, and Liebknecht.⁵² When Gniffke resigned from the SED on October 28, 1948, he wrote: “Today I resign from the ‘party of the new type’, or rather from Ulbricht’s KPD of 1932.”⁵³ At a meeting of the party executive on October 30, 1948, Gniffke was officially expelled from the SED. Even Grotewohl, his one-time close friend, refused to speak on his behalf, and Gniffke was condemned *in absentia*. Grotewohl’s change of attitude toward his friend signaled the dying hope of former-SPD influence in the SED. The order of the day was now, and would remain, Stalinization. Grotewohl, once a supporter of an independent Germany was now in favor of an “orientation to the East.”⁵⁴

On January 28, 1949 the First Party Conference of the SED addressed alleged attempts of the former members of the SPD to delay or derail the process of transforming the SED into a ‘party of the new type’:

“There were also serious weaknesses in the ideological struggle which encouraged certain elements to undertake attempts to turn the SED into an opportunistic party of the western type...with the task of creating anti-Soviet and nationalistic tendencies and attitudes within the SED. The danger thus raised was averted when the party committee at its 11th assembly in June 1948 took a decisive turn and linked the task of developing the SED into a party of the new type to the acceptance of the Two-Year-Plan.”⁵⁵

Social Democracy in the SED was effectively dead.

THE GERMAN ECONOMIC COMMISSION

While Ulbricht was attacking opponents in the SED, SMAD Order no. 138 established the German Economic Commission (DWK) on June 4, 1947, in response to the formation

⁵² SAPMO-BArch, ZPA, IV 2/11/v746.

⁵³ SAPMO-BArch, ZPA J IV 2/202/4.

⁵⁴ SAPMO-BArch, ZPA IV 2/1/48.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

of the German Economic Council in the British and American zones. Although the new commission was subordinate to SMAD, Ulbricht wanted to make the DWK an organ of the SED. To that end, however, he ran into considerable opposition from the Soviets, who wanted to strengthen the DWK and were resistant to turn in over to German control in response to the formation of Bizonia, the fusion of the American and British zones in late 1947.⁵⁶ On March 20, 1948, SMAD's Sokolovskii issued Order no. 32, which gave the DWK the right to release binding decrees on all German organs of the SBZ as well as the power to ensure that these decrees were enforced. In Ulbricht's interpretation, Order no. 32 gave the Germans the right to assume positions in SMAD, effectively signaling the final turnover of Soviet to German power in the Zone.⁵⁷ By mid-1948, the Soviet Cadres Department had removed many of SMAD personnel, allowing Ulbricht and the SED to take an even larger role in the economic administration of the Zone. By September, the SED established a series of control commissions in the DWK, which corresponded to those of the SED's Central Control Commission, for the purpose of discovery and removal of economic enemy agents and saboteurs.⁵⁸ Now overwhelmingly under SED control, the DWK's primary responsibility was the enforcement of the Two-Year Plan. By July, the DWK's powers included economic planning and policing functions as well as judicial functions. The DWK directives of July 28 and 29, 1949 state, "If by any act considerable damage has been done to the antifascist democratic order or the reconstruction of the peaceful economy, the offender is to be punished by imprisonment

⁵⁶ Norman Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 53.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

in a penitentiary [for] not less than two years.”⁵⁹ Although the Soviets still retained the ability to release orders through the DWK, Ulbricht had made the DWK his own.

THE GDR IS BORN

By mid-1948, relations between East and West were quickly deteriorating. One source of conflict among the occupying powers centered on joint-administration of the city of Berlin, which, although physically located within the SBZ, was, like Germany as a whole, divided into four zones, one for each occupying power. By the end of the year, Soviets’ interference in the work of the all-Berlin city administration (*Magistrat*) and SED-organized council-chamber riots, provoked the Allies to relocate the *Magistrat* from East Berlin to Schöneberg, one of Berlin’s western districts.⁶⁰ In response, the Soviets established their own governmental administration in East Berlin.⁶¹ Further Soviet provocation came on June 16, 1948, when the Soviets walked out of the Allied Kommandantura. The Allied Kommandantura, which was founded on July 7, 1945, was the governing body of the city of Berlin. Decisions for the administration of the city were to be made by unanimous decision of the Kommandantura. On July 1, 1948, the cooperation of the four powers came to an end when the Soviets announced that they would no longer participate in the Kommandantura. Eight days later the Soviets began a blockade of West Berlin, which lasted almost a year, finally ending on May 12, 1949. Because of West Berlin’s location one hundred miles into the heart of the SBZ, the

⁵⁹ “Directive for the Punishment of Offenses against the Secrecy of Classified Matter,” Report PR-295-49, Berlin, July 9, 1949, NA, RG 59, 740.00119, Control (Germany), 3-1749.

⁶⁰ Peter W. Sperlich, *Oppression and Scarcity: The History and Institutional Structure of the Marxist-Leninist Government of East Germany and Some Perspectives on Life in a Socialist System* (Westport: Praeger, 2006), 15.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

blockade forced the Allies to supply West Berlin by air in what came to be known as the Berlin Air Lift. The blockade was Stalin's misplaced attempt to prevent the Western powers from founding their own state in the West. However, the blockade, more than any other single event, pushed the Allies to do just that.

With his enemies in the party defeated, Ulbricht finally took complete control over the party, proclaiming at the January 28, 1949, First Party Conference of the SED:

“The merger of the KPD and the SPD to form the Socialist Unity Party of Germany was the most significant occurrence in the recent history of the German workers' movement. The union has proved of value—this is evidenced by the successes in the democratic development of the Eastern Zone. This is also evidenced by the ideological unity and cohesiveness of the party, which were achieved during the nearly three years since unification.”⁶²

By the beginning of 1949, all pretenses of Western-style democracy in the SED had vanished, as had the moderate voices in the party, and along with these, chances of reuniting Germany. Ulbricht publicly referred to the SED as a Marxist-Leninist party and redefined 'democracy' in the SBZ, as a government that will exist “side by side with the People's Democracies and the revolutionary workers' parties all over the world.”⁶³

Ulbricht even went so far as to claim that it is the 'duty' of all workers to stand in firm support of the Soviet Union in the struggle against the Western, imperialistic powers.⁶⁴

On May 23, 1949, the American, French, and British zones joined to form the Federal Republic of Germany on May 23, 1949. On September 7, 1949, the Politbüro of the SED released a statement of reaction to the founding of the FRG, which it saw as a break of the Potsdam Agreement as well as a great tragedy for the German people: “The

⁶² “From the Resolution of the First Party Conference of the SED”. In *Occupation and the Emergence of Two States, 1945-1961*.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

so-called Bundestag, which met on September 7, 1949 in Bonn, is a parliament of fissure that is contrary to the interests of the German people and a hazard to the German nation...It is the result of the breaking of the Potsdam Agreement through Anglo-American warmongers and colonialists.” The document goes on to say that the fault lies not only with these warmongers and colonialists, but also with the Germans who assisted them. Together, they have implemented a plan that runs contrary to the interests of the German people, the Bonn Tragedy.⁶⁵

Five months after the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany, Stalin finally abandoned his hope that the Western powers would not found their own state in West Germany. On October 7, 1949, the German Democratic Republic was proclaimed. On October 12, 1949, Otto Grotewohl was elected minister president of the GDR. The new Soviet Control Commission (SCC) replaced SMAD. Although the GDR would govern itself as a sovereign state, aside from the SCC, the GDR in 1949 was not accepted as an equal member of the Cominform.

In an article “The German People Shapes its Own Fate”, which appeared in the *Tägliche Rundschau*, a newspaper of the Red Army published in the SBZ, there was talk of the founding of the GDR as a state that would bring freedom to Germans through democratically elected *sovereign* government: “When the People’s Council has passed a resolution next Friday to introduce a new phase in German post-war development: Germany leaves a status of occupation and enters the status of sovereignty...[the German people] are about to free themselves from the national emergency by national self-help;

⁶⁵“Announcement of the Impending Establishment of the German Democratic Republic”. In *Occupation and the Emergence of Two States, 1945-1961*.

they are on the path to independence, to freedom, and to peace.”⁶⁶ In the new constitution of the GDR, it seemed there was hope for a ‘democratic’ government, one that would safeguard the rights of its citizens; however, the reality of life in the GDR existed far removed from this ‘official’ constitution.⁶⁷ Behind closed doors, Ulbricht made use of his own set of rules, which eroded the rights of citizens and became a dictatorship.

From 1945 to 1949, Walter Ulbricht manipulated external circumstances, primarily the failure of the KPD, then SED, to gain broad-based popular support in Germany and Stalin’s resulting reorientation of the party to follow the CPSU model, as well as the Tito-Stalin split to his own advantage. Each event allowed him to consolidate further his power over the party. Ulbricht’s next goal was to be the complete remodeling of the GDR into a Stalinist state.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ “Constitution of the German Democratic Republic.” In *Occupation and the Emergence of Two States, 1945-1961*.

“The Party is Always Right” October 1949-March 1953

“The government of the German Democratic Republic rejects secret policies. It works for the people, and only the people, so it does not need to keep secrets like the warmongers.” --Walter Ulbricht

After the founding of the German Democratic Republic, Ulbricht, the ‘motor’ of the SED, began consolidating power in the new state. Within three years, Ulbricht had transformed the GDR into a dictatorial police state. Recent upsets in the Soviet sphere won Ulbricht, and his hard-line stance, Soviet support. The period from 1949 until Stalin’s death in March 1953 was marked by a ratcheting up of the process of Stalinization in the GDR. As the Korean War shifted the international focus from Germany to Asia, Ulbricht began eliminating all possible forms of opposition within the GDR free from Soviet interference. The creation of the National Front and the first of many sham elections in 1950 left only one party with any claim to real power in the GDR, the SED. Following the reorganization of the SED, Ulbricht assumed almost complete and unquestioned power within the party. He created a system of review committees to purge opposition from the party and began show trials similar to those held in the Soviet Union. By Stalin’s death, Ulbricht had transformed the SED into a “party of the new type,” replicating virtually every aspect of Soviet society in the GDR.

THE NATIONAL FRONT

On January 7, 1950, the National Front of the German Democratic Republic was created. The National Front was an alliance of political parties and mass organizations created for the purpose of drafting a list of candidates from each of the political parties to stand for elections for the *Volkskammer*, or People’s Chamber, later that year. In a resolution of the East German Parliament on the creation of the National Front, the East Germans portrayed the National Front as a sincere attempt to achieve national unity and democracy

saying, “Calls from East and West for the National Front are louder than ever before.”⁶⁸

The document goes on to set the GDR against the FRG, calling into question Western desires for German unity while trumpeting the National Front as the manifestation of Germans’ desires, both East and West. Calling Adenauer a separatist and condemning Western “dollar imperialism,” the document sets the National Front against West German remilitarization and calls for all-German elections saying, “Germany must be united, in order for us to win freedom. The National Front of Democratic Germany will bring about this historical goal.”⁶⁹

At the Third Party Congress of the SED in 1950, Otto Grotewohl outlined the central tasks of the National Front: “Improvement of living conditions, construction of a united German state, negotiation of a peace treaty and withdrawal of all occupation forces.”⁷⁰ However, at the same time, Grotewohl reiterated the SED’s commitment to Marxism-Leninism and the transformation of the SED into a “party of the new type.” This was a contradiction, which could not be reconciled. The National Front ostensibly desired a unified Germany, but at the same time affirmed its commitment to the construction of socialism in the GDR. This contradiction points the conclusion that although the founding documents of the National Front suggest that the leadership of the GDR sought German unity, in reality, these calls for unity were simply ploys on behalf of the East Germans to appear desirous of cooperation with the West.

⁶⁸ 7. Januar 1950: Beschluß des Sekretariats der Deutschen Volkskongreßbewegung über die Konstituierung des Sekretariats der Nationalen Front des demokratischen Deutschland. Bundesministerium des Innern und Bundesarchiv, ed. *Dokumente zur Deutschlandpolitik*. Vol. II. Series 3. 1950 (München: Oldenbourg, 1997), 3. (self translated)

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ *Protokoll des III Parteitag*, Band I (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1951), 237.

In much the same manner as the KPD dominated the political scene in the SBZ, the SED held a prominent position within the National Front, even though the alliance was meant to appear “democratic.” The creation of the National Front represents the first in a number of steps on the part of Walter Ulbricht to consolidate the SED’s power in the new state. The National Front was useful for the SED because it allowed the party to appear to be collaborating with the other East Germany parties, while in reality, allowing the SED complete control over the alliance. Through its powerful position in the National Front, the SED could quell opposition both in the elections and also in the months leading up to them. In fact, the SED wasted little time intimidating the leadership of the other parties. As an example, on January 29, 1950, Professor Hugo Hickmann, the Chairman of the CDU in Saxony, resigned following accusations of unwillingness to conform to the National Front. When the SED failed to “bully” opponents enough to get them to resign of their own volition, the SED leadership simply forced them.

By July 9, 1950, the East Germans had agreed on a “single list” of candidates to be sponsored by the National Front to stand election. The agreement also fixed the number of seats each party would have. Through fear of persecution among opponents to the National Front and an unceasing propaganda campaign, the SED consolidated its power in this, the first of many, sham elections in the GDR. On October 15, 1950 this “single list” of candidates won 99.7 percent of the vote.⁷¹ The SED, then, publically paraded these results as an indication of popular support. The reality of the situation,

⁷¹ Phillips, *Soviet Policy Toward East Germany Reconsidered*, 127.

however, pointed to a different set of statistics. Between 1949 and 1961, 2.7 million citizens of the GDR fled to the West in an attempt to “vote with their feet.”⁷²

THE GDR AND THE COLD WAR

Alliances

In response to the lackluster reception for the National Front among the West German middle class, at the sixth meeting of the SED Central Committee in July 1951, Ulbricht announced a new strategy of “national struggle from below,” which constituted two major changes to the National Front. First, the SED proclaimed that the main impediment to German unity was the reemergence of German imperialism in the FRG in alliance with American imperialism. Second, the SED accused not only the conservative coalition in Bonn, but also the West German SPD and the West German labor unions of being averse to German unity.⁷³ In the fall of 1951, the SED renewed efforts to reach out to the West German working class under the slogan “*Deutsche an einem Tisch!*” or “Germans at one table!” The SED called for all-German elections. Despite these overtures, however, West Germany’s integration into the Western bloc proceeded. In April 1951 the FRG became a founding member of the European Coal and Steel Community, and in July the Western powers terminated the state of war with Germany and began discussions about potential West German sovereignty and inclusion in proposed European Defense Community.⁷⁴

The remilitarization and full incorporation of West Germany into the Western bloc was what Stalin had feared the most since the Allies first saw signs of victory during

⁷² Jürgen Weber, *Germany, 1945-1990: A Parallel History* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2004), 61.

⁷³ Phillips, *Soviet Policy Toward East Germany Reconsidered*, 120.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

the war. In an attempt to prevent this from happening, on March 10, 1952, Stalin sent the first of several now infamous notes to the Western powers. In the letter, Stalin professed a desire for peace and a unified Germany. Other provisions included the withdrawal of the occupying powers and the universal assurance of democratic, political, and civil rights to all citizens. Perhaps most ironically, given the situation in the GDR, the Soviet draft included a clause about political activity: “Free activity of democratic parties and organizations must be guaranteed in Germany with the right of freedom to decide their own internal affairs, to conduct meetings and assembly, to enjoy freedom of press and publication.”⁷⁵

In the ensuing exchange of notes, another main point of contention surfaced around the ability of a unified Germany to enter into its own alliances. The Soviets, although proclaiming the need for a united, sovereign Germany, stated: “Germany obligates itself not to enter into any kind of coalition or military alliances directed against any power which has taken part with its armed forces in the war against Germany.”⁷⁶ Furthermore, the Soviets demanded that Germany must not be included “into one or another grouping of powers directed against any peace-loving state.”⁷⁷ These clauses were the crux of Stalin’s hopes to forestall the integration of the FRG into a Western alliance. In response, the United States sent a reply stating:

⁷⁵ *Note From the Soviet Union to the United States Transmitting a Soviet Draft of a Peace Treaty with Germany, March 10, 1952.* In *Documents on Germany, 1944-1985*. Department of State Publication 9446. Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, 361.

⁷⁶ *Note From the Soviet Union to the United States Proposing Four-Power Rather Than United Nations Investigation of Conditions for Free All-German Elections, April 9, 1952.* In *Documents on Germany, 1944-1985*, 365.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

The United States Government could not accept any provisions forbidding Germany to enter into associations with other states which one of the signatories of the peace treaty might arbitrarily chose to regard as 'directed against a peace-loving state.' It cannot admit that Germany should be denied the basic right of a free and equal nation to associate itself with other nations for peaceful purposes.⁷⁸

Despite Stalin's seeming change of heart and genuine desire for peace and democracy, his intentions were not quite so pure. Although he was still considering the prospect of German unity, even as late as March 1952, the real purpose behind these March notes was Stalin's attempts to both prevent, or at least, halt the integration of the FRG into the Western bloc, and to create the appearance of flexibility and genuine desire for democracy, while at the same time, creating an offer to which Stalin knew the Americans, British, and French would never agree. Stalin continued his attempts to postpone the signing of the Paris and Bonn treaties until just two days before they were signed. The note criticized the treaties, saying they only deepened the division of the two Germany's and posited them in conflict with one another.⁷⁹ In spite of Stalin's attempts, however, the General Treaty, which granted sovereignty to West Germany, was signed in Bonn on May 26, 1952. The following day, the European Defense Community (EDC) Treaty, which provided for the integration of the West German military into a larger European military, was signed in Paris. Undeterred, Stalin moved to prevent the ratification of the treaties. His protestations, however, went unheeded, and the West

⁷⁸ *Note From the United States to the Soviet Union Reasserting Authority of the United States to Investigate Conditions for Free All-German Elections, May 13, 1952.* In *Documents on Germany, 1944-1985*, 368.

⁷⁹ *Note From the Soviet Union to the United States Proposing Simultaneous Four-Power Discussion of a German Peace Treaty, German Reunification, and Formation of an All-German Government, May 24, 1952*, 374.

German Bundestag ratified the Bonn and Paris Treaties in March 1953.⁸⁰ Stalin's greatest fears had been realized. West Germany had been integrated as an equal and sovereign member in the anti-Soviet bloc.

SED Domestic and Foreign Policy

The Third Party Congress of the SED met from July 20-24, 1950. At the Congress, Ulbricht reoriented the SED's leadership structure to match that of the Soviet Union. A new Central Committee (ZK) replaced the old Executive Committee, and the Politbüro replaced the Central Secretariat. Henceforth, the seat of the General Secretary of the ZK held authority in the Party. The following day, Ulbricht became the General Secretary of the SED.

Reorientation toward a Sovietized state came not only through reorganization of the SED's leadership, but also included economic reorientation. A major portion of the Third Party Congress was the creation of the First Five-Year Plan for the years 1951-1955. The primary goal of the plan was to reach a level of production that was double that of 1936, through the production of 1.8 million tons of iron ore, 1.5 million tons of brown coal, and four million tons of hard coal, as well as the creation of 22 vessels to create a merchant marine.⁸¹ The SED implemented the First Five-Year Plan in an era in which the Stalinist orthodoxy of industrial development above all other concerns was of utmost importance.⁸²

⁸⁰ In reality, in August 1954, the French National Assembly refused to ratify the EDC. Although they did, however, approve of West German membership in NATO, the French postponed this for five years.

⁸¹ Webb, Adrian. *The Longman Companion to Germany since 1945* (London: Longman, 1998), 223

⁸² *Ibid.*

Although the Soviet Union had not yet recognized the GDR as a sovereign state and Stalin was still considering German unification, Ulbricht moved to cement the GDR's status as an independent state. Focusing for the first time on foreign policy, throughout 1950, Ulbricht signed a number of agreements with surrounding states, marking a shift outward. Focusing on developing relations with other nations on the GDR's own terms, without the Soviet Union as intermediary, Ulbricht demonstrated his desire for East German sovereignty not only from the West, but also from the Soviet Union. On June 23 Ulbricht signed an agreement with Czechoslovakia declaring that neither state had any outstanding territorial claims. On June 24 he signed friendship agreements with István Dobi, the Hungarian Prime Minister, and from July 6 to September 26, signed parallel agreements with Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria. Finally, on October 1, East Germany became a member of the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON).⁸³

Germany's position at the geographical and symbolic center of the Cold War allowed Ulbricht to capitalize on the FRG's integration into the Western bloc. He understood that the further integrated the FRG was into a Western alliance, the more he would receive Soviet backing to tie the GDR ever tighter to the Soviet Union.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIALISM

At the Second Party Conference of the SED in the summer of 1952, the SED adopted a program called the "Planned Construction of Socialism." Several other Eastern bloc states had already adopted a similar plan, hoping it would promise rapid short-term economic growth. However, by the summer of 1952, when the SED officially adopted

⁸³ Ibid., 162. COMECON was established in January 1949. The founding nations were Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and the Soviet Union.

the program, these same policies in other Eastern European nations had produced damaging effects, which, among other things, were fomenting protest among the people.⁸⁴ Soviet intelligence sources reported “near-total chaos” in Czechoslovakia, “severe deficiencies” in Hungary, and “extremely detrimental conditions and disruption” in Romania.⁸⁵

The SED’s adoption of the “Planned Construction of Socialism” not only reflected Ulbricht’s ultimate goal, the Stalinization of the GDR through radical means, but it also signified a policy change in Moscow. By the summer of 1952, Stalin’s uncertainty on the German question was gone. From the early post-war period, Stalin’s hopes for the future of Germany remained unclear, and even though Stalin’s attitudes toward domestic policy in the GDR radicalized slightly in aftermath of the Tito-Stalin split and increasing tensions with the West, Stalin at least kept open the option of a unified Germany. However, angered by the West’s rejection of his ‘March notes’ and the deepening alliance of the FRG with the Western bloc, Stalin seemed to have finally, fully abandoned, once and for all, any remaining hope for German unification.

On April 1 and 7, 1952, Stalin met with Wilhelm Pieck, Otto Grotewohl, and Walter Ulbricht, at two meetings of the CPSU Politburo. The transcripts of these meetings, only months before Ulbricht’s announcement of the “Planned Construction of Socialism” program for the GDR illustrate Stalin’s change of heart. At the first meeting, on April 1, 1952, Pieck asked Stalin a series of questions regarding a peace treaty with

⁸⁴ Christian F. Ostermann, ed. *Uprising in East Germany: The Cold War, the German Question, and the First Major Upheaval Behind the Iron Curtain* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2001), 1.

⁸⁵ Mark Kramer, “The Early Post-Stalin Succession Struggle and Upheavals in Eastern Europe (Part 1),” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 1:1 (Winter 1999), 6-7.

the FRG and the possibility of all-German elections, as well as questions about what kind of military force the GDR should establish to counter the ‘threat’ from the West. Stalin’s response to these questions more or less skirt over a discussion of a peace treaty and elections and focus on the development of a strong police force in the GDR. In response to Pieck and Ulbricht’s concerns that producing arms for a police force would violate the Quadripartite Agreements, Stalin responded “You need to create an army...without making much noise...the Western powers in West Germany violate all agreements and do whatever they please.”⁸⁶ Over the course of the conversation Stalin encouraged the SED to begin in earnest the creation of a self-sufficient, independent state in the GDR.

At Stalin’s second meeting with the three SED leaders on April 7, 1952, Stalin reiterated, more strongly this time, his lack of trust in the West’s commitment to German unity:

“Regardless of what proposals we make on the German issue, the Western powers will not agree with them, and will not leave West Germany anyway. To think that we would be able to achieve a compromise or that the Americans would accept the draft peace treaty would be a mistake. ... The Americans will pull West Germany into the Atlantic Pact. They will create West German troops. ...In reality, an independent state is being created in Germany. And you need to organize an independent state. The demarcation line between East and West Germany should be considered a border...We need to strengthen defense of this border.”⁸⁷

On January 2, 1953, the Central Committee of the CPSU resolved to “inform Ulbricht that there are no objections to the measures planned by the SED CC Politbüro to deploy guards from the forces of the GDR national police along the border between East and

⁸⁶ *Record of Conversation of Leaders of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany W. Pieck, W. Ulbricht, and O. Grotewohl with J.V. Stalin, 1 April 1952. In Uprising in East Germany, 22-34.*

⁸⁷ *Record of Conversation of Leaders of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany W. Pieck, W. Ulbricht and O. Grotewohl with J.V. Stalin, 7 April 1952. In Uprising in East Germany, 34-40.*

West Berlin and to end uncontrolled access to East Berlin from Western sectors.”⁸⁸ The purpose of these “border guards” was to decrease the massive flood of East Germans fleeing the GDR. During 1952 alone, 232,000 GDR residents fled to the West.⁸⁹

PURGING THE OPPOSITION

Stasi and Intimidation of the Population

One month after the announcement of the creation of the National Front, in February 1950, the *Volkskammer* approved the establishment of a Ministry of State Security (MfS), the Stasi, with Wilhelm Zaisser, chief of the *Volkspolizei*, as its head. The *Volkskammer* did not list the powers of the Stasi, leaving it accountable only to the Politbüro of the SED, meaning that it enjoyed unlimited power. The Stasi was a powerful manifestation of the ratcheting up of the process of Stalinization in the GDR and was responsible for the arrest and imprisonment of many citizens, most of whom were innocent of any real crime against the state. The Stasi encouraged the practices of anonymous denunciations and incentivized collaboration created a sense of state in which private life became subject to public scrutiny, in much the same manner as the Gestapo had done during the Hitler years.

SED

Almost immediately after the Third Party Congress, the SED began purging the party of all opposition, both real and perceived. By October of 1950, Walter Ulbricht and Hermann Matern⁹⁰ drafted a series of guidelines for the checking (*Überprüfen*) of party members. The plans demanded that “around 300,000 card-carrying members must be

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ In 1950, Hermann Matern was the Vice-president of the *Volkskammer* and directed many of the investigations.

removed from the party” including especially “capitalist, peasant farmer and petty bourgeois elements, morally dubious and corrupt persons, careerists, [and] bureaucrats.”⁹¹ In addition, the drafts specified that special checks were necessary for white-collar workers “who became white-collar workers on account of their further education and their social origins” as well as members of the intelligentsia.⁹²

By 1951, the leadership of the SED set up examining commissions to analyze the political, economic, and social backgrounds of party members. Examiners were to take note of a person’s “loyalty and dedication to the party and loyalty to the Soviet Union” and scrutinize those who were “factionalists, émigrés, and POWs returning from the West.”⁹³ Responsible for these checks was the Zentrale Parteikontrollkommission (ZPKK). Although the ZPKK conducted in depth checks of SED and National Front party members, the ZPKK also investigated university faculties and the GDR’s many mass organizations. At its many meetings, the ZPKK chose a number of people to investigate. Each person’s name and information was then compiled into a report, which detailed, among other things, the person’s political history and economic standing. To take an example, in the 84th Meeting of the ZPKK, on October 10, 1953, one of those investigated was Rudolf Schulze. The report includes his birth date, address, and profession (he was a metalworker). In addition, the report notes that he is middle class and that from 1932 until 1933 he had been a member of the SPD, and a member of the SPD/SED since 1945. From October 1945, he was a POW in the Soviet Union and had attended the *Parteischule*, or Party School, which provided ideological ‘rehabilitation’ for

⁹¹ SAPMO-BArch, ZPA, NL 182/903.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

former POWs. Following this general information is a page-long critique of Schulze's ability to enforce a high level of productivity and a discussion detailing anti-SED remarks he had made at his place of work. Although the report does not indicate what action, if any, should be taken against Schulze, it does suggest that his actions and anti-party sentiments are a "great shame."⁹⁴

This example illustrates the intrusive and often frivolous nature of the ZPKK checks. The checks created a sense of fear, especially for universities and large organizations undergoing checks, which feared that any anti-government statements or activities on behalf of any member of an organization would bring the SED's wrath down on the organization as a whole. Illustrating this is a letter addressed to the ZPKK on behalf of one Alfred Lemmnitz. Lemmnitz sought to call the ZPKK's attention to several members of the faculty of social sciences at the University of Leipzig. Lemmnitz writes that he knows that at least four members of the faculty had spent time in Western Europe and America and suggests that there was also an American agent, Noel H. Field, working as a tutor there.⁹⁵

Following the example of the Soviet Union, the GDR prepared for show trials of its own. The trials were less bloody than those of the Soviet Union, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia, as judges handed down no death sentences, probably due on some level to Stalin's hesitancy to carry out more violent trials in the GDR, given its visibility

⁹⁴ 'Protokoll der 84. Sitzung der ZPKK am 10.10.1953'. SAPMO-BArch ZPA DY 30/IV 2/4/448.

⁹⁵ 'Vorgänge auf der Leipziger Universität in Zusammenhang mit dem Beschluss des ZK über die Zusammenarbeit von Funktionären der SED mit amerikanischen Agenten'. 19. September 1950.

and also due to Stalin's death.⁹⁶ In spite of this, however, the trials served as a reminder of the GDR's continually tightening alliance with the Soviet Union and Soviet practices.

Reintegrating Former Nazis

From 1945 to 1949, 700,000 German POWs returned home from the Soviet Union and settled in the SBZ. Twenty-three thousand POWs, classified as 'war criminals', however, remained in the Soviet Union for allegedly committing 'serious war crimes.'⁹⁷ From 1950 to 1956, these 23,000 prisoners returned to the newly founded GDR. For a state founded principally on the principle of anti-fascism, this second group of returning POWs presented the problem of historical memory, a problem that the SED was reticent to face. In order for the GDR to claim legitimacy, it had to distance itself from Germany's Nazi past. The SED, concerned with maintaining historical consistency, faced an almost inescapable contradiction. The state was based the idea of a historical friendship with the Soviet Union. The Soviets emphasized the shared sacrifices of the two peoples, while simply ignoring the war years. In *Neues Deutschland* an article expounded on this connection: "The experience of the last war has shown that the German and the Soviet people have made the greatest sacrifices, that those two peoples have the greatest potentials in Europe for the achievement of great deeds with global importance."⁹⁸ Despite Soviet attempts to return to a 1920s Rapallo relationship with Germany, there was no denying the fact that during the war, the Soviets and Germans had

⁹⁶ Kaiser, "Change and Continuity," 693.

⁹⁷ Christina Morina, "Instructed Silence, Constructed Memory: The SED and the Return of German Prisoners of War as 'War Criminals' from the Soviet Union to East Germany, 1950-1956" *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (August, 2004), 325. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20081219>.

⁹⁸ 'Alles für den Aufbau der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik', *Neues Deutschland*, 19 Oct. 1949, 4.

been bitter enemies. This second group of returning POWs subverted SED and Soviet efforts to ignore this past.

As a result, Walter Ulbricht took a particular interest in the reintegration process of these former POWs. He and the SED regarded those soldiers who returned to Germany from 1945 to 1950 as integral to the economic and material reconstruction of East Germany, even calling them “mediators between the German people and the peoples of the Soviet Union.”⁹⁹ Those soldiers who returned from 1950 to 1956, however, Ulbricht regarded as “convicted war criminals” and potential threats to the GDR. The distinction between the two groups of POWs was predominantly the SED’s reaction to a statement released by TASS, the official Soviet news agency, on May 6, 1950, that “9,717 prisoners of war, who were convicted of *serious war crimes* [and another 3,815 who were] being investigated for war crimes” remained in the Soviet Union [emphasis mine].¹⁰⁰ The SED saw the post-1950 returnees as a two-fold threat to the East German state. First, they had been imprisoned for a substantial period of time, which, the SED believed would engender hatred for the Russians and would strengthen their allegiance to fascism and increased their potential to subvert the new state. Second, they also put strain on the already tenuous relationships between East and West Germany as well as between the Soviet Union and the West.¹⁰¹ Third, and in many senses, most importantly, this second group of returnees had represented the SED’s scapegoat for the most egregious war crimes. While the POWs remained in the Soviet Union, the SED could

⁹⁹ ‘Bericht Nr. 1 über die Kontrolle des Heimkehrerlagers Gronenfelde b. Frankfurt/Oder’, 9 Jun. 1949. BStU, MfS, Allg. S. 440/67/I, 12, *Bundersbeauftragte für die Unterlagen der Staatsicherheit der ehemalingen DDR, Ministerium für Staatsicherheit* (BStU, MfS), Berlin.

¹⁰⁰ Morina, “Instructed Silence, Constructed Memory,” 325.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 328.

safely condemn them, while selectively “forgetting” the Nazi past of other residents of the SBZ/GDR. However, upon their return, Ulbricht and the leadership of the SED knew that the party faced a further loss of credibility if all the returnees were simply reintegrated into society.

In order to address this problem, the SED ‘allowed’ the majority of returnees to simply accept socialism-communism, after which their National Socialist pasts were forgotten. A key political instrument in achieving this was the NDPD, the National Democratic Party of Germany. Although no veterans’ organizations were allowed in the GDR, the NDPD was created by SMAD on June 16, 1948, to appeal to former NSDAP members and former members of the Wehrmacht. The NDPD was allowed to exist only because it was integrated into the National Front, and therefore, directly supervised by the SED. By the early 1950s, the NDPD’s membership included about 500,000 former members of the NSDAP, as well as about 700,000 former Wehrmacht officers and soldiers.¹⁰² Despite these large numbers of members from the NSDAP and Wehrmacht, the SED ensured that the party’s leadership was dominated by ‘reliable’ individuals, including Lothar Bolz, who had been a member of the KPD since the 1930s and had spent the war years in exile in the Soviet Union.

In fact, very few former NSDAP and Wehrmacht members were ever able to achieve leadership positions in the NDPD.¹⁰³ For the SED, the NPDP’s purpose was to

¹⁰² Ibid., 331.

¹⁰³ Dietrich Staritz, ‘National-Demokratische Partei Deutschlands (NDPD)’, im Martin Brozat and Hermann Weber, eds., *SBZ-Handbuch. Staatliche Verwaltungen, Parteien, gesellschaftliche Organisationen und ihre Führungskräfte in der Sowjetischen Besatzungszone Deutschlands 1945-1949* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1993), 576.

act as a 'collecting basin' for denazified people.¹⁰⁴ Although the NDPD took a remarkably nationalistic stance, declaring that the party's aim was to "put the nation's interests above everything else"¹⁰⁵ and by the spring of 1953, had become the strongest party in the National Front, the SED considered the party harmless because NDPD members had broken with the past and had integrated themselves into the GDR politically. Their unique combination of nationalism with socialism evidenced their newfound 'antifascism.' Furthermore, they had also proved invaluable to the reconstruction efforts after the war.

Although the NDPD represented a success for antifascism, Ulbricht was concerned about the SED's credibility. It would seem contradictory for a state founded on the principles of antifascism to accept former Nazis with open arms. In order to remedy this disjuncture of rhetoric and reality, Ulbricht and the SED undertook a series of trials to purge former Nazis, real or imagined, in order to give credibility to the idea that the SED took the prosecution of former Nazis seriously. In these trials, called the Waldheimer Trials, took place between April and June of 1950. Over the course of the trials, SED judges convicted more than 3,300 people to long terms of imprisonment and 24 executions were carried out. The trials proceeded often without any evidence pointing to guilt and without defense attorneys. Most of those persecuted were only nominal members of the NSDAP and were not responsible for the commission of Nazi war crimes.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 574.

¹⁰⁵ 'Ruf an die deutsche Frontgeneration des zweiten Weltkrieges', June 1952. SAPMO-BArch DY 16/1431.

¹⁰⁶ Weber, *Germany 1945-1990*, 62-3.

ON THE WORLD STAGE: THE GLOBAL COLD WAR

Korea

With the settlement of the Berlin Blockade, the frontline of the Cold War moved from Germany to Asia. The Soviets, heartened by the fall of China to communism, believed they could expand the Soviet sphere of influence in Asia with relatively little risk from the West. When North Korea made advances to unify the country under communism, however, the United States reacted violently, much to Stalin's surprise. The Soviets believed that Korea was of little strategic importance to the United States. The Americans' reaction to the success of the Chinese Communist Revolution did not provoke the United States to war, despite the fact that China was of greater importance strategically to the United States.¹⁰⁷ In reality, however, the United States saw the opening of the Korean Conflict as a turning point in the Cold War. On June 27, 1950, two days after the war began, President Truman stated: "The attack upon Korea made it plain beyond all doubt that Communism has passed beyond the use of subversion to conquer independent nations and will now use armed invasion and war."¹⁰⁸

Although the Soviets provided arms for the North Koreans and planned on war, the Soviets' knowledge that the invasion would occur on June 25 is hotly debated. There is circumstantial evidence to support the hypothesis that the Soviets were indeed surprised when the North Korean invasion of South Korea came about a month and a half earlier than planned, but there is also evidence to suggest that the Soviets knew exactly

¹⁰⁷ Phillips, *Soviet Policy Toward East Germany Reconsidered*, 116.

¹⁰⁸ Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs*, Vol. II, *Years of Trial and Hope* (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 339.

when the invasion would come.¹⁰⁹ Regardless of the extent of involvement in the Korean conflict, however, the shift of global attention to Asia, had enabled Ulbricht to carry out his goals without the interference of the Soviets.

Stalin's Legacy

Although Stalin is rightfully to blame for the deaths of millions of Soviet citizens and the havoc wreaked by his tyrannical government within the Soviet Union, his policy with regard to the German question had always been relatively tempered. Only in the months leading up to his death did Stalin abandon hope for a unified Germany. Although occurrences within the Soviet Union, as well as West Germany's integration into an anti-Soviet alliance with the West, pushed Stalin to adopt a greater degree of support for a divided Germany, it was not Stalin, but rather, Ulbricht that pushed the GDR in the direction of the Soviet Union. After Stalin's death, however, Ulbricht began invoking Stalin's memory to garner support from the Kremlin, and when this did not help him win Soviet support, Ulbricht embarked on a dangerous and uncharted course, one that led directly to the East German Uprising of 1953.

¹⁰⁹ Geoffrey Warner, "The Korean War" *International Affairs*, 56:1 (January, 1980), 99-100.

Uprising in East Germany

“The most perilous moment for a bad government is when it seeks to mend its ways.” --Alexis De Tocqueville

The period from Stalin’s death in March 1953 until December 1953 was perhaps the most trying time for Ulbricht and his government. Stalin’s death and the change of leadership in Moscow signaled a shift in Soviet policy toward an easing of tensions both within the global Cold War and specifically with regards to the GDR. Despite the new Soviet government’s “Peace Offensive,” Ulbricht managed to cement himself further as the sole arbiter of power in the GDR and to cement the GDR’s status as a sovereign state. Ulbricht’s unique genius is most visible during this period. In continuously looking for ways to break with Moscow’s new policy and continue the process of Stalinization in the GDR, Ulbricht precipitated the first major upheaval in the Eastern bloc, the East German Uprising of June 17, 1953. Despite the fact that Ulbricht’s actions were directly responsible for the outbreak of the crisis, he was able to manipulate the situation in the aftermath of the uprising to once again ensure himself of power and force Moscow to accept and support his leadership of the GDR.

CHARTING A “NEW COURSE” IN MOSCOW

Even before Stalin breathed his last on March 5, 1953, Georgii Malenkov, Lavrentii Beria, Vyacheslav Molotov, and Nikita Khrushchev took control of the Soviet Union. That same day, Malenkov was appointed chairman of the Presidium of the USSR Council of Ministers and was presented to the Soviet Union as the face of the new “collective leadership.”¹¹⁰ In an attempt to break with the hard-line policies and paranoia that surrounded Stalin’s Kremlin, Malenkov announced on March 15 to the Supreme Soviet

¹¹⁰ Vladislav M. Zubok and Constantine V. Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin’s Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

that there was “no litigious or unresolved question which could not be settled by peaceful means on the basis of mutual agreement of the countries concerned ... including the United States of America.”¹¹¹ This change of attitude, dubbed the “Peace Offensive,” dominated US-Soviet relations for several months and signaled the new Soviet government’s willingness to open negotiations with the United States and commitment to lessening tensions in the Cold War.

Initially, the new Soviet leadership seemed to true to its word. In the initial weeks following Stalin’s death, the USSR showed signs of a true break from the past and from Stalinism. In addition to signaling desire for a truce in Korea, the new leadership expressed willingness to ease tensions in Berlin by taking steps to ameliorate the traffic congestions around Berlin and called to reconvene quadripartite negotiations on the safety of Berlin’s air corridors. In addition, the Soviet’s media lessened their “hate America campaign,” and there was even talk about a possible US-Soviet summit on disarmament.¹¹²

In addition to lessening tensions with the West, the new leadership seemed committed to making improvements in the Soviet sphere. For a brief time, the fear of secret police and party purges lessened and economic reform seemed just on the horizon with the new Soviet plan called the “New Course,” which focused on the transition of production from heavy industry to consumer goods with the hope that this would improve quality of life.

Although the new Soviet leadership had embarked on a new, more peaceful campaign, in the GDR, Ulbricht, at least initially, showed no signs of enacting the policy

¹¹¹ *New York Times*, 17 March 1953, p. A6.

¹¹² Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany*, 4.

change handed down from the Soviets. On March 8, 1953, the day before Stalin's funeral, Ulbricht published in a *Neues Deutschland* article, his firm and unwavering desire to continue with the accelerated plan for the construction of socialism and to proceed with his plan for the creation of National Armed Forces in the GDR.¹¹³ Furthermore, Ulbricht renewed an earlier request for the Soviets to authorize the placement of border guards on the division of East and West Berlin. Ulbricht was careful to attribute both the content of the *Neues Deutschland* article and his desire to isolate further West Berlin to Stalin himself. However, the new Soviet leadership would have none of it. The Soviets refused to give Ulbricht their support for "border protection" in a move that indicated the extent to which the new Soviet leadership sought to shift its policy away from Stalin's, and Ulbricht's, radical sovietization of the GDR. The Soviet leadership considered the placement of border guards at the border between East and West Berlin "unacceptable and grossly simplistic." They also demanded that the leaders of the Soviet Control Commission (SCC) "tactfully explain" to Ulbricht and Grotewohl that:

"carrying out such measures in Berlin... would certainly lead to a violation of the established order of city life [and] would invoke bitterness and dissatisfaction from Berliners with regard to the government of the GDR and the Soviet forces in Germany... and would place in doubt the sincerity of the policy of the Soviet government and the GDR government, which are actively and consistently supporting the unification of German and the conclusion of a peace treaty with Germany."¹¹⁴

¹¹³ *Neues Deutschland*, 8 March 1953. There is debate over the extent to which Ulbricht, and the GDR leadership, had been informed of the policy change in Moscow. Although Ulbricht's desire to reassert his Stalinist stance in face of any knowledge of a policy change seems clear, however, evidence suggests that upon returning from Stalin's funeral, Ulbricht's rhetoric became, for the time being, more tempered.

¹¹⁴ *Draft Instructions for General Vasilii Chuikov and Vladimir Semyonov Regarding GDR Control of Borders, 18 March 1953*. In *Uprising in East Germany*, 50.

The new Soviet leadership also told East Berlin newspapers to stop attacking the Western Powers, and instead to focus their attention on the West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and his lack of cooperation with the East to find a peaceful solution to the German question. In addition, the SCC, under orders from Moscow, forced the SED to curtail purges and show trials.

Despite hope for lessening of Cold War tensions, tension within the Kremlin was reaching a breaking point. It was not long after Stalin's death when Beria and Malenkov, the reformers and relative moderates and those responsible for the "Peace Campaign," faced off against Molotov, a hard-line Stalinist. Ulbricht used this unresolved leadership struggle in the Kremlin to his advantage. Molotov's opposition to the New Course gave Ulbricht the freedom he needed not only to break from the moderate Malenkov/Beria policy, but in fact to step up the process of Stalinization in the GDR. Ulbricht took aim at his opposition once again, targeting both individuals and the Churches. Ignoring signs of unrest in Eastern Europe and even within the GDR itself, all self-employed people were forced to give up their ration cards and purchase items at high priced state-run stores, food subsidies were all but eliminated, lower-priced travel fare for workers was eliminated, and there was increased pressure to quicken the collectivization of agriculture.¹¹⁵

Realizing that his position depended almost wholly on Soviet backing, Ulbricht again shifted policy and began complying with Soviet wishes to moderate his policy. In doing so, Ulbricht managed to regain Moscow's confidence, as evidenced by Moscow's decision in mid-April to offer the GDR greater economic support, something that Stalin

¹¹⁵ Phillips, *Soviet Policy Toward East Germany Reconsidered*, 130.

had promised the leadership of the SED in April 1952. Due to Ulbricht's tenuous relationship with the Soviets, Ulbricht modified his tone to match Soviet policy in two *Neues Deutschland* articles published on April 15 and 16, 1953. Assured once again of Soviet support, Ulbricht once again reverted to his radical policy. At the Thirteenth Plenum in May of 1953, Ulbricht announced a measure that he pushed the Central Committee to adopt: a 10 percent compulsory increase of industrial work norms, which would become effective June 1, although this date was later changed to June 30.

SOVIET DEUTSCHLANDPOLITIK IN SPRING 1953

The German question was of utmost importance to the new Soviet administration. The FRG's integration into the Western bloc, as well as Soviet hopes to continue to postpone West German remilitarization, prompted the Soviets to continue in the same vein as Stalin's "March Notes."¹¹⁶ The new government appealed to the West once more. The motivations for this policy were contradictory. In some cases, the purpose of these appeals paralleled Stalin's own purposes in his "March Notes." That is, their purpose was of a purely propagandistic and stalling nature. At the same time, however, there was some sense from at least some of the Soviet Foreign Ministry officials that these overtures represented sincere policy aims with regard to German unification. The documentary record provides evidence for both opinions on the matter. Whether their purposes were propagandistic or sincere, the Soviet leadership's memorandums on the German question reflect a desire on the part of the Soviets to garner support for a more

¹¹⁶ Stalin's "March Notes" represented Stalin's attempt to prevent the signing of the Paris and Bonn treaties and the integration of the FRG into the Western bloc. Although Stalin was not actually expecting the West to accept his attempts to facilitate German unification, the harsh and dismissive reception the notes received in the West, coupled with the signing of the treaties, marked the extinguishing of any remaining hope Stalin had with regard to German unification.

moderate East German regime as well as to “resurrect” the idea of German unity, which Stalin had finally turned away from less than a year before his death.

A memorandum from Georgii Pushkin and Mikhail Gribanov to Molotov on April 19, 1953, represents this later view and presents a series of concrete steps toward German unification. The writers seem sincere about their plan of August 23, which indicated several steps to unification and included drafting a peace treaty with Germany, establishing an all-German government, and the carrying out of free German elections. In response to this plan, the Three Powers replied, “Until elections are held, there can be no establishment of an all-German government and no unification of Germany. Discussion of the conditions of the peace treaty with Germany is impossible without the establishment of an all-German government.”¹¹⁷ The writers believe that “the governments of the USA, England, and France are fearful of new active steps that may be taken by the Soviet government on the German question.”¹¹⁸ The document then goes on to include concrete steps to change the mind of the West including the creation of a new all-German election law based on the election law of the Weimar Republic and the discussion of issues relating to both East and West Germany including “representation at international conferences”, “circulation currency”, and “scientific, cultural, and technical cooperation.”¹¹⁹

In another Soviet Foreign Ministry memorandum on the German question, the motives for the promotion of German unity seem less sincere and more propagandistic: “These measures should contribute to an increase of the Soviet Union’s authority among

¹¹⁷ *Memorandum on the German Question, from Georgii Pushkin and Mikhail Gribanov to Vyacheslav Molotov, 18 April 1953.* In *Uprising in East Germany*, 67.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

the German people and contribute to further development of the movement of German democratic forces for the unification of Germany, against the Bonn and Paris ‘agreements,’ and against the militarization of, and [increase of] fascism in Western Germany.”¹²⁰ Regardless of the aims of these two documents, both were confident in the Soviets’ negotiating position and believed the SED to be strong, even though the Soviets worried about Ulbricht’s proclivity for radicalism.

Beginning in May, however, the documents show a change in attitude among the Soviets. It seemed as though they were just beginning to understand the gravity of the deteriorating circumstances in the GDR. The refugee crisis, which was growing almost by the day, forced the Soviets to take a hard look at the GDR and Ulbricht’s policies. In a memorandum from the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs to Vladimir Semyonov on May 15, 1953, the extent of the crisis came to light. There were several statistics of particular importance to the Soviets. More than 25 percent of those who fled to the West from the GDR were workers, 50 percent were youth between the ages of 15 and 25. In addition, 604 specialists including engineers, science workers, teachers, had also fled the GDR in the third quarter of 1952.¹²¹ Although the Soviets understood the problem in the GDR, they were, by May 1953, powerless to stop it: “Clearly, defection of inhabitants from the GDR to West Germany is to a certain extent related to the policy of constructing socialist foundations in the republic.”¹²² The document also provides a list of concrete steps to curb the flood of people from the GDR including taking steps to decrease the

¹²⁰ *Soviet Foreign Ministry Memorandum, “Regarding Further Measures of the Soviet Government on the German Question,” 28 April 1953. In Uprising in East Germany, 71.*

¹²¹ *Memorandum from the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs to Vladimir Semyonov, “On the Question of Preventing the Defection of Inhabitants from the GDR to West Germany,” 15 May 1953. In Uprising in East Germany, 97.*

¹²² *Ibid.*

number of arrests and persecutions, increasing quality of living for specialists, and exposing “hostile” Western propaganda.¹²³

A follow up memorandum issued only three days later on May 18, 1952, provides not only details of the crisis in the GDR, but also harsh criticism of Ulbricht’s regime. The document traces the effects of the resolutions of the Second Party Conference of the SED in 1952, which included increased class warfare and “limiting capitalist elements in industry and trade,” the results of which, the Soviets believed led to an increase in the standard of living for most citizens, but also led to a shortfall of consumer goods in early 1953. In addition, a weak harvest led to food shortages, and in the first quarter the SED temporarily ceased the sale of fats and sugars. Interruptions in coal supply often meant that public buildings and schools went unheated. Then, the SED increased penalties for economic crimes such as petty theft. The Soviets believed that the SED underestimated the gravity of the situation in the GDR, which played right into the hands of the “West German and Anglo-American authorities [who] are carrying out economic and political diversions aimed at disrupting the five-year plan and at discrediting the policy of the GDR.”¹²⁴

In response to this series of events, the document sets forth a list of policy recommendations for Ulbricht’s government’s including: increase the flow of consumer goods to the population, support crafts production and create incentives for artisans, reduce agricultural norms 5-10 percent and work out a plan to begin mechanizing agriculture, differentiate between large and small retailers in efforts to limit private

¹²³ Ibid., 97-8.

¹²⁴ *Memorandum from General Vasilii Chuikov, Pavel Yudin, and Ivan Il’ichev to Georgii Malenkov Critically Assessing the Situation in the GDR, 18 May 1953, In Uprising in East Germany, 100-105.*

capitalist elements, and carry out amnesty for those who committed Nazi crimes and release 15-17,000 of such persons from prisons.¹²⁵ Most importantly, however, were the Soviet recommendations for political questions. The SED should “end the political underestimation of the significance of the issue surrounding the departure of GDR citizens to West Germany,” “take concrete measures to strengthen counter-propaganda, organizing it in such ways that the press and radio of the GDR systematically expose the mendacious Western propaganda on the issue of refugees from the GDR,” “expose the reactionary propaganda of the Church,” and “to take measures to improve scientific and cultural links between scholars in the GDR and in the Soviet union and the people’s democracies.”¹²⁶

In light of the severity of the situation in the GDR, the Soviets had reason to look more seriously into German unity. At the May 27 meeting of the Presidium of the Council of Ministers in the Soviet Union, the members all agreed that Ulbricht’s forced construction of socialism in the GDR had to be halted in order to ameliorate the growing tensions there and the mass exodus of GDR citizens. However, Lavrentii Beria proposed not only abandoning Ulbricht’s radical Stalinization in the GDR, but allegedly also the abandonment of socialism in the GDR altogether. Perhaps their most important priority was to temper Ulbricht, whom they called “little Stalin.”

THE TIPPING POINT

Whether or not the Beria plan was a sincere effort or a fabrication, the Soviets would have done well to follow up on the plan, not only in the GDR, but also all over Eastern Europe. The result of years of Stalinist practices in Eastern Europe had finally come to a

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 106-08.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 108-09.

head. Unrest was fomenting in the Eastern bloc and should have been a sign to the Soviet leadership to effect serious, immediate change. Two events in particular, the tobacco workers unrest in Bulgaria and the Plzeň strike, were two powerful indications of what was to come in the GDR.

Vulko Chervenkov, Prime Minister and leader of the Communist Party in Bulgaria, shared, in many respects, a similar leadership style with Ulbricht. In fact, the situation in Bulgaria in May 1953 was eerily similar to that of the GDR. Forced increases in collectivization and industrial production norms had virtually the same effect as the practices did in the GDR. The supply of consumer goods decreased, and mid-1953, Bulgarians were fleeing the country. Angered by the flood of citizens out of the country, Chervenkov increased domestic oppression even further, punishing family members of those who had fled.¹²⁷ Work norm increases, which essentially translated into wage cuts, provoked a strike of several hundred tobacco workers in Plovdiv and Khaskovo on May 4, 1953. In a report of the strike, the devastation that Stalinist economic policies wreaked on the people is clear. The report mentions that in the days leading up to the strike, the tobacco plant drew up a list of workers at the plant who were allowed to keep working, the rest, were effectively put out of work. The report tells of two women, Comrades Vera Dimitrova and Boriana Doumbalakova, who were not on the official workers' list:

“We told them that there were no openings and that they should be glad to have one piece of bread in their families because those who were on the list did not even have money for bread. The two women started protesting, saying that, no matter what, they would go to work. There were also other [female] comrades

¹²⁷ Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany*, 16.

who came to the depot, but after we explained the situation to them, they left—some of them right away, other after long, angry tirades.”¹²⁸

The report notes that on the morning of the strike, there was a large gathering of those workers not on the list outside the factory doors. At around 6:50 a.m., on May 4, “the situation became threatening.” There were between four and five hundred angry workers attempting to push their way into the factory about 150 of whom succeeded in gaining entry. The report writer remarked: “Everyone is unemployed—people gather at the cooperatives waiting in lines for bread [and] milk... Whether it was May 4, 10, or 20 it does not matter and what happened on the 4th could not be avoided.”¹²⁹

Then, on June 1, 1953, thousands of workers demonstrated against currency reform in Plzeň, Czechoslovakia. The origins of the Plzeň crisis dated back to late 1952, when rumors of currency reforms were spreading rapidly in Czechoslovakia. At the “Lenin” Škoda Works tensions rose on May 30, when workers got word that the currency form had gone into effect despite assurances from management that their money was safe. The following day, however, Prague radio announced that the currency reforms had indeed been carried out. Unsettled and angry at the management’s lack of concern, 3,000 workers marched to the city’s center where calls against the currency reforms quickly turned into broader protests against the Communists as workers shouted slogans like “Black Plzeň is faithful to Beneš” and “We shall have good times again, the boys from the USA will come back again.”¹³⁰ Protestors at Republic Square shouted “We want free

¹²⁸ *Report on 4 May Disturbances at the Tobacco Depot in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, 7 May 1953. In Uprising in East Germany, 87.*

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹³⁰ Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany*, 16.

elections!,” “Long Live Eisenhower!,” and “Death to Communists!,” in an eerily similar fashion as protesters in East Berlin two weeks later.¹³¹

THE ROAD TO JUNE 17

In light of the recent upsets in Eastern Europe, the Soviets decided to take direct action to halt Ulbricht’s forced Stalinization of the GDR and what the Soviets deemed an “incorrect political line,” and “a mistaken course.”¹³² The construction of socialism in the GDR, the Soviets reiterated, was “a serious threat to the stability of the German Democratic Republic.”¹³³ The Soviets ordered a revision of the Five-Year Plan to more adequately respond to consumer needs at the expense of heavy industrial production and insisted that SED propaganda was “pushing the party organizations of the SED to unacceptably simplified and hasty steps both in the political and in the economic areas.”¹³⁴

On June 2, Ulbricht, Grotewohl, and Oelssner, arrived in Moscow to meet with the Soviet leadership. In Grotewohl’s notes from the meeting, the only record of the meeting, the Soviets admit, “We all have made mistakes” and tell the East Germans that simple reform is not enough. Rather, a reversal of SED policy was immediately necessary. Molotov commented: “If we don’t correct [the situation] now, a catastrophe will happen.”¹³⁵ The meeting ended with the announcement of a “New Course,” which was a large program of reform for not only the GDR, but also several other Eastern blocs states. When Ulbricht and his delegation returned from Moscow, discussions over the

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹³² *USSR Council of Ministers Order “On Measures to Improve the Health of the Political Situation in the GDR,” 2 June 1953, In Uprising in East Germany, 133-34.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Otto Grotewohl’s Notes of Meetings between East German and Soviet Leaders in Moscow, 2-4 June 1953. SAPMO-BArch, DY 30 J IV 2/2/286.*

Soviet “New Course” ensued. Reluctantly, Ulbricht and the leadership of the SED agreed to implement the “New Course,” which included the removal and reevaluation of poster propaganda, the lessening of oppression of the churches, and, most importantly, the seat of Ulbricht’s power in the SED, the Politbüro and the Secretariat, were to be reviewed.¹³⁶

Although the SED initially had misgivings about the nature of the Soviet “New Course,” the party’s ire soon turned against Ulbricht himself. Members of the SED leadership criticized him directly, taking particular issue with Ulbricht ever-growing cult of personality. In the days following the announcement of the “New Course,” the SED officially adopted the program for the GDR, in defiance to Ulbricht. Some party members even called for Ulbricht’s resignation.

THE UPRISING

The New Course and anger at the deterioration of working and living conditions in the GDR, led to confusion among the population. On June 12, 1953, workers in East Berlin began work slow-downs to protest the increase in work norms, and a demonstration of over 5,000 people occurred outside the Brandenburg prison. On June 15, a workers’ delegation from the “Stalinallee Block 40” site went to confront Grotewohl to demand the retraction of higher work quotas and promise to strike the following day if their demands went unmet. Grotewohl, acting on the advice of his advisors, simply ignored the workers. Tensions mounted even further the following morning when the *Tribüne*, a union paper, published a statement about the necessity of the work norm increases, in a

¹³⁶ *SED CC Politburo Minutes Discussing Moscow’s Directives for the New Course, 6 June 1953. In Uprising in East Germany, 139-40.*

move that displayed disregard for the growing tension among the workers.¹³⁷ Angered, throngs of workers made their way to the House of Ministries to confront Grotewohl and Ulbricht, but neither confronted the crowd. By the afternoon, however, the SED decided to revoke the norm increases, but it was already too late. In response to what the workers believed was a direct provocation by the government, the workers called for a general strike to be held the following morning, June 17.

By the early morning of June 17, workers were gathering and marching, once again, toward the House of Ministries. Mirroring the scene in Plzeň just two weeks earlier, the protestors' calls for the rescission of the norm increases transformed into calls for the liquidation of the government including slogans like "Nieder mit der Regierung!" (Down with the government!) and "Butter statt Kanonen!" (Butter, not Arms!). By 9 a.m., about 25,000 people had assembled in front of the House of Ministries with ten of thousands more on their way. An hour later, 100 protestors managed to get past guards and stormed the building. Suddenly, Soviet tanks arrived to put down the uprising. Throughout the afternoon and evening, isolated incidents continued, not only in East Berlin, but in hundreds of other East German cities and towns as well.

FALLOUT

The SED

Although the party understood that the living conditions in the GDR were rapidly deteriorating, the scale of the uprising surprised the SED. In the immediate aftermath of June 17, the SED began analyzing the mistakes made in the weeks leading up to the uprising. Although the SED leadership, and even Ulbricht himself, confessed that

¹³⁷ Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany*, 163.

“mistakes were made,” in order to retain some credibility with the public, the SED concocted a scheme to acknowledge the workers’ right to protest the norm increases, but insisted that the workers were joined by “Western provocateurs” when the protests’ slogans turned against the government. The creation of “*Tag X*,” as June 17 came to be called in the GDR, illustrates the extent to which the SED was both surprised by and unable to cope with the uprising.

Ulbricht’s powerful position that he had worked so hard to build was compromised. Party members were once again calling for his resignation, blaming him, and rightly so, for provoking the uprising with his harsh policies. Ulbricht insisted that the SED’s first task should be to reestablish control of the situation, however, more moderate members of the party, including the once powerful Anton Ackermann, voiced the opinion that the party should be held responsible and should admit its guilt in the matter. That Ackermann and others felt it safe to speak out against Ulbricht illustrates the tenuousness of Ulbricht’s position in the immediate aftermath of the uprising. As party members leveled personal attacks on Ulbricht, he could see his power slipping away before his eyes. Although Moscow had issued orders that the SED regroup and reorganize its leadership quickly, Ulbricht took every opportunity to stall for time. He admitted guilt to various mistakes and even apologized for his personality cult.

At the July 8 meeting of the Politbüro, which focused on the question of whether or not Ulbricht should resign, almost every member of the party leadership expressed a desire that Ulbricht be removed from his position. In a last ditch effort to postpone what seemed to be inevitable, Ulbricht promised he would make a statement at the 15th SED

CC Plenum later that month.¹³⁸ Although he had no way of knowing at the time, Ulbricht's stalling efforts saved his career.

The Soviets

On June 24, 1953, the Soviets issued the Sokolovskii-Semyonov-Yudin report, which analyzed the causes and results of the uprising with a critical view of the SED and Ulbricht's initial reactions to the uprising. The Soviets note that on the evening of June 16:

“We alerted ... and suggested that they [SED] take measures of precaution and preparedness for the outbreak of disorder in the districts of the GDR. We advised our friends (Ulbricht) also to warn the districts about this...but our friends did not manage to do anything better than to call the first secretaries of the district committees in Berlin on 17 June ‘for instruction,’ as a consequence of which, at the time of the disturbances of 17 June the districts were left with essentially no top party leaders.”¹³⁹

The document goes on to state that the Soviet troops took the primary role in dispersing the demonstrators despite the fact that the demonstrators “hooted, climbed onto tanks, threw stones at troops.”¹⁴⁰

The Soviets also expressed serious dissatisfaction with the way the SED responded to the uprising: “Serious confusion in connection with the turn of party policy was displayed on the eve of the events of 17-19 June by Ulbricht, who was subjected at that same meeting of the SED CC to sharp criticism for incorrect methods of work.”¹⁴¹ Furthermore, the Soviets believed that the SED's inactivity illustrated the need for a

¹³⁸ *Otto Grotewhol's Handwritten Notes of a SED CC Politburo Meeting, 8 July 1953. In Uprising in East Germany, 297.*

¹³⁹ *Report form Vasilli Sokolovskii, Vladimir Semyonov, and Pavel Yudin “On the Events of 17-19 June 1953 in Berlin and the GDR and Certain Conclusions from These Events,” 24 June 1953. In Uprising in East Germany, 257.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 275.

leadership change in the GDR. Finally, the report contains a list of Soviet recommendations for immediate action in the GDR including various methods to improve the standard of living and ways to address “the fact that the SED CC has recently used and incorrect method of leadership over the state and national economy.”¹⁴² Most importantly, the Soviets demands a radical transformation of the SED government, “with the goal of strengthening and simultaneously reducing the state apparatus...[and] to free Cde. Ulbricht of the responsibilities of deputy prime minister of the GDR.”¹⁴³

Ulbricht Survives

Despite the strong language of the Sokolovskii-Semyonov-Yudin report, the Soviets soon realized the June 17 Uprising set a bad precedent for rebellion in parts of the USSR including Poland and even Moscow where large-scale strikes were breaking out. Fear of more uprisings coupled with the continuing power struggle in the Soviet Union and Beria’s arrest, which focused Soviet attention away from Ulbricht, made the Soviets reevaluate their GDR policy. Only a few days after the Sokolovskii-Semyonov-Yudin report was drafted, the Soviets seem to have reconsidered such drastic measures and urge the writers of the initial report to come up with “more concrete suggestions” as to how to remedy the situation in the GDR.¹⁴⁴ Several days later, the recommendations of the Sokolovskii-Semyonov-Yudin report were classified as “untimely” and were “canceled.”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Ibid., 281.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ *Protocol #1 of a Meeting of the Vyshinskii Commission to Draft a Proposal Pertaining to the GDR, 2 July 1953. In Uprising in East Germany, 293.*

¹⁴⁵ *Memorandum from Georgii Pushkin to Andrei Vyshinskii Regarding Proposals Made by Semyonov, Sokolovskii and Yudin, 9 July 1953. In Uprising in East Germany, 303.*

For Ulbricht, circumstances once again worked out in his favor. By August, the situation in the GDR was stable thanks to reforms efforts enacted in the initial aftermath of the uprising. The ascendancy of Nikita Khrushchev in the Kremlin, whose commitment to maintaining the GDR in the Soviet sphere, was rivaled only by Ulbricht himself, ensured Soviet support for Ulbricht's Soviet-style state. Once again enjoying Soviet backing, Ulbricht "cleaned house" in much the same way as he had done many times before. In July, Ulbricht removed Zaisser, Herrstadt, and Ackermann, all outspoken critics of Ulbricht, from the Politbüro, and at the 15th SED Plenum in late July, Ulbricht charged Zaisser and Herrstadt with "inner party conspiracy" and tied them to Beria's "criminal machinations" with regard to abandoning socialism in the GDR.¹⁴⁶

Despite seemingly insurmountable pressure to step down in the aftermath of the East German Uprising, Ulbricht, through a mixture of luck and political maneuvering, was able to regain power in the GDR. Ulbricht's keen ability to manipulate situations for his own benefit allowed him to hold onto power. The SED's lack of action during the uprising, much to the chagrin of the Soviets, actually saved Ulbricht's career. The necessity of Soviet tanks to quell the uprising forced the Soviets to react in ways that would both discourage uprisings in other parts of the Eastern bloc and also to claim "victory" over the efforts of "Western provocateurs" trying to wrest power away from the Soviets. To save face, the Soviets had to lend Ulbricht their support.

¹⁴⁶ Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany*, 179-80.

CONCLUSION

The Soviets' reticent support of Ulbricht's regime after the East German Uprising played directly into Ulbricht's hands. From the early days after his return to Berlin at the end of the Second World War until 1953, Ulbricht had always desired the creation of a separate East German state that would enjoy sovereignty and equality with the Soviet Union. Stalin and his successors, however, had all sought a settlement with the West for a unified Germany. Through political genius and a bit of luck, Ulbricht was able to corner the Soviets into supporting him as the unquestioned leader of the GDR and set them on a path to full recognition of the GDR as sovereign state, forever dispelling any lingering hope of German unification.

The years 1954 and 1955 were marked by a series of agreements between the GDR and the Soviet Union that sealed the GDR's future. Beginning on January 1, 1954, the Soviets discontinued the collection of reparations from the GDR, and on March 25, the Soviet Union declared the GDR to be a sovereign state. Finally, on May 14, 1955, the GDR became one of the founding members of the Warsaw Pact, signaling once again the increasing volatility and importance of Germany to the Cold War as NATO and the Warsaw Pact, two powerful alliances, faced off in the broken German nation.

With Moscow's now unwavering backing, Ulbricht ran the GDR with an iron fist. Ever reliant on the Stasi, Ulbricht once again opened a system of purge trails and stepped up domestic oppression. The number of East Germans fleeing to the West was staggering; between 1953 and December of 1960, 1,916,466 citizens fled.¹⁴⁷ For the Soviets, the ever-growing crisis in the GDR was not unforeseen, however, they were left

¹⁴⁷ Weber, *Germany 1945-1990*, 70-2.

with no choice but to support Ulbricht's strong-handed practices. For Ulbricht, the situation presented yet another opportunity to further solidify his control over the GDR. Between the nights of August 12 and August 13, 1961, the "People's Police" and "National People's Army" of the GDR sealed off the border between East and West Berlin. Those West Berliners visiting the East found themselves stuck behind barbed wire and stone the following morning, unable to return to the West. For East Berliners, the morning of August 13 solidified their imprisonment. Over time, the makeshift wall was replaced with stone.

Germany's story is one of brokenness, guilt, and separations, of nation, of *Heimat*, of families, and of hopes and dreams. The building of the Berlin Wall created a visible barrier between East and West, between freedom and dictatorship, but the roots of that separation had been long before been set in motion. The history of the SBZ/GDR is one in which one man, possessing minimal education, who seemingly had no chance of defying the wishes of the Soviet giant, was able to position himself as supreme dictator, to create a world in his image. Walter Ulbricht was a man who, from his first moments in Berlin in the war-riddled streets of Berlin in the spring of 1945, was able to do the unthinkable. Yet, Ulbricht is merely one of the often overlooked members of a select group of men who, in the 20th century, did the unthinkable, at horribly high human costs.

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Honors Director: Dr. Ronald Granieri; Faculty Advisor: Dr. Jonathan Steinberg