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Socialist Fraternal Aid and the Downfall of Ulbricht (January 21, 1971)

Led by Erich Honecker, members of the Politburo, the highest decision-making body of the SED, appeal to the general secretary of the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) for help in removing Walter Ulbricht. His removal, they argue, was necessary due to mistakes on his part in the areas of economic and foreign policy.

Members of the SED Politburo to the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and General Secretary Leonid I. Brezhnev

Dear Comrades!

As you know, over the past few months, our situation in the Politburo has been steadily deteriorating and has now become extraordinarily difficult. The reason for this follows: since the middle of 1970, Comrade Walter Ulbricht has repeatedly offered assessments and raised questions that are inconsistent with the actual circumstances of the German Democratic Republic and with our tasks.

This fills us with great concern because it is weakening the political and organizational leadership of the party at a time when domestic problems and complex foreign policy issues are demanding our complete attention and strength. Comrade Walter Ulbricht does not adhere at all to decisions and agreements that have been reached. He does not refer to decisions made by the Central Committee and the Politburo but instead continues to question them and constantly forces the Politburo to engage in discussions that prevent the concrete work of solving our most pressing tasks to an extent that is no longer acceptable.

We have tried and are still trying to fully and consistently implement the agreements made in Moscow in August 1970; in accordance with this, we already made a fundamental decision back on September 8, 1970, to stabilize the situation in the German Democratic Republic. Comrade Walter Ulbricht has repeatedly spoken out against this decision outside of the Politburo in front of a large audience.

After the 14th session of the Central Committee (December 9-11, 1970) had developed and approved both a realistic assessment of domestic (especially economic) developments and corresponding goals, Comrade Walter Ulbricht made closing remarks whose general tenor was inconsistent with what had been said during the meeting and with our common party line. The

Politburo was forced to prevent the publication of these closing remarks. The same thing had already happened with a speech that Comrade Ulbricht gave to an extended session of the Leipzig district leadership in November 1970. In January 1971, the Politburo also had to withhold materials that Comrade Walter Ulbricht had unexpectedly submitted for delivery to all district and county authorities [*Bezirks- und Kreisleitungen*] and to the Party's base organizations in preparation for the 8th Socialist Unity Party Congress. In these materials, once again, verbal acknowledgement was paid to the decisions of the 14th session of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party and of previous Politburo sessions; in reality, however, an attempt was made to offer a different assessment of the situation and to direct the party, once more, toward unrealistic goals. These materials envision the following: that the 8th Party Congress will be given a certain orientation and that it will pass resolutions that do not address the concerns people have in their daily lives and that do not make the current program more concrete on the basis of developments, but rather replace the program with out-of-touch, pseudo-scientific, and partially "technocratic" theories of a so-called projection to 1990 and beyond. When evaluating international issues, he sometimes reverts to formulations predating the resolutions of the Moscow Conference of Communist and Workers' Parties and the various conferences of the states of the Warsaw Pact. This would lead to our entering the 8th Party Congress not with a unanimous opinion but with the opinion of a majority of the Politburo and the Central Committee, on the one hand, and with Comrade Walter Ulbricht's opinion, on the other. Lately, his behavior as a whole has obstructed our preparations for the party congress.

Comrade Walter Ulbricht pursues an individual course, to which he clings stubbornly, not only in domestic policy but also with regard to our policies toward the FRG. This consistently disturbs the reliable course of coordinated action between the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the SED and the agreed-upon arrangements with the FRG.

Regrettably, these differences of opinion have become known not only within our party but, thanks to the circle around Comrade Walter Ulbricht, also in the West.

We think that the growing difficulties that our party is facing on account of Comrade Walter Ulbricht's behavior are caused in part by his advanced age. This is certainly a human and biological problem. We understand – and everyone in our party will understand – that it is exceptionally difficult, at the age of 78, to attend to the great volume of tasks and obligations associated with the position of First Secretary of the Central Committee of the SED and chairman of the Council of State of the German Democratic Republic, especially considering the high demands placed upon us by the current and future political situation.

We can say with full confidence that we have done everything possible to help Comrade Walter Ulbricht. And we also highly value his past contributions. Unfortunately, we cannot help but note that certain negative aspects of Comrade Walter Ulbricht's already difficult character have become increasingly pronounced of late. For as he alienates himself from the actual life of the party, the working class, and all workers more and more, unrealistic ideas and subjectivism are gaining an ever firmer hold on him. In his dealings with Politburo comrades and other comrades,

he is often coarse and offensive, and he takes on an air of infallibility in discussions. It is increasingly the case that Comrade Walter Ulbricht, guided by a sense of his own infallibility, issues political and other prognoses for decades to come, even up to the year 2000 – prognoses that no other party in the community of socialist states is making. It is apparent from many comments and some incidents that Comrade Walter Ulbricht likes to see himself as on a par with Marx, Engels, and Lenin. Comrade Walter Ulbricht sees it as one of his most essential tasks to “creatively advance” Marxism-Leninism in a most diverse range of areas.

His attitude culminated in a claim he made in the Politburo, namely, that he is “one of a kind.” He transfers this exaggerated sense of himself onto the GDR as well, repeatedly trying to maneuver it into the role of “model” and “teacher.” For example, in all seriousness, he gave the party and the state the goal of increasing, under any circumstances, industrial production and labor productivity by ten percent a year for the next few years, because this, according to him, is objectively necessary. At the same time, he advanced the view that this would depend on assessing and taking stock of “that which has not been thought of thus far.”

Certainly, in the past we were not always sufficiently critical and forceful when it came to Comrade Walter Ulbricht’s inappropriately exaggerated sense of self.

Comrade Walter Ulbricht’s attitude and public behavior are a serious threat to our party’s relationships with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the fraternal parties. The Politburo has already had to contend with him on several occasions to prevent more serious problems and conflicts. Our concerns also give due consideration to certain lessons learned from events in the People’s Republic of Poland and the ČSSR [Czechoslovak Socialist Republic].

In view of the responsibility of our party in the current domestic and international situation, and also in view of our experience that, despite much discussion and effort, the burden caused by Comrade Walter Ulbricht’s behavior is not decreasing, but, on the contrary, increasing, we regard it as our internationalist obligation to inform the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU of the situation that has developed here and to request help in finding a solution to this complicated problem.

We are of the opinion that such a solution could involve separating the function of the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the SED from that of chairman of the Council of State of the GDR very soon and limiting Comrade Walter Ulbricht’s function to that of chairman of the Council of State of the GDR. At the same time, it would be advisable to limit the exaggerated and artificially expanded authority of the Council of State. The activities of the Council of State, which are often used today to make decisions without the Politburo, should be put under the control of the Politburo. The Council of State must suspend its activities in areas belonging entirely to the sphere of responsibility of the government of the German Democratic Republic. Our considerations should also take into account that, according to official medical opinion, Comrade Walter Ulbricht’s current workload is irresponsible. His doctors have urgently and

repeatedly recommended that he work only four hours per day, relax on Wednesdays, Saturdays, and Sundays, and participate in evening events only once a week for two hours. We are concerned that Comrade Walter Ulbricht does not follow this and other recommendations by his physicians. A complicated situation could thus arise both for Comrade Walter Ulbricht himself and for the party and state.

Our suggestions are also motivated by the wish to give Comrade Walter Ulbricht the longest possible opportunity to contribute to our cause. In the interest of the party and in his own personal interest, it would be desirable to find a solution as soon as possible. Otherwise, the damage to our party, which is rectifiable only with difficulty, will continue to grow. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly difficult to prevent a public airing of these differences before the party and to avoid a repudiation of his false statements.

Therefore, it would be of the utmost importance and would help us immeasurably if Comrade Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev had a conversation with Comrade Walter Ulbricht in the next few days, a conversation that would result in Comrade Walter Ulbricht asking the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany to relieve him of his duties as First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany on account of his advanced age and state of health. This matter should be resolved as soon as possible, that is, definitely before the 8th Party Congress of the SED.

In submitting this important request to you, we are operating under the assumption that since the time of Thälmann and Pieck our parties and states have always shared and still share a good, firm, steadfast readiness to fight, which is based on Marxism-Leninism. Furthermore, we hope that the resolution of this unsettling matter will contribute to further deepening all that is great and good about our relations. We await your answer and assistance.

With Communist greetings

Berlin, January 21, 1971

signed by H. Axen, G. Grüneberg, K. Hager, E. Honecker, G. Mittag, H. Sindermann, W. Stoph, P. Verner, E. Mückenberger, H. Warnke, W. Jarowinsky, W. Lamberz, G. Kleiber

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