



Volume 9. Two Germanies, 1961-1989

Walter Ulbricht: A Communist Biography (1973)

On the occasion of Walter Ulbricht's death, a West German journalist examines his political development, his decisive role in the postwar history of the GDR, his relationship to the Soviet Union, and his downfall. The article makes clear that the GDR's Soviet partners played a central role both in his rise and fall.

A State Purges Its Organizer. On the Death of Walter Ulbricht

It's not insignificant that high school students in both parts of Germany know spot-on jokes about Walter Ulbricht: the now-deceased eighty-year-old left just as profound a mark on the political consciousness of Germans after the Second World War as Konrad Adenauer. And he was able to do this although even his most dispassionate critics ascribed to him all the qualities that normally stand in the way of political success: he was dry, boring, pale, not well connected, unimaginative, unattractive.

The Red Soul of Thuringia

He grew up in modest circumstances in an unprosperous Leipzig milieu; as a fifteen-year-old carpenter's apprentice, he was already part of the organized class struggle in the Socialist Workers' Youth Organization. He had firm views, which he never rethought and which therefore shielded him from a radical intellectual change, a questioning of everything, a metanoia. By today's standards, he was slow to start utilizing the potential within him – it was not until the second half of the third decade of his life that he did so. Between 1920 and 1921, Walter Ulbricht must have come to realize that successful political action is not a matter of activity but organization. The Communist Party of Germany [*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* or KPD], still young at the time, offered him the perfect testing ground for this possibly still unconscious general truth: it let him build up the party district in Thuringia. Ulbricht soon became the “red soul of Thuringia,” party congress delegate, participant in the 4th Comintern¹ World Congress in Moscow.

This is how he came to personally know Lenin, who is said to have patted him on the shoulder; in his old age, he told this to Lenin's heirs, who no longer knew him personally. In 1924, during a

¹ The Comintern (1919–1943) sought to guide the socialist movement under the leadership of the Soviet Union. – eds.

period when the KPD was banned, the Central Committee of the Communist International (Comintern) “discovered” him through Dimitri Manuilsky, who recruited talent in Germany. After attending the Lenin School in Moscow and completing a brief apprenticeship in the organizational department of the Comintern, he rose to greater glory as a recognized org[anization] specialist. “Comrade Cell,” as Ulbricht came to be known, and Wilhelm Pieck reorganized the German section of the Comintern, the KPD, according to the operational-cell organizational model and on the basis of Stalinist cadre principles.

The rigor with which he did this has often been described. The same can be said of the way in which he, as a “centrist,” cleverly stayed out of all internal party disputes and faction formations. If a vote taken during an internal party conflict would have exposed or labeled him too strongly, he waited it out, if need be, in the men’s room. The only thing that mattered was to keep hold of the reigns or to regain control of them quickly, to stay on good terms with Moscow, and to always be the most well-informed person around. He soon became head of the important Berlin-Brandenburg party district and, from 1928 on, served as a Communist representative in the Reichstag and thus held a very comfortable position, though not in the leadership. It suited him just fine that Thälmann, Pieck, Florin, Schubert, Schulte, and Scheer were at the forefront of party life.

During his Parisian exile, which started in the fall of 1933, he kept things much the same. Ulbricht managed to amass an information monopoly on party activities in Germany, and through tireless activity he outplayed the rest of the Communist émigré community – Thälmann had been taken out of the game by the National Socialists. His ability to anticipate and almost playfully track and follow [policy] course changes became even more refined there: although the 7th Comintern World Congress in 1935 invalidated all the principles of Communist alliance politics employed up to that point, Ulbricht was just as willing to participate in the “Antifascist People’s Front” as he had been to partake in the fanatic attack on Social Democrats as “social fascists” and “National Socialist lackeys.” But the short-lived German émigré People’s Front in Paris saw through him. To leftwing German Socialist refugees, this instruction-bound “apparatchik” was repulsive. Heinrich Mann was famously outraged by him: “I cannot sit down at a table with a man who suddenly claims that the table we are sitting at is not a table at all but a duck pond, and who wants to force me to agree.”

Relocation to Moscow

But despite an apparent reprimand, confidence in him continued to grow at the Moscow headquarters. It even survived the Stalinist purges. Although there was “material” against him from the time of serious KPD infighting, it was not used. He continued to be permitted to return to Paris after being called to Moscow. And it was not that he merely survived, he also acted as an accomplice, especially in Spain, where he and André Marty fulfilled so-called cleansing functions at the end of 1936 and beginning of 1937, and where he, on behalf of Stalin, got the blood of German Socialist Civil War fighters on his hands.

Not until 1938 did the native Leipziger permanently move from Paris to Moscow. His co-émigré Johannes R. Becher, who later became GDR minister of culture, supposedly said of him: “Comrade Ulbricht lives in Moscow on the banks of a river named Pleisse.”² A year later, another change of course, the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, occurred as elegantly and as quickly as all those preceding it. The Soviet leadership’s absolute trust in Walter Ulbricht was expressed in its use of him during the German [military] attack in the summer of 1941. He was allowed to stay in Moscow to spread propaganda, at first against the invaders and later among prisoners of war. According to Moscow’s conception, the “National Committee for a Free Germany,” which was organized by Ulbricht exactly thirty years ago, was supposed to prepare a “truly German government” for the immediate postwar period.

In April 1945, he became the first to return from Moscow with his “Ulbricht Group,” and from that point on, he was considered the organizer of the Sovietization of the country east of the Elbe and, ultimately, of Germany’s division. But he was merely the instrument that, after many years of testing, had been judged best suited to both projects. According to Soviet opinion, any peace worthy of its name would have to initiate a restructuring process that would ensure the continued progress of the revolution. To that end, the so-called “old exploitative classes” would have to be stripped of all political and economic power, the “working class” – whatever that may be – would have to be forced to unite under Marxist-Leninist leadership, and the dictatorship of the proletariat would have to be established in the form of a people’s democracy. Ulbricht carried out this program within the time allotted.

In 1949, the Soviet Occupation Zone in Germany was on the path to socialist build-up and under the complete control of a Stalinist cadre party of a new type. The execrable means that Walter Ulbricht employed as its governor have dug themselves so deeply into the German consciousness that nothing needs to be said about them here. Now one could play state with this zone.

The more weight the German “workers’ and farmers’ state” amassed – especially after it was walled in on August 13, 1961 – the more visible the change in Ulbricht, its creator and organizer, became. To be sure, the seventy-year-old Ulbricht, like GDR head of state Wilhelm Pieck before him, was certainly prone to a father-of-the-people demeanor as an old man. And certainly there was a growing political tendency in the Western part of Germany – whether out of tiredness, convenience, or masochism – to view Ulbricht in a more favorable light. But in addition to these sorts of factors, an objective change had taken hold of him. His views hadn’t changed but their point of reference had. For the GDR state, which he felt he had created (even though his power had only been borrowed), had become more important to him than the Soviet “fatherland of the workers.”

² The Pleisse is a river that runs through Leipzig – eds.

Change in Priorities

In the end, Ulbricht knew that a state is more than just an instrument to bring about socialist restructuring in the hands of a party determined to do it. He sensed that a state has a quality and dignity of its own, and that it demands its own loyalty. No one knows how cognizant he was of this realization during the last decade of his life, but it became increasingly clear that he acted in accordance with it. In his last major speech to the Central Committee, shortly before he was deposed, he hardly even mentioned the party and its so-called “leading role.” He spoke only of the “system” and its development. No wonder the director of the Karl Marx Party College threw her arms around the new party chief [Erich Honecker], who took it all back, on his first visit.

For Ulbricht, the chairman of the Council of State, the German Democratic Republic had become his primary task, not serving the international Communist movement and its center in Moscow. Because this shift in priorities could not be tolerated – not because he was too old – he had to relinquish his power suddenly, overnight, shortly before a party congress. His successors treated him with disdain for another two years until he died. When the first GDR president died, his birth city of Guben received the sobriquet Wilhelm-Pieck-City. Leipzig will be spared a renaming.

Source: Ernst-Otto Maetzke, “Ein Staat läutert seinen Organisator” [“A State Purges Its Organizer”], *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 2, 1973.

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