

Stemming the Tide: East Germany's Struggle to Retain its Citizens throughout the Ulbricht Regime

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Stemming the Tide: East Germany's Struggle to Retain its Citizens throughout the Ulbricht Regime deals with the mass exodus from East Germany to West Germany after the end of WWII and the subsequent occupation of the area by Soviet forces, as well as the following decades under the administration of Walter Ulbricht. The paper discusses key factors that led to the extensive unhappiness of the citizens of the East and their desire to flee to the West. Of equal importance is the state's response methods to said migration. These responses, led by Walter Ulbricht, more often served as further motivation to leave, rather than as a means of migration deterrence. The conclusion of the research indicates that although the Soviet mandated policies brought about some consternation early on, the majority of the unrest in the population was the result of the leadership of Walter Ulbricht, the head of the governing Communist party of East Germany.

Introduction

After the fall of the Third Reich in 1945, and the resulting division of Germany, the German people would embark on two vastly different paths. West Germany, under the influence of the international patron of capitalism, the United States, would blossom into a consumer paradise over the course of the Cold War. East Germany, on the other hand, would aggressively pursue what would come to be known as "the utopian experiment" under the guiding Socialist principles of the USSR. For the 2,178,617 East Germans who fled west over the course of 1952 to 1961,¹ this experiment was far from utopian. This brings the question: What caused these citizens to abandon their lives in East Germany in favor of an opposing yet equally foreign occupier and ideology in the West? This paper provides a two part explanation of the population crisis experienced in East Germany during this period. Firstly, the Soviet policies enacted during the time of initial occupation to formation of the German Democratic Republic instigated said population loss. Secondly, Walter Ulbricht's Stalinist policies concerning economy and population loss over the course of his regime further perpetuated this population crisis. This continuation of policies, which often directly or indirectly lowered the morale of the population, can be seen as the result of Ulbricht's desire to champion the concept of Stalinist Communism in the face of Nikita Khrushchev's "New Course" mentality being impressed on the Communist world. This New Course emphasized distancing the idea of Communism from what it had existed as under Stalin by promoting "stop forced collectivization, support small private enterprises... guarantee civil rights, treat intelligentsia and churchgoers respectfully and strengthen the role of the other political

¹ Edith Sheffer, *Burned Bridge: How East and West Germans Made the Iron Curtain* (New York: Oxford UP, 2011), 142.

parties and mass organizations vis-à-vis the SED."² Ulbricht, however, maintained a fervor for the methods of population management learned from Stalin and continued to act in a manner contrary to the New Course, much to the dismay of his population. By not adapting Communism into a more progressive ideology, Ulbricht exacerbated the population loss experienced by the GDR, until the construction of the Berlin Wall.

Soviet Occupation of the Eastern Zone

Joseph Stalin, Harry Truman, and Clement Attlee met in Potsdam, Germany in July of 1945 to discuss the fate of the territory and German people left in the wake of the defeat of the Third Reich. The resulting conclusion of the meeting was that Germany would be divided into separate zones of control, just as President Roosevelt proposed in 1943, at the Conference of Tehran.³ This division, while initially between four powers, could truly be surmised as a division between East and West, a division between Communism and Capitalism, and a division which would set the stage for Germany to become the showcase for the two competing ideologies at the time. Allied Western powers funneled money into a war-torn western Germany to create a showcase for the opulence that Capitalism could provide. The Soviet Union was also steadily sending material and financial aid to East Germany in order to foster and support the "Utopian Experiment" of a Socialist East Germany. As these two patrons, the United States and the Soviet Union, shaped and molded their respective developing governments in Germany to reflect the ideologies which they held to be correct, their paths diverged further and further in terms of social engineering. Were the early exoduses from East Germany the result of many Germans' inclination to Capitalism over Communism?

Beginning with the occupation of East Germany by Soviet troops directly after the end of the war, the Germans residing east of what would come to be coined the Iron Curtain were subject to rape, theft, property destruction, forced relocation, and an intense denazification purge by the Soviet troops and authorities.⁴ These hardships would be just the tip of the iceberg for many of the Germans who would stay over the course of the next half century. Beyond this, East Germans would be subject to a radical transformation of kinship structures, living under the all seeing eye of the infamous Stasi, restrictions on travel, insufficient consumer goods and options of consumer goods, limited avenues of public expression, immense tensions, and even persecution of Germans by East bloc powers. This was in addition to the many other nuances of living within a centrally planned economy with an authoritarian government structure. Analyzing the policies enacted pre-GDR by the USSR officials presiding over the newly occupied East Germany in relation to their

² Hope Millard Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall: Soviet-East German Relations, 1953-1961* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2003), 29.

"Avalon Project - A Decade of American Foreign Policy 1941-1949 - Proceedings of The Tehran Conference," June 22, 2008, accessed April 26, 2015.

⁴ Norman M. Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945-1949* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 87.

direct and indirect hindering of the functioning of the soon to be established GDR is the aim of the following section.

The amount of hatred toward Germans that Eastern bloc states had accumulated over the course of Hitler's Nazi regime existed for obvious reasons in nations such as Poland, but it also existed in Germany's "allies" to the east, such as Czechoslovakia. This desire for some sort of revenge on Germans held in these states was most explicitly expressed during the period of deportations of Germans from what had recently become West Poland, known as Silesia. Not only were citizens harassed to leave the area, but there was also great neglect of the wellbeing of the Germans being deported. "Rail transports in the winter of 1945-1946 had to be suspended when freight cars arrived at their destinations full of corpses, Germans who had died in the cold."⁵ This is only one example of the overall sentiment expressed towards Germans at the time in these areas. As Vlado Klementis, a Czech official, stated, "Until the issue (German deportation) is dealt with, none of the other important social, economic, and institutional problems could be addressed."⁶ For many Germans the idea of deportation from their ancestral homes, or the possibility of being committed to a Polish or Czech labor camp, was too much to bear, and thus they committed suicide.

This desire for retribution was not only held by the citizens of previously occupied nations but also shared by the Soviets who had suffered millions of casualties at the hands of the German armies. This was likely the driving force behind the initial brutal treatment of the East Germans by Soviet troops. This aggressive mentality would eventually be replaced by a camaraderie held together through the ideology of Communism; however, in the early years of occupation, these actions left a lasting first impression of Communism as a scourge to be avoided. It is also important to note the lack of this brutality in Western Germany upon initial occupation by US forces who had not suffered any domestic attacks by Germans in the war and thus had less incentive to conduct acts of cruelty. A manifestation of these relationships can be seen in the interaction between German females and the occupying soldiers. While the East zone suffered a great deal of forced sexual assault, the women in the Western zones were far more apt to consent to a relationship with an American soldier and thus "profitable dating" became the Western norm as opposed to the rampant rape in the Soviet Zone.⁷

Much of the pre-existing burden that was placed on East Germany economically was that of paying reparations. While the amount of reparations paid were mitigated in an attempt to prevent a repeat of the Treaty of Versailles reparations imposed on the Weimar Republic, which led to hyper-inflation and the rise of the Nazi party, the toll was still significant. East Germany's ability to pay off these reparations was further hampered by the fact that many of the factories that had been built in East Germany had been disassembled after the war as part of the demilitarization of Germany stated in section III.6 of the Potsdam Proceedings of July 1945,⁸ and then shipped to the

⁵ Norman M. Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001), 129.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁷ Sheffer, *Burned Bridge*, 26.

⁸ "Avalon Project - A Decade of American Foreign Policy 1941-1949," accessed April 18, 2015.

Soviet Union. Combined with Ulbricht's desire to mimic Stalin's focus on heavy industry, this called for the building of new factories in East Germany before production could resume at a rate comparable to West Germany.

Even once the gap in the worker productivity was bridged, West Germany still maintained an advantage in its amount of natural resources. Areas such as the Ruhr Valley region, which had been the primary producer of coal and steel supplies in Germany since the Weimar era, lay deep in the heart of West Germany. The initial division of Germany into Allied and Soviet zones left East Germany with an area which was comparable in terms of natural resources, known as the aforementioned Silesia. However, Stalin would fight to expand Poland's borders west, all the way to the Oder Neisse line, as an attempt to lessen the blow to the Polish people from his westward expansion of Russia into East Poland. Early talks on this expansion of Poland began in the conference in the Crimea; it would be confirmed in the proceedings of the meeting at Potsdam in section VII.B.⁹ While Stalin would not live to see the negative ramifications of this shift in borders for the GDR in its battle against West Germany throughout the remainder of the Cold War, the decision effectively further reduced the GDR's ability to produce at the same capacity as West Germany throughout the remainder of the century.

Formation of the GDR

In 1946, the merger of the SPD (Social Democratic Party) and the KPD (Communist Party of Germany) created the SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany.¹⁰) This new party was led by Walter Ulbricht, a devoted member of the KPD party throughout the Nazi German era who had spent much of his time in the Soviet Union and under the tutelage of Joseph Stalin.¹¹ Under his leadership, the GDR was managed entirely through Ulbricht's cult of personality, via the politburo of SED members. GDR officials operated in a place of disconnect from the population of East Germany since its inception; this disconnect between officials and the people manifested itself in the citizens who voted with their feet when presented with no political outlet to voice their unrest.

This population loss did, however, provide the opportunist Ulbricht with a perfect reason to request immense amounts of aid from the Soviet Union, as well as have much of the reparation payments to the USSR nullified. This request set the tone for the relationship between the USSR and the GDR for the remainder of the state's existence. Over the course of the next half century, the East German state would attempt to play economic catch-up with the West's "*Wirtschaftswunder*" (Economic Miracle), which was being stimulated by the Marshall Plan. Despite efforts by the Soviet Union, and later all of the Warsaw Pact nations, to keep the GDR at a place of comparable economic strength with West Germany, the inefficient, centrally planned economy (further burdened by constant disappearance of workers), combined with few natural resources to exploit, kept the GDR always a few steps behind its Western counterpart.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ David Childs, "In the Beginning" In *The GDR: Moscow's German Ally* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1983), 10.

¹¹ Frank Mario, *Walter Ulbricht: Eine Deutsche Biografie*. 1. Aufl. ed. Berlin: Siedler, 2001.

Key Players: Khrushchev and Ulbricht

The request for aid from Ulbricht to the USSR first had to be cleared by Nikita Khrushchev, the successor to Joseph Stalin and the new Leader of the Communist world. Ulbricht's and Khrushchev's personalities were near polar opposites, which only made matters more complicated between the two on their true point of contention: Khrushchev's "New Course" mentality versus Ulbricht's *Afbau des Sozialismus* (Construction of Socialism) approach.¹² The New Course proposed by Khrushchev was a radical break from the Stalinist style of Communism to which Ulbricht was devoted.

By openly criticizing Stalin in 1956, at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of The Soviet Union¹³ and attempting to ease relations with the West, Khrushchev was offering a radically different approach globally than Ulbricht was within the locus of Germany. Not only did this create conflict between Ulbricht and Khrushchev, but this was also the primary cause for the Sino-Soviet rift, as Khrushchev had offended Mao to an even greater extent than Ulbricht. The *Afbau* plan acted as Ulbricht's counter proposal to the New Course that had been introduced. Reminiscent of Stalin's collectivized farming programs, population movement, mass arrests, and focus on heavy industry, Ulbricht's primary goal was the consolidation of his own personal power within the GDR for the sake of perpetuating the ideology he believed was superior to Capitalism.

Khrushchev's New Course mentality was created with a global perspective of events in mind. Considering worldwide perceptions of Communism to be in a very delicate state, it attempted to put a more friendly face to Communism - a more modern form that was more capable of co-existence with the West. Khrushchev believed that Communism was truly superior to Capitalism and that, in time, people would see the progress in Communist states and begin to not only remain there but also to influence citizens in Capitalist states to migrate into Communist ones. In a letter of correspondence between Ulbricht and Khrushchev concerning ways in which to deal with the population crisis, Khrushchev stated "The best and most logical way to fight western influence is to try and win the minds of the people using culture and policies to create better living conditions."¹⁴

Continuing in defiance of the New Course, a scathing Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs report in 1953 that called for an end to mass arrests, and a generally less heavy handed approach to governing the GDR, Ulbricht increased the work quota 10% in factories without increasing pay on June 1. This was the final tipping point for many East Germans who began the famous 1953 riots in Berlin.¹⁵ Beginning with only the workers under the immediate impact of the rise in the work quota, it would quickly grow to crowds of thousands of East Germans who were growing

¹² Peter Davies, *Divided Loyalties: East German Writers and the Politics of German Division 1945-1953* (Leeds, UK:U of London School of Advanced Study, 2000), 94.

¹³Harrison, *Driving the Soviets Up the Wall*, 63.

¹⁴Harrison, *Driving the Soviets Up the Wall*, 21.

¹⁵ Christian f. Ostermann and Malcolm Byrne, *Uprising in East Germany 1953: The Cold War, the German Question, and the First Major Upheaval behind the Iron Curtain* (Budapest: Central European UP, 2001), 5.

more volatile by the minute and expressing aggression towards the state which had suppressed such expression for so long. Complaints also ranged from abolishing the newly instated quota to the ousting of Ulbricht from office, using expressions such as “*Der Spitzbart mus Weg*¹⁶” (“The goatee must go,” referring to Ulbricht). This event would frighten not only the GDR officials but also those in Moscow who feared that this type of behavior would spread to the other Communist nations, which it eventually would. This event also set the tone for the method in which the dissidents would be dispelled -- implementation of Soviet tanks and brutal force in the area served quickly to quell the uprising in 1953, and therefore would be utilized in Hungary in 1956.

Not only was Ulbricht in defiance of providing more favorable working conditions for the East German people, but this was also accompanied by his disregard for Khrushchev's request to transition some of the production capability of the GDR towards a light economy and consumer goods rather than focusing entirely on heavy industry and infrastructure. While Ulbricht never disobeyed a direct order from Khrushchev, he was open about his disagreement with the New Course. In 1955, Ulbricht made a public announcement denouncing the New Course as incorrect, stating, "I must warn people with these ideas (the New Course) that we never meant to and never will embark on this mistaken course."¹⁷

Although the methods of achieving the same goals differed greatly between the two leaders, they maintained one common interest -- the perpetuation of the GDR in eastern Germany. For Ulbricht, the motivations were obvious; if there was no GDR state (population and territory), then there was nothing to preside over and ensure his vision of Communism for Germany. Khrushchev had come to the conclusion that East Germany was to act as a domino for other states engaged in the process of converting to Communism. If the Communist system failed in East Germany, it would certainly bring about the fall of Communism throughout the world, and therefore, the GDR state had to be maintained at all costs.

In the early 1960s, the conflict between the GDR and USSR officials became more apparent in the communications between the two. Ulbricht cited the tremendous speed at which it was being out-produced by West Germany, along with his most often used piece of leverage to negotiate aid from the USSR, which he stated in a letter to Khrushchev: "If socialism does not win in the GDR, if Communism does not prove itself superior and vital here then we have not won. And this is also the reason that the GDR occupies first place in negotiations or in credits."¹⁸ Khrushchev's patience with the constant demand for resources by Ulbricht had worn thin as he replied, "By old habit you do everything through us. You should have learned how to walk on your own two feet, instead of leaning on us all of the time."¹⁹ Khrushchev would eventually give in to Ulbricht's demands for more financial aid. This was most likely done as an attempt to retain closer ties between the GDR and the USSR after Ulbricht's threat to align himself with Mao's emerging Communist China after the Sino-Soviet Rift. Mao and Khrushchev's relationship had already

¹⁶ Frank, *Walter Ulbricht: Eine Deutsche Biografie*, 13.

¹⁷Harrison, *Driving the Soviets Up the Wall*, 51.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 128.

deteriorated after the denouncing of Stalin's policies, many of which Mao proudly emulated. Ulbricht recognized this division between two major Communist powers as another chance to further extort funding from Khrushchev by hinting at the idea of changing patrons.

Population Loss as a Result of GDR Policy

Undoubtedly, the GDR was facing a daunting task upon its formation in 1949. There were reparations to be paid, and a population migration that threatened the GDR's existence. Despite these grave tribulations, Ulbricht's primary concern (when dealing with other political leaders or with the East German people) was always focused on securing the power of the GDR through the SED, with him at the head. This fixation with the perpetuation of power led Ulbricht to implement policies which placed immediate population control as the primary goal for the GDR, neglecting the bolstering of the light economy suggested by Khrushchev.

In an early attempt to decrease the amount of border crossers, Ulbricht took an uncontested Stalinist approach: deportation to the interior -- deportation of those coined "Unstable" border residents, further into Eastern Germany. One of the most famous of these deportation campaigns was "*Aktion Ungeziefer*" (Action Vermin),²⁰ where residents considered unstable within the *Sperrgebiet* (*Restricted Area, the 5km zone along the border*) were relocated, given only twenty-four hours after their notice to assemble their belongings for departure. As many began to take the previously considered, and now the only viable option, of fleeing to the West, Ulbricht decided that the amount of time between giving notice for deportation and departure of deportation should be further reduced to decrease the likelihood of the family fleeing. However, this had quite the opposite effect, inspiring many to flee before ever receiving a notice of eviction.

One out of five families who were given notice of their impending departure fled. In an attempt to lure back some of the citizens, the GDR offered amnesty to anyone who would turn himself in and return to the east. Ninety percent of those who fled would decline, with only thirty-four individuals returning, most of whom were arrested on the spot, therefore decreasing the likelihood of others returning.²¹ In order to effectively determine which residents of the border zone were unstable, the GDR needed to develop an organization capable of mass surveillance in the society. The answer to this was what would become a very refined tool of social control known as the Ministry of State Security. As this organization took on a more and more prominent role within East German society, it would be referred to simply as the Stasi.

Surveillance prompted dissent, and dissent surveillance, thus causing the apparatus to become self-perpetuating, with the Ministry of Security at its heart. Led by Erich Mielke under Ulbricht's regime, the Stasi would become one of the most infamous aspects of the GDR's legacy. It permeated every level of life and society, documenting every interaction, and, most importantly, seeking out those who had intentions of crossing the border into West Germany. The early period

²⁰Sheffer, *Burned Bridge*, 132.

²¹*Ibid.*, 102.

of the Stasi was not quite as grand as it would be under Honaker towards the latter years of the GDR; however, in this formative period, it began to insert itself into every crevice of life in East Germany.

The individuals who entered into the Stasi most likely did not all share the dream of a utopian society united under Communism, but rather they were seeking social mobility in one of the few ways allowed within a communist system: joining the cause. This social mobility brought along with it the ability to advance one's position in society through vehicles, travel passes, and more choices of consumer goods (mostly imported). This highly rewarding incentive structure took quite a good deal of time before people throughout East Germany decided to join, but nonetheless, over the course of Ulbricht's regime, the Stasi would establish a near omnipotent panopticon. John O. Koehler, director of communications under President Reagan's administration, emphasized the scale of Stasi operations in relation to what Germans had experienced under Hitler's Gestapo: "The Gestapo had 40,000 officials watching a country of 80 million, while the Stasi employed 102,000 to watch a country of 17 million. One might also add that the Gestapo lasted 12 years, whereas the Stasi terror lasted for four decades."²²

So all-encompassing was the Stasi that it grew to be the largest employer within East Germany by 1964, employing one out of every ten individuals.²³ The goal for the Stasi was to reduce the level of population loss experienced by the GDR, and it grew to being fairly effective at this. One in five border arrests would be the direct result of a tip to the authorities from either a Stasi agent or simply a Stasi informant. Informants were not solely willing participants, being materially encouraged to inform on their fellow citizens.

Another tool that could be considered an extension of Ulbricht's omniscience was that of the Free German Youth (FDJ). The FDJ involved children aged 14-24, and its sister institution, the Young Pioneers, provided a social sphere controlled by the GDR in which children 6-13 could operate.²⁴ Many Germans initially opposed the sight of their children back in kerchiefs after being exposed to a similar program for children under Hitler's Germany. However, as time passed, the enrollment in these institutions skyrocketed. In 1962, FDJ members totaled 50.3% of all youth, but in 1978, they totaled 69.9%. In 1985, nearly all youths between the ages of 14-18 were members.²⁵

These institutions were able to subject developing children to the views of the party almost constantly. This served a dual purpose for the officials within the GDR. Firstly, it provided them with a way to create a generation enculturated in the ideology of the GDR; secondly, and more practically, children within these institutions acted as spies on the members of their household (willingly or not). By mentioning aspects of their home life, children unwittingly informed on their parents, oftentimes leading to reduced social standing within the party, further investigated by

²² John O. Koehler, *Stasi: The Untold Story of the East German Secret Police* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999), 8.

²³ Sheffer, *Burned Bridge*, 158.

²⁴ John Borneman, *Belonging in the Two Berlins: Kin, State, Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), 162.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Stasi agents, and occasionally deportation. While this was not a system which many of the parents of these children favored, these programs held great opportunity for the children involved.

Within the GDR there were also radical changes to kinship structure, which most likely furthered discontent in the population initially. Along with granting children agency to pursue their interests with a greater degree of freedom from their parents, the most prominent shift was in that of the father/husband playing a critical financial role within the family. Thanks to the generous allotments for child rearing and single mothers in the GDR, many women were able to maintain families on their own without the need for a male figure in the house. Female freedom was furthered by the fact that women in the GDR were not only not restricted from working, but, on the contrary, they were encouraged to do so. This approach to women in the workforce took the opposite stance of the highly conservative Konrad Adenauer era of West Germany, where the ideal home structure was for the woman to maintain the home. This stance on women in the workforce was only one example of the morally conservative era of the West directly after its inception under Adenauer.²⁶ This promotion of gender equality in the workforce was primarily the reactionary result of the gaping hole left in the GDR workforce by population migration, and it further served to create tensions in a population already reeling from drastic changes to all aspects of their lives.

The most dramatic of Ulbricht's initiatives to prevent the flow of people across the border was to simply further militarize the border. While the most infamous example of the physical manifestation of the "Iron Curtain" would be the Berlin Wall,²⁷ one should consider the situation along the majority of the border between East and West Berlin. While the rest of the border was much less of an area for conflict, it was none the less distinguished by the barbed wire that ran along the demarcation line. Over the course of the Cold War, landmines, electric fences, and watchtowers would be added to the fortifications along the border on the Eastern side. This too would serve to not only demoralize the population further but also to provide Western media with physical symbols of the oppression of the GDR. Just as Khrushchev feared, this would not promote a positive image of what Communism could be to the developing nations at the time. Ulbricht however, caring little for global politics, saw the hermetic sealing of the border as the immediate answer to the population problem. Ulbricht would eventually bring the GDR to a position where the building of the wall was the only viable option if the great Socialist Experiment was to continue, and thus he attained the green light for "Operation Rose" (Construction of the Berlin Wall).²⁸

Conclusion

The GDR would not survive to see the beginning of the new millennium. The policies that were enacted by Ulbricht could be argued as necessary to maintain the state of the GDR, however, as evidence seems to show, Ulbricht acted to perpetuate his own immediate power at the cost of

²⁶ Charles Williams, *Adenauer the Father of the New Germany* (New York: J. Wiley, 2001), 528.

²⁷ Fred Taylor, *The Berlin Wall: 13 August 1961-9 November 1989* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 62.

²⁸ Borneman, *Belonging in the Two Berlins*, 148.

the longevity and international representation of East Germany. While it would be speculative to assume that the GDR would have prospered had it followed the suggested direction of Khrushchev early on, it is obvious that the methods chosen by Ulbricht that were contrary to this mentality were consistently and vastly unpopular with the citizens he presided over. In habitually undermining the requests of citizens and dismissing the warnings provided by the USSR officials such as Lavrenti Beria, Ulbricht confirmed and reinforced the negative associations that many East Germans had already made with Communism. Not only would Ulbricht's policies present the East German people with an unsavory idea of practical Communism through leadership by a politburo disconnected from the average citizen, but due to the fact that Germany was the world stage of ideologies, this negative image would also spread and further diminish the international perspective of the ideology throughout the duration of the Cold War.