

STALINISM AND SURVIVAL:
THE POLITICAL MOTIVES
OF WALTER ULBRICHT

by

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the memory of my uncle, Michael McClean.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my family: I am indebted to your generosity. Without you, none of this would have been possible. Your encouragement in pursuing education has brought to me a fulfillment in life that I could've never imagined. You have provided me with treasures that are beyond words. My sincerest love to you; may this work be a testament to your parenting.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	vii
ABSTRACT.....	viii
PREFACE.....	xi
CHAPTER	
I. THE DUBIOUS LEGACY OF ULBRICHT: LITERATURE REVIEW	1
II. THE PERILOUS LIFE OF A GERMAN COMMUNIST: BIOGRAPHY	8
III. A MAN SHROUDED IN RED SHADOWS: ANALYSIS.....	42
IV. BOTH SIDES OF THE ULBRICHT WALL: CONCLUSIONS.....	62
REFERENCES CONSULTED.....	75

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Description
CPSU	Communist Party Soviet Union
FDR	Federal Republic of Germany
GDR	German Democratic Republic
KPD	Communist Party of Germany
NES	New Economic System
NKVD	People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs
SD	Social Democrats
SED	Socialist Unity Party of Germany
Stasi	Ministry for State Security
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

ABSTRACT

Walter Ulbricht was a German-born Communist functionary whose modest beginnings as a carpenter in the Social Democratic Party (SDP) eventually culminated in his leadership of the post-WWII Socialist Unity Party (SED) of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Ulbricht officially joined the Weimar-era Communist Party of Germany (KPD) in 1920, quickly working his way into positions of leadership under the patronage of Ernst Thälmann, Chairman of the KPD. He was elected to the Central Committee of the KPD and went on to attend the International Lenin School of the Comintern in 1924, where he cemented his place as a loyal adherent of Stalin's ideology. From that time until the end of World War II, Ulbricht worked for the Comintern as a leading German Stalinist, giving him a certain level of authority within the KPD, as Soviet endorsement was considered the highest honor. Walter Ulbricht further garnered prestige during the time he served in the Spanish Civil War, where he worked clandestinely to eliminate Trotskyites opposing Stalin's control of the international communist movement. Ulbricht fled Nazi persecution in 1937 and spent his exile in the Soviet Union as a prominent agent provocateur; he was groomed by the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) to serve as a driving force for the post-war reconstruction of Germany under communist administration. He returned to his homeland in 1945 to begin his Soviet-issued mission: purging Social Democrats from positions of power and facilitating the creation of the merged Socialist Unity Party of Germany, built specifically with adherence to Stalinism as a cornerstone of the

organization. Following Stalin's death in 1953, Ulbricht maintained his authoritarian political beliefs despite the Soviet-led policy of destalinization. Walter Ulbricht would enshrine himself as the unquestioned leader of the SED and the GDR for over twenty years, through the begrudging non-interference of Nikita Khrushchev. Ulbricht held absolute authority over East Germany until his voluntary withdrawal from party leadership after a political coup in 1971 that was staged by his protégé Erich Honecker and officially endorsed by the adversarial new Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev.

This thesis seeks to investigate and deductively answer the following questions: Was Walter Ulbricht genuinely motivated in his politics by the fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism, or was he a power-driven individual who was driven more by personal opportunism? What strategies did Ulbricht use during the height of Stalin's reign to ensure his political survival and advancement? What about Ulbricht made him willingly participate in the more dastardly aspects of Stalinization in Germany? What factors allowed Ulbricht to be so successful in his domination of the German communist movement? How did Ulbricht emulate the example that Joseph Stalin had set for building and maintaining an authoritarian communist regime?

It is the conclusion of the author that Walter Ulbricht knowingly maneuvered from Democratic-Socialism, to Marxism-Leninism, to hardline Stalinism by cunningly entrenching himself in whatever political ideology he thought would progress his own career at the time. Ulbricht successfully emulated Stalinization in his creation of the SED and GDR, allowing him not only the title of First Secretary of the party, but also the

eventual prestige of being a national leader in control of his own territory. He did so by utilizing the Stalinist devices of inner-party paranoia, unquestioning loyalty to the hierarchical structure, and the elimination of political undesirables. A cutthroat ability to pursue personal gain, the submissive mentality of the German “Old Communists” to party authority, and substantial personal support from Joseph Stalin allowed Walter Ulbricht to succeed in his political career.

The models of analyses in this work include: (1) review of pertinent literature; (2) biographical overview of Ulbricht’s political career; (3) a biographical review of the individual’s life and political career, which the author feels is a necessary inclusion in order to fully comprehend the thesis subject; (4) the deductive findings of the author cumulating in the thesis argument body, brought about through guided interpretation of the subject and progressive understanding; (5) and finally the conclusion.

PREFACE

This work is the culmination of a long study of Walter Ulbricht and the German Democratic Republic. It began in a graduate studies course at Texas State University about the life of Joseph Stalin, directed by Dr. Theodore Hindson, who would later serve as my thesis committee chairman. I already had a long-time personal interest in communism and the Soviet Union, so this class was intellectually exciting to me. Near the end of the course, I asked Dr. Hindson to facilitate a directed research class the following semester so that I could continue my communism studies. During the planning meeting, he suggested that I might enjoy studying the Stalinist leaders of Eastern Europe. He recommended Walter Ulbricht and I agreed to focus my study on his regime.

I became fascinated with Ulbricht's biography. His colorful history was not only interesting, but engaging. Studying specific communist leaders became my passion and I continued my research on Ulbricht the following semester under the direction of Dr. Robert Gorman. I continued to piece together the life of Walter Ulbricht and appreciated the mystery of researching his career. His life was shrouded in mystery and every author seemed to have a different impression of his importance (or lack thereof!). My research became equivalent to historical detective work, gathering evidence and interpreting motives. I decided that my thesis would be a thorough investigation of Ulbricht, hoping to put on paper the questions and discrepancies that I had encountered in my research. I have loved every minute of writing this thesis and I hope that it leads to similar studies of other Stalinists.

CHAPTER I

The Dubious Legacy of Ulbricht: Literature Review

Literature on the subject of Walter Ulbricht and his leadership is readily available in the German language, but few books dedicated to him have been published in or translated into English. Some, like Ulbricht: A Political Biography by Carola Stern, are merely translations and not original scholarship in the English language. Other books have scopes beyond Ulbricht, but include him as a key figure or discussion point; one such example being Zbigniew Brzezinski's The Soviet Bloc: Unity and Conflict.

Citation work regarding this individual has to be gathered from works or journal articles that focus on someone else or a topic where he is considered of minor importance. In order to put the pieces together regarding Ulbricht in an academic sense such as this, there have been two major routes. The first is to learn German and read the original documents and works where he is most often discussed, especially in a scholarly context. The more accessible method to a native English speaker, at least in my case, has been to cull quotes and discussions of him from other books regarding the time period and biographies of other figures. Performing such a large search and treating information on him like a puzzle has allowed the author to see many different sides and discussions on the politics and personality of Walter Ulbricht. Learning about him is similar to the puzzle mentioned; many pieces fit together, but upon completion the viewers all see a different image. Ulbricht's many sides have led to diverging interpretations of him in current scholarship.

Walter Ulbricht's motives have not often been as thoroughly investigated in English as those of other communist leaders, such as Joseph Stalin or Nikita Khrushchev.

There is still an abundance of information able to be gathered and several schools of opinion that academia has regarding him. Three opinions are often formed about Ulbricht. Each can be defended and rebuked if taken in the proper context. Due to the secretive nature of Ulbricht and our inability to personally question him, certain assumptions and conclusions have been made that are open to interpretation. It should be emphasized that the author feels some of these conclusions bear more weight than others, but there are no definitive answers that we can draw with absolute certainty. With that disclaimer in mind, this review of literature on the subject of Walter Ulbricht will break these three schools of thought down into sections by the different conclusions and their supporting works.

The first school sees Walter Ulbricht as a true believer in communism, a person who genuinely believed in the cause and did what he could in order to advance socialism in Germany. Carola Stern's Ulbricht: A Political Biography takes this approach, at some points even romanticizing and defending the dictator. She even asserts a personal note in the preface to the book that is surprising to scholars of this time period: "Nor am I of the opinion that Ulbricht primarily is to blame for the fate of those German Communists who died during the Soviet purges of 1936-38" (Stern, vi). Stern also denies Ulbricht's role in a popular rumor that he was at least partially responsible for the death of Ernst Thalmann, the prior leader of the KPD. Despite the positive light this school tends to shine on Ulbricht's ideological methods, they do not completely disregard his negative qualities and ruthless political behavior. Albeit her implication of Ulbricht's negative side is weak at best, exemplified through this feeble statement, "in the case of those who knew Ulbricht, a hatred that is perhaps understandable." (ibid. vii). Outside of German texts,

Carola Stern largely stands alone in her beliefs that Ulbricht was ideologically-motivated; most English sources implicate him in other ways. They claim he either manipulated or ignored Marxism-Leninism

The second school of thought saw Ulbricht as a cowardly man who lacked political skill of any kind, merely stumbling along by being a leech upon Stalin; he was too ignorant to properly believe in communism and too weak to pursue his own source of power. He was a follower and did not have the ability to cement his own position as the head of Germany, leaving him to continuously beg for the protection of the Soviet Union. M.E Sarotte's work, Dealing with the Devil: East Germany, Détente, and Ostpolitik, 1969-1973, perhaps best articulates this attitude. Ulbricht is seen largely as an inconsequential figure during the Cold War, one who came and went from power without having significant impact and having never escaped Soviet domination. Sarotte describes Ulbricht in a less-than-flattering light following the June 1953 East German popular uprising: "Ulbricht failed to show decisive leadership during the crisis. After the revolt was crushed, however, any kind of dramatic change seemed inherently too risky, and Ulbricht was allowed to remain in his post." (Sarotte, 10). This paints the portrait of a man too ignorant or incapable to run his own party, much less a country. His leadership is extraordinarily lacking and the author is of the opinion that he is only kept there through the Soviet's need to protect their image to the West, doing so by not changing leadership following a crisis. Andrew Port recalls in his work, Conflict and Stability in the German Democratic Republic, that the "feisty Saxon" (Port, 97) Ulbricht was largely a source of public ridicule for his pettiness and his awkward mannerisms. Port recounts incidents of angry retirees verbally berating the General-Secretary over their pensions,

disgruntled workers referring to him as a “scoundrel and a swine” (ibid. 77), and an extremely egomaniacal forced increase in worker production quotas “just in time to celebrate Walter Ulbricht’s sixtieth birthday” (ibid. 71).

The third school disagrees in part with both of the previous ones. Its supporters saw Ulbricht as a man who was cunning and had a keen sense of opportunism, possessing organizational prowess and using cold calculations to achieve his objectives. These academics do not disagree as a whole about Ulbricht’s support for Marxism-Leninism, but view him more as an authoritative power-seeker, one who took on the Stalinist mantle of controlling and building one nation under his absolute rule. Such is the autocratic school of thinking on Ulbricht, viewing him as a man who took advantage of the unstable political situation he wandered into and excelled at making it work as a catalyst for his own selfish motives and aspirations. These authors focus on his ability to purge his own party of challengers and his country of oppositionists, securing his authority by suppressing rivals and frightening those that remained into obedience. Catherine Epstein, in her work, The Last Revolutionaries, described these party purges. She rejects the mantle of weakness often forced upon Ulbricht, instead claiming, “Although subject the whims of Stalin and his representatives in Germany, Ulbricht nonetheless enjoyed considerable political power.” (Epstein, 111). Ulbricht used this freedom to solidify his rule; Epstein claims, “By 1958, he had purged all of his opponents.” (Epstein, 158), including prominent Weimar-era communists like Karl Schirdewan, Fred Oelssner, Fritz Selbmann, and Franz Dahlem, who is noted as being a long-time rival. Ulbricht is depicted as a clever and vengeful man, one who remembers slights against him and knew how to eliminate, politically or otherwise, individuals who were on his hypothetical kill-

list.

Anne Applebaum's work, Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1944-1956, is another member of the school that sees Ulbricht as an amalgamation of communist convictions and power-seeking authoritarianism. On the note of his Marxist beliefs, Applebaum states that his understanding was very rudimentary, being centered on the base belief that "the ruling classes were bent on suppressing and keeping (truth) from the people" (Applebaum, 44). "Ulbricht was to stick to that very simple, very clear faith for the rest of his life" (ibid.), giving the figure a simplistic, but genuine, adherence to his chosen political philosophy. Applebaum similarly views Walter Ulbricht as an autocrat-minded politician who did everything he could to consolidate his own rule. She notes Ulbricht's infamous shrewdness, which would usually come at the expense of his communist ideology or basic humanity, "Ulbricht benefitted directly from the arrest of dozens of leading communists—men better educated and more experienced—since their disappearance facilitated his own rise to power." (ibid.) While he may have known about the truth behind Stalin's 1930s purges, Ulbricht was wise enough to keep his mouth shut; the mere fact that he was not one of the persecuted meant that if he survived long enough, he would be the sole remaining German that would inherit the Party. Applebaum tends toward the belief that Ulbricht was a stooge to the USSR, but she intelligently doesn't discount his authoritarian or his Marxist sides.

James McAdams' work East Germany and Détente: Building Authority After the Wall provides an excellent characterization of Walter Ulbricht, although it is delivered in the context of examining overarching themes rather than specific character focus. McAdams describes multiple sides of Ulbricht, which sometimes appear contradictory in

nature, giving a focused examination of why Ulbricht acted in varying ways at different periods of his life. The author mentions Ulbricht's interest in nationalistic aspirations, "assuredly more interested in consolidating his own state's authority" (McAdams, 21), but then goes on to describe his genuine loyalty to international socialism, "the Soviets could see that Ulbricht and his colleagues were loyal comrades, more enthusiastically socialist than most communists under Soviet tutelage" (McAdams, 14). McAdams is unique in that he does not ignore the shifting loyalties of Ulbricht, noting during the Sino-Soviet conflict that the SED leadership was not always completely dedicated to the USSR. Even though the opportunity was not seized by the East Germans, McAdams notices a kinship between the GDR and communist China: "the Chinese had been enthusiastic supporters of the GDR's national cause in the past; and in many respects, the issues that divided the Soviets and the People's Republic of China as the 1960s progressed...were matters that Beijing and East Berlin still held in common" (McAdams, 55). McAdams seems to notice that while Ulbricht never turned to the Chinese, like his Albanian counterpart Enver Hoxha had, the German may have found more ideological kinship in Beijing than in the destalinized Moscow. However, Ulbricht's loyalty to the Soviet Union was considerable, making that possibility beyond likelihood.

As we can see, Walter Ulbricht is a controversial figure, not only by deed, but interestingly by motive. Scholars have never come to any sort of agreement on the kind of politician that he was and what his primary intentions were during or after his rise to power in the 20th Century. If we look at the primary paths of interpretation, Ulbricht can be seen wearing many masks: the coward, the stooge, the plotter, the devil, and the imbecile. It is difficult to paint this man in only one way, because as a human being,

there were many dimensions to this man. Most likely, Ulbricht was an amalgamation of all these interpretations, exhibiting them all at some point or another. However, upon further investigation, this thesis will seek to put these pieces of the puzzle together to describe a man who is more multi-dimensional than many have given him credit for. Ulbricht cannot be confined to single personality traits, as has been the generalized method encountered in academia. As such, the author hopes to illustrate that the three schools are accurate in some way as to their interpretation of Walter Ulbricht, but we must not discount his complexity as a historical figure.

CHAPTER II

The Perilous Life of a German Communist: Biography

Walter Ulbricht was born on June 30th, 1893, in the city of Leipzig. At the time, Leipzig was part of the Kingdom of Saxony, a subsidiary entity of the greater German Empire. The city was a bastion of the German labor movement, unsurprisingly making it home to many industrial workers who identified with the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Ulbricht's mother and father were both active in the SPD, passing on their political sentiments to their children. Young Walter attended primary school like many German children, as the Prussian educational system founded by Alexander von Humboldt had given even the children of industrial workers access to education. Unfortunately, "Walter Ulbricht was probably the most unpromising (future Stalinist leader) as a young man. The son of a poor tailor, Ulbricht left school early and became a cabinetmaker" (Applebaum, 44). Ulbricht would choose to take on an apprenticeship with a carpenter as a joiner, one who cuts wood to fit without the use of nails. In his teenage years, he began the usual routine of taking on journeyman's status, traveling as far as Austria to train in his craft. East German official state biographers would later romanticize this episode in Ulbricht's life, falsely claiming that it was during these travels that Walter had his "revelation" about the virtues of Marxism.

Upon return to Leipzig, Ulbricht worked as a carpenter. He turned eighteen and chose to register with the political party of his elders, the SPD, in 1912. He worked intermittently for the party doing basic political labor: selling books, handing out leaflets, hanging posters, and organizing rallies. However, when the Great War broke out, Ulbricht was one of the many German men drafted for military service in the national

army, the Wehrmacht. Scholar Mario Frank notes that from 1915-1917 Ulbricht served in the Balkans and Galicia, Ukraine, likely on the frontlines against the Tsarist Russian forces and allied Serbian states. During this time period Ulbricht would have his first true awakening to the struggle of the commoners. In 1918 he deserted his military post; Anne Applebaum notes “he loathed the military” (Applebaum, 44). However, Ulbricht would experience the first of many lifelong setbacks when he was captured by the German military and imprisoned for desertion, being freed only after the abortive German Revolution of 1918. Following his release, Ulbricht would witness firsthand the schism between the SPD and the more radical Marxist branch of the party. When the Marxists split off and founded the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) in 1918, Ulbricht remained in the SPD, but had been radicalized by his experiences in the military. Although official state biographies state that Ulbricht was an integral part of the KPD’s formation, Catherine Epstein contends that Ulbricht, despite even his own statements, had joined the KPD in 1919. She states that this was likely an intentional fabrication, “legend of an early KPD membership was circulated to lend additional revolutionary legitimacy to Ulbricht’s biography” (Epstein, 20). Despite his hesitancy to split from the SPD, Ulbricht for certain joined the KPD before 1920, although the specific date is contentious. Carola Stern, the East German defector who wrote about Ulbricht under a pseudonym, may have more insight or simply be fooled when she states that “a new chapter in Ulbricht’s life began” (Stern, 14) as soon as World War I was over, speaking of course of him joining the KPD.

Regardless of the date, Ulbricht quickly distinguished himself as an outstanding organizer within the KPD ranks. A labor uprising supported by the communists broke

out in Ulbricht's hometown of Leipzig in 1920, wherein "Ulbricht commanded a 'fighting sector' at a barricade in the eastern part of the city" (Stern, 24). Claims of Ulbricht's participation are once again dubious at best in this early instance of his career, although most do concur that he had some role in the uprising, albeit more likely not one as heroic as being a squad commander of the revolutionaries. The German authorities ultimately quelled the uprising, but this failure did not stop Ulbricht or the KPD from continuing with party work. It was around this time that Ulbricht would be married for the first time, in 1920, and had his first child in 1921. But as was the case for many communist functionaries of the day, Ulbricht was often separated from his family to do the Party's labor. Epstein notes, "within a few years, Ulbricht had no contact with his wife and daughter" (Epstein, 32), abandoning them in favor of his revolutionary family instead.

In 1921 Ulbricht would receive his first honorific from the KPD, being selected as one of their Party delegates to the Fourth World Congress of the Comintern, a gathering of the world Marxist organizations that was considered a major event. Ulbricht being selected only two years after joining the party seems to speak highly to how his work was seen by his superiors, so likely he was in their good graces to receive such a privilege. During his trip to the Congress, which moved between Petrograd and Moscow, Ulbricht received the biggest honor of all, "for the first and last time, Ulbricht met Lenin" (Epstein, 22). Having personal contact, no matter how insignificant, with the idol of Bolshevism was a significant moment for any Marxist. For Ulbricht, it served as a way to cement his communist credentials and would be used as a talking point from which to promote his own revolutionary standing.

Due to his prior service in the Wehrmacht, even if it had been cowardly, Ulbricht was selected by the KPD to serve as a member of the new Military Council of the party, whose job it was to prepare for insurrection under the guidance of Soviet officers. It is likely during this work that Ulbricht first established his rapport with the Russian communists, a mutually beneficial relationship that would serve him well into his later life. In 1924, a Russian Comintern agent named Manuilsky was sent to visit the KPD. Stern notes, "His job was to straighten out the German Communist Party... (he) had also been instructed to look around for suitable Party officials... to become obedient tools of Moscow. In Berlin, he soon met Walter Ulbricht." (Stern, 29). Ulbricht would once again find himself on the receiving end of Soviet generosity and honors, because as a result of the scouting by Manuilsky, Ulbricht was invited to attend the International Lenin School of the Comintern in 1924. It was during his tenure there that he first learned the Russian language and was given advanced instruction in his revolutionary specialty, party organization. It is suspected that while attending the Lenin School, Ulbricht made his first contacts with the Soviet secret police apparatus of the time, although this obviously cannot be confirmed or denied.

When Ulbricht returned to the KPD he was a new man, having been emboldened by his experiences in the motherland of bolshevism. He took leadership roles in the party and began moving out of his organizational role into a capacity as a politician. Ulbricht was especially vocal "in the debate raging in the KPD... about whether or not to emulate the Soviet Bolshevik methods, Ulbricht argued strongly for bolshevization." (Harrison, 14). This will be the first, but certainly not the last, instance of Ulbricht siding with the Soviet-leaning side of his party over the more Germanic bloc. Ulbricht had not only

learned the ideology of the revolutionary motherland while at the Lenin School, but also its language. He had taken courses and achieved fluency in Russian during his trip, helping overcome a language barrier that his KPD comrades had not. Due to his competency in Russian, not only were his credentials as a true Marxist elevated, so too was his career boosted when he was selected for direct party talks with the CPSU due to his fluency. Ulbricht became the Soviets' man in the KPD, able to accurately communicate with them in their mother tongue while espousing their brand of Marxism-Leninism. In 1926, Ulbricht was elected to the Saxony regional parliament, and in 1928 he would win a seat in the parliamentary body of the Reichstag, representing South Westphalia.

Coinciding with Ulbricht's entry to political prestige would be another dubious political revolution, the rise of the National Socialist Party of Germany, better known as the Nazis. The KPD's Marxist ideals obviously clashed ideologically with the Nazis, who were strongly nationalistic and had already set forth efforts to crush communist cells in their controlled areas. Violent confrontations between KPD labor demonstrators and Nazi-affiliated police officers had been growing more frequent; the obviously embattled communists turned once again to illegal activities in order to supply and arm their street militias against the National Socialists. Ulbricht, in his capacity as a member of the Reichstag, would hold the party line by spiting fiery rhetoric against the National Socialists. Despite his position as a politician, he also returned to his revolutionary roots and participated in violent plots aimed in retaliation against Nazi police who had killed protestors at KPD rallies. This would be an interesting character turn for Ulbricht, who in the past had been notable for mostly avoiding violent confrontations. It can perhaps be

assumed that his experiences in the USSR, possibly with the NKVD, had given him a certain skillset that allowed him to work effectively in insurgent operations. Amongst the KPD-Nazi violence that was tearing some labor towns apart, there would be one odd occurrence that brought the two parties together, although it was incredibly short lived. In 1932, the Comintern took the unusual position of ordering the KPD to cooperate with the Nazis in an operation aimed at the Social Democrats in certain industrial divisions. The Nazis agreed to this cooperative endeavor, which hoped to push SD members out of the leadership positions within these targeted factories. Ulbricht was one of the KPD officers involved in this effort, “At one point during this particular campaign, Nazi propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels even shared a speaker’s platform with KPD agitator Walter Ulbricht” (Koehler, 39-40), in the hopes of a united front being able to demolish the SD-bourgeois parliament. There even exists a photograph of Ulbricht speaking at this event, in which you can see the back of Goebbels at the presiding dais table. Together in November 1932, they planned a transport workers’ strike in the capitol of Berlin. However, unsurprisingly, the strike would come to a quick end as the Nazis and KPD were unable to suppress their deep hatred for one another, leading the demonstrators to turn against themselves, dissolving the strike and the hesitant alliance (Die Zeit, 1969).

During the National Socialists’ rise to power, the KPD suffered numerous setbacks at the hands of the pro-Nazi elements. Adolf Hitler, leader of the National Socialists, had been democratically elected to the position of Chancellor in January 1933, leading to increased pressure on the KPD from the national government. Matters went from bad to worse following the 1933 arson of the German Reichstag building, allegedly carried out by a Dutch communist named Marinus van der Lubbe. Due to van der

Lubbe's political connections, Hitler implicated the KPD in the fire, allowing him to ask "President Hindenburg for emergency powers to contain the threat of communist revolution, for which the burning of the Reichstag was supposed to be the signal" (Overy, 186). Following the granting of emergency powers to Hitler, the Marxist elements of the nation were the first ones targeted by the Nazis' security apparatus. The KPD's existence was immediately made illegal in Germany and its politicians were expelled from their political seats; average communists were arrested and either interned in concentration camps or actual prison complexes. Richard Overy states the extent of this anti-KPD push in Germany, "On the day following the Reichstag fire an estimated 1,500 communists were rounded up in Berlin, 10,000 throughout Germany. The exiled communist party announced in 1935 that 393 party members had been murdered since January 1933" (Overy, 204). Some were able to flee to the West, where they continued to organize resistance with the help of affiliated parties. A sizable portion, including Walter Ulbricht, went into exile in the Soviet Union, where they worked actively with the Comintern and the Soviet military to actively oppose Nazi rule. One major defeat for the fragmented KPD was the arrest of the party's leader, Ernst Thalmann. Thalmann was arrested in Germany quickly after the Nazis gained government authority, interning the long-time leader of the Marxists and effectively taking Stalin's main actor in the state out of the picture. Walter Ulbricht would be one of the KPD leaders who would move to fill in the vacuum left by Thalmann's arrest, and later execution.

Ulbricht would originally flee to the Soviet Union, but was dispatched by the Comintern as a functionary in the Spanish Civil War in 1936, followed by a brief stint in Prague and Paris in 1937. This particular time period is particularly controversial for

Ulbricht. It is believed that during the Spanish Civil War “Ulbricht was among the highest functionaries of the NKVD in Europe” (Dall, 18). The Stalinist purges in the USSR extended to the Spanish International Brigades, seeing NKVD and Comintern informers and executioners targeting Trotskyite soldiers within their own allied lines. Ulbricht’s role in Spain, and even the extent of his stay, is unclear. There were reports that “a German division of the secret police (GPU) was organized under Walter Ulbricht...responsible for the imprisonment and torture of many German dissidents” (Krammer, 74). Some claim that Ulbricht was actively involved in the torture and imprisonment of alleged Trotskyites, but others believe that he only stayed there for a few months, perhaps in an information-seeking capacity. Catherine Epstein believed that Ulbricht was more of a short-term informant for the Soviets; “on a visit to Spain in late 1936 and early 1937, Ulbricht alerted Soviet officials about those communists who had, for whatever reason, fallen under suspicion (of being Trotskyites)” (Epstein, 63-64).

Some scholars believe that Ulbricht resorted to treachery in order to eliminate potential rivals during this time period, even perhaps having been personally involved in Ernst Thalmann’s arrest. Carola Stern asserts that despite his unsavory character, Ulbricht did not play a role in having other German communists purged by the NKVD. However, Mario Frank, a German biographer of Ulbricht, states that Ulbricht was at least known to have had one KPD member, Kippenberger, purged by the Soviets (Frank, 117-121). During the NKVD war-time purges of German communists, who were alleged to have ties back to Germany’s Nazi government, Ulbricht lived in the renown Hotel Lux, a hub for exiled European communists in the Soviet Union. Ulbricht resided there on and off from 1937-1945, surrounded by old party comrades who would often disappear

without warning, likely victims of Stalin's elimination policy. During the early part of the war, the KPD members did what they could to undermine the Nazi government from their position of exile, "Away from the bitter reality of political life in Germany, they urged all German workers to refuse to pay taxes, rent, gas and electricity bills and to mount nationwide marches, strikes and demonstrations" (Overy, 330). Likely, this was all political theatrics, as even the most delusional communists must have realized that asking this of the German people would have been tantamount to suicide. Germany under the total control of the Nazi Party, whose secret police, the Gestapo, would have immediately imprisoned or even executed anyone who heeded the KPD's calls to civil disobedience.

Part of Ulbricht's duties to the Soviet Union during World War II was to engage in "propaganda efforts to 'reeducate' German prisoners of war who had been captured by Soviet forces" (Epstein, 71). These duties had Ulbricht visit "prisoner-of-war camps. There, in an effort to win over Wehrmacht officers and soldiers, he held political discussions and set up antifascist courses" (Epstein, 83). Unfortunately for Ulbricht, his droning tone and lack of speaking skills weren't as effective in converting German soldiers as was the complimentary promise of better camp conditions and improved food rations. They often mocked Ulbricht for his boring discussions, preferring to cooperate in the interest of their own personal comfort. Later, along with German ideologue Fred Oelssner, Ulbricht and Wilhelm Pieck "coordinated exiled party members' wartime work...Ulbricht, for example, personally oversaw the German-language programs of Moscow Radio" (ibid.). It was the intention of Ulbricht and his comrades to use "tactical cunning, ideological persuasion, and outright coercion to establish a communist

dictatorship among an unwilling German people” (Epstein, 85), so their wartime duties were aimed at honing these skills. Ulbricht had essentially outright failed at ideological persuasion, but tactical cunning and coercion were more his defining qualities; methods he would perfect before his return to the fatherland.

When the tide of the war was turning, Ulbricht began to take a more frontline role, following the Soviet lines as they pursued the retreating Wehrmacht. One of the more exciting anecdotes from this stint on the front happened during the Battle of Stalingrad, when “Ulbricht and fellow comrades also drove trucks equipped with loudspeakers to the front and barked propaganda at the nearby German troops.” (Epstein, 83-84). Catherine Epstein notes that, “This was dangerous work—Ulbricht and the others were within shooting range of the encircled Wehrmacht” (ibid.). It was rumored that while witnessing these foolish heroics, Lavrentiy Beria stated of Ulbricht that he was “the greatest idiot that he had ever seen” (Frank, 241). Luckily for the KPD members, the surviving ones were in Stalin’s good graces and had been hand-selected to rebuild Germany after the fall of the Nazi government. Stalin had every intention of setting these individuals up for direct power. Through Comintern and NKVD channels, he would organize and train Ulbricht and others for their power-play, organizing them into small revolutionary cells that would infiltrate Soviet-occupied Germany in order to reform the government, suppress adversarial elements, and pack government offices with those who would help advance socialism. Walter Ulbricht would be one of the leaders of this clandestine movement, heading up his titular Ulbricht Group, which was assigned directly to Berlin. Cells like these were to be made up of KPD members and anti-fascist prisoners of war. A leadership position in the capital, backed by the might of the Soviet

military, foretold Ulbricht's success and spoke strongly to Stalin's trust in his organizational capabilities. In April 1945, after some intensive months of preparation and training, the Ulbricht Group moved into Germany to begin their plans at reconstructing the post-war nation.

The post-war cells were the brainchildren of KPD leader Wilhelm Pieck and the assistant division leader of the International Information Division of the CPSU Central Committee, Georgi Dimitrov. Their mission was to help root out Nazi war criminals and to support the Soviet Military Administration's efforts in Germany. The KPD cells were also to calm residents and assure them that the Red Army presence was in their best interest, contrary to the rape and looting that many German civilians were experiencing during the power vacuum. Anne Applebaum notes that even the KPD was unwilling to accept that the Red Army were committing atrocities, instead following their usual line of unquestioned support of the Soviets "During the early period of the Soviet occupation of Germany, Ulbricht would not tolerate any discussion of Red Army rape and looting" (Applebaum, 45). Along with their job of stabilizing the population of Berlin, the Ulbricht Group was primarily in charge of building the foundations for a KPD-lead government and recruiting friendly bureaucrats that would assist in the mission. Ulbricht concocted a plan where he would nominate Social Democrats and other party members to leadership positions, all the while understanding that the true power of government came from putting KPD members in lower-echelon, but more controlling, jobs; "The Ulbricht Group, for example, named bourgeois or social democratic activists as mayors of Berlin's various precincts, but placed veteran communists in jobs that involved personnel, police, and education" (Epstein, 103). Potential administrators and city councilors had to be

approved by the Soviet Military Administration, but they were often accepted upon Ulbricht's recommendation, as his plan was standardized throughout Germany. Mark Allinson further examines their role, "With the support of the Red Army, the Ulbricht Group sought out competent administrators and technicians to staff the city government and re-establish essential services. Ulbricht was careful to avoid the inevitably unpopular appearance of a communist take-over" (Allinson, 13).

The KPD and Soviets understood that Germany was not a bastion of communism, so in order to pacify the public they would have to make it appear that more popular parties were retaining some sort of control, "Since the Communists were determined to mask their 'leading role' in this democratic-looking set-up, they devised a 'deputy system'." (Stern, 106). As the deputy system was implemented and proved effective in the post-war environment of the SBZ, Ulbricht began to look ahead at the potential socialist state that his work was building toward. He knew that democracy would be a necessary tool to win over the German public, but he had achieved the means to make it work in his ideology's favor. Democracy had been manipulated to keep the KPD in the true positions of power, "As Ulbricht reportedly told another member of the group: 'It's quite clear—its got to look democratic but we must have everything in our control'." (Epstein, 103). Part of this pseudo-democracy included the creation of cross-party united fronts, which were essentially political councils that represented the major parties in post-war Germany. Social Democrats, Communists, farmer's coalitions, and Christian Democrats were all part of this measure; the Soviets saw the process as necessary in order to eventually stifle the non-communist parties and convince the native population that democratic procedures were being adhered to. Andrei Lankov notes in his book, "all

parties found themselves under the strict control of the Communist leadership and in fact, of the Soviet authorities. The founding of such a United Front was a standard political measure undertaken by the Communists and Soviet administration in virtually all countries in Eastern Europe” (Lankov, 29). The coalition of parties was a ruse manipulated by the Soviets and their localized supporters, a system that served a purpose early in the GDR’s formation, but quickly led to the KPD cadres steamrolling the other groups and eventually disbanding the united front after they determined the democratic procedure was no longer necessary.

Walter Ulbricht would quickly become the primary leader of the Soviet Zone after this dissolution of the guise of multi-party democracy, enjoying promotions endorsed by the Soviets. Although unpopular with his own German comrades, Ulbricht understood well that the post-war KPD’s reliance on the USSR made him invaluable, as he had become the Soviets’ go-to man in the area. Ulbricht would be instrumental in the creation of a new unity political party controlled by the communists, but aimed at enveloping SD voters through deception. The SD were essentially brow-beaten by the Soviets into merging with the KPD, creating what would be known as the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), understandably led by the communist elements, despite the majority of membership having been ex-SD. This was not an unusual process in Eastern Europe, “merger of left parties (normally Communists and Social-Democrats) was another routine measure undertaken by the Soviets in virtually all countries under their control” (Lankov, 30). Following the creation of the SED, Wilhelm Pieck assumed leadership, but it was understood that even this new party was part of the planned deputy system. Walter Ulbricht would be the second-in-command of the party, working at re-

organizing the SD and KPD elements into a streamlined organism that would be a minion of Stalin's will in Germany. With such valuable roles having been placed at his feet, "Walter Ulbricht, once a leading functionary of an ostracized party in Weimar Germany, now became the most powerful political figure in the SBZ and later, East Germany" (Epstein, 111).

When the German Democratic Republic declared its independence in 1949, recognized and bolstered by Soviet force, Ulbricht would continue to work on the administrative side of the nation and party. This involved building both aspects along the lines of Stalinism and socialism in one country. He focused on maintaining the East German party and state, as opposed to supporting active proletarian revolution outside its borders. Ulbricht was following Stalin's example, by building a base from which socialism could take root. Old party communists, used to their revolutionary activity, had to be brought to heel, "As Ulbricht repeatedly stated, veteran communists now had to abandon revolution for administration" (Epstein, 109). Ulbricht's place as Stalin's chosen German deputy gave him the authority to institute these party and membership changes, and soon enough there was not even a need for the deceitful deputy system. The deputy was the de-facto leader of the GDR, so it stood to reason that he would eventually become the de-jure head of government. Wilhelm Pieck understood that despite being superior in title to Ulbricht, that he was not the true holder of power in the party, "By 1950...Ulbricht became the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the SED. The deputy had now officially assumed power" (Stern, 112). An SED constitutional change allowed the party to incorporate both Ulbricht's and Pieck's positions into one office; Walter Ulbricht had won out over his old colleague. The SED and the GDR were now

both under the complete control of Ulbricht.

In the wake of this shakeup, Ulbricht would again emulate the Soviet model for consolidating power, by convincing his party that capitalist spies were attempting to sabotage the socialist system in the wake of the East-West divide. The German took after Stalin and his security head, Lavrentiy Beria, by manipulating “Cold War paranoias to initiate a wave of purges...Walter Ulbricht, in turn, exploited the spy mania to augment his power and authority” (Epstein, 130-131). In doing so, he found yet another way to solidify his own rule over the SED and GDR, blaming failures and setbacks on western interloping, rather than his own shortcomings. The remedy was found in party purges, as had been done in the USSR, wherein undesirable political rivals to Ulbricht and untrustworthy party members were stripped of influence and their jobs. The Soviets never trusted any former KPD members who had not been of the Muscovite contingency, so any who had fled to the West during the war, or even those who had been imprisoned by the Nazis, were not to be left in power. Ulbricht was one of their chosen few and had surrounded himself with other Muscovite comrades. A purge would take place to remove those who had not been part of this elite. Zbigniew Brzezinski notes of purges that, “The victor...had to make certain that the organization he now controlled was truly staffed with elements loyal to him. Thus an important aspect...has been elimination of those minor figures whose fate was sealed by the defeat of their protectors” (Brzezinski, 22). For the SED, this meant non-Muscovites, of whom even the most insignificant, would be taken out of the apparatus. By utilizing such a method, Ulbricht ensured that his position was safe, and that any of his lieutenants in the party were of similar mindedness regarding the dominance of Stalinism and bolshevism. Purges would be an oft recurring

theme in the Soviet sphere, “The show trials of the 1950s...combined with other trends to reduce the extent of at least visible support for...alternatives” (Fulbrook, 176).

All would continue according to Stalin and Ulbricht’s plans, until a major world event would plunge the GDR leadership into disarray and uncertainty as to its future. In March 1953, Ulbricht’s patron for almost thirty years, Joseph Stalin, died and left in his wake a power struggle for leadership of the USSR. The Soviet Union was in turmoil as to who would be the heir apparent of the dead dictator. Ulbricht was in dire straits, as he had been seen in an unfavorable light by most of Stalin’s lieutenants for quite a while; Stalin had been his only protector. The worst seemed likely for Ulbricht, as the most likely candidate to replace Stalin was Lavrentiy Beria, the NKVD chief who had in the past clashed with even other Soviets as to the viability of the SED and GDR.

Specifically, as was noted during the Stalingrad incident, Beria held no kind feelings for Ulbricht, believing him to be incompetent and unnecessary. Beria was publically hostile toward the German, seeing him as a fool incapable of decisive action without direction from his Soviet counterparts. Beria would go so far in his contempt for the entire German situation that he had, multiple times, pushed Stalin’s early idea for leaving Germany as a unified, but neutral, buffer nation between the West and the Soviet bloc. This went against the ideas of another prominent Stalin lieutenant, Vyacheslav Molotov, who had served as the foreign minister. “Lavrentii Beria and Vyacheslav Molotov had taken opposing position on the fate of the GDR...Beria maintained: ‘All we need is a peaceful Germany; whether it is socialist or not isn’t important to us’.” (Granville, 481).

Russia scholar Jonathan Haslam believes that Beria’s attitude toward Ulbricht in particular may have originally come from Stalin himself, who Haslam claimed saw the

German leader as “troublesome and headstrong” (Haslam, 141), an attitude that may have left a lasting impression upon other Soviets.

While Ulbricht was reduced to waiting for his fate at the hands of the likely Beria regime, other members of the SED lunged at the opportunity to exploit the coming storm. Individuals like Wilhelm Zaisser and Rudolf Herrnstadt took their chances and made overtures to Beria as possible replacements for Ulbricht. Ulbricht was in significant trouble, as these were no minor threats that were backing Beria; Zaisser was the Minister for State Security and Herrnstadt was a Politburo member, as well as the chief editor of the party daily newspaper *Neues Deutschland*. These two powerful SED leaders jockeyed for Beria’s endorsement, hoping that they would be the ones to replace Ulbricht following Beria’s victorious power grab. The two plotters were likely correct in their assessment of the state of German-Soviet relations; it was well known that Beria disliked Ulbricht personally and wanted him gone. They seized the initiative and began a public campaign of denunciations against Walter Ulbricht, “Zaisser and Herrnstadt had criticized Ulbricht’s dogmatism and leadership cult” (Fulbrook, 34). “Zaisser had condemned Ulbricht’s ‘cold-blooded administering’ that had ‘spoiled the party.’” (Granville, 481), showing that even the benefactors of this spoiling were willing to abandon their leader when opportunity showed itself for further promotion.

It’s believed that “By late October some members reportedly believed the leadership was not building socialism correctly, and expected the Central Committee to be replaced by a group around Wilhelm Zaisser and Rudolf Herrnstadt... Even various local party secretaries openly called for Ulbricht’s removal” (Allinson, 72). Ulbricht found himself in even worse shape when this period of political uncertainty would also

create the first major uprising against his regime by the general public. In June 1953, there would be a popular revolt in Berlin aimed at the SED leadership. It was so intense within the capital that the SED politicians were forced to flee to the German countryside until the local Soviet military detachment entered Berlin and put down the protestors by force. Even though the uprising had been short-lived, it was a major source of embarrassment for Ulbricht, who was now largely put at fault for the uprising. False rumors had begun spreading through East Germany that “Ulbricht, Grotewohl and President were dead or had fled the country” (Allinson, 55), giving the German public “revived memories of the end of the Third Reich...an unconscious comparison of the two regimes in the public mind” (ibid.). Other reactionary SED politicians even started claiming that Ulbricht’s Stalinist actions and pompous attitude had turned both the party and the people against him at a critical moment in the world.

Walter Ulbricht had been fortunate that the June rebellion was short lived and that he had even survived. Quelling the uprising had not been bloodless, though, “Ulbricht called in the Soviet occupation forces and T-34 tanks trapped the crowd in a main square. When stones were thrown by demonstrators on 17 June, the Volkspolizei retaliated with gunfire and at least 125 demonstrators were killed. (Service, 309-310). Despite the CPSU’s feeling that Ulbricht was incompetent and ineffective when handling the situation, they realized that in the wake of Stalin’s death and the uprising, it could be perceived as weakness if they replaced any SED leadership. It would either be regarded as capitulation to the West, who had lauded the revolt, or to the workers who staged it. In order to save face “In Moscow, there was renewed support for Ulbricht, whose situation was once again saved by the threat of popular unrest and the danger of destabilizing the

situation by any change in leadership” (Fulbrook, 35). The June uprising was indeed a double-edged sword in the Eastern Bloc, but somehow Ulbricht avoided both dangers that came about as a result of the disturbance in Berlin. Not only were the Soviets intent on keeping him in power in order to protect their illusion of control, but the revolt had also convinced CPSU leaders like Molotov, Nikita Khrushchev, and Nikolai Bulganin that Beria’s views on the German question were destructive. This group of Soviet leaders saw Beria as someone who held defeatist attitudes towards socialism in East Germany.

In response, they plotted to bring Beria’s power grab to an end, which took place during a Central Committee meeting of the CPSU. The group of conspirators began speaking publically against Beria’s character, denouncing him to the party, as was the standard method of removing someone from the party. Georgy Malenkov, Stalin’s hand-picked successor, attacked Beria as someone who was compromising the integrity of the GDR as a state, painting him as a “bourgeois regenerate” (CPSU CC Plenum, 1), harsh words indeed within the Soviet lexicon. Nikita Khrushchev would also seize the initiative to condemn Beria, by pointedly calling him “an instigator, an agent of the imperialists” (ibid.). Khrushchev also took the opportunity to defend Ulbricht from Beria’s ire, done more out of necessity than desire, stating “Beria screamed at Comrade Ulbricht and at the other German comrades so much that it was embarrassing to hear” (ibid.). He concluded, patronizingly, that the NKVD chief was negligible in Soviet politics, having only proved himself a liability to the party who he pettily called a “cheeky fellow” (CPSU CC Plenum, 1-2). Molotov finally spoke at great length about how Beria’s opinions regarding the GDR were “completely foreign to our party” (ibid.); the foreign minister drove the point home when he stated, “Beria did not hold Communist

positions...we are dealing with someone who has nothing in common with our Party, a person of the bourgeois camp, the enemy of the Soviet Union” (ibid.). Incredibly harsh accusations fell down upon Beria, who likely saw that the onslaught would come down to a showdown in the near future. Ulbricht sat by and watched as he was used as a rhetorical pawn in the plot, something he was likely content with, as Beria was no friend of his.

In the last days of June 1953, in an elaborately orchestrated plot, Beria was finally denounced by Molotov before the CPSU Presidium. Beria was accused of having western loyalties and was subsequently arrested in the Presidium hall by hidden military police who rushed the hall. World War II veteran General Georgy Zhukov had been in on the plot; his role was to place armor and infantry divisions near the Presidium to prevent Beria’s NKVD loyalists from stirring unrest following the apprehension of their leader. Following his formal denunciation by the Politburo and a short show trial, Beria’s long career of terror ended ironically. He was shot in the very basement where he had carried out Stalin’s purges and his predecessors, Yagoda and Yezhov, had shared a similar fate. Nikita Khrushchev would seize the initiative and began his unlikely rise to power ahead of Georgy Malenkov, in the process crushing the aspirations of Zaisser and Herrstadt in the GDR. Beria was dead, so the two plotters found themselves in a precarious position. Khrushchev was not a personal friend of Ulbricht’s, but he had used the German as a tool to his own rise, so now their fates were intertwined, despite how little the Soviet may have wanted this to be. The anti-Ulbricht faction realized that they had backed the wrong Stalin lieutenant, coming to the horrific realization that the fate of the GDR’s regime was guaranteed by Khrushchev’s rise. Ulbricht’s power was solidified

and protected by this surprising victory, so once again he went to work in purging disloyal party elements, namely Zaisser and Herrstadt. Revenge was the order of the day after the Soviet struggle ended, “Zaisser...Herrstadt...as well as three other members of the party leadership and several high state officials were expelled from the party for their opposition to Ulbricht” (Brzezinski), a relatively light sentence considering the opportunism they had exploited. Ulbricht had twice been on the winning side of fate in 1953. Although he faced a disagreeable relationship with his new Soviet patron, Khrushchev, he realized that he was still in a powerful position within his own party and state.

Another party member who would face elimination at the hands of the re-empowered Ulbricht would be the old party communist Franz Dahlem, long seen as a potential rival even in the Weimar days. Since 1949, Dahlem had found himself under suspicion of having promoted Zionist politics while he was the Paris Secretary of the KPD in 1939. During the 1953 purges, the SED Politburo began an investigation into Dahlem’s history likely at the behest of Ulbricht. The investigation was conducted by the Central Party Control Commission (ZPKK); they reported that Dahlem had likely acquiesced to Gestapo interrogation while interned in France during the war. They claimed Dahlem had stalled plans for a 1945 uprising in the Mauthausen concentration camp. Because of these accusations, he was found guilty by the Politburo of being hostile to the Soviet Union, due to his wartime attempts to protect the French Secretariat by voluntarily entering minimum-security internment so as to avoid imprisonment. This was seen as a crime because at the time the Soviets were allied with Nazi Germany, so siding with French requests was tantamount to betraying the USSR. As a result of yet

another successful purge of a rival, “Ulbricht was now able to strip Dahlem of his responsibility for SED personnel policy; two years later, he also took over Dahlem’s supervision of communist politics in West Germany (Epstein, 144). Ulbricht personally benefitted from these investigations and purges, as they were a good fear motivator for other potential threats and could be used to “explain GDR economic and other shortcomings by pointing to a vast conspiracy bent on undermining East German socialism” (Epstein, 154). Even potential threats to Ulbricht’s regime were targets, as shown from the fact that many lower-echelon party members fell alongside larger figures like Dahlem, Zaisser, and Herrnstadt. Walter Ulbricht was utilizing Stalin’s tactics to perfection, cleaning up his party and protecting himself, while giving the GDR the necessary scapegoats upon which to blame their shortcomings.

After Khrushchev solidified his power base in the USSR, the new leader made a bold and unpredicted move at the XX Party Congress of the CPSU in 1956. While Ulbricht was emulating Stalinism in the GDR for his own purposes, Khrushchev took large steps in eliminating the very actions that his German comrade was engaged in. At the Congress, Khrushchev made an impassioned speech formally denouncing the former regime of Joseph Stalin in a piece titled “On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences”, also popularly known as the Secret Speech. This speaking engagement marked a dramatic turn in Soviet policy, not only admitting the faults of the past, but also turning away from the authoritarianism of Stalin that had fully controlled the USSR for the last thirty years. As a result, the Khrushchev regime would engage in a policy of “destalinization” that would extend well into the Eastern Bloc. Ulbricht, as an unabashed Stalinist, would have to once again alter his methods in order to not draw the ire of the

Soviets. At first, Stalin's German deputy scoffed at Khrushchev's efforts, seeing them as an affront to the memory of Stalin and indicative of a petty attack on the system that the GDR had been built upon. However, Ulbricht was no fool when it came to Eastern Bloc politics, so despite his apprehension to formally denounce Stalinism, he was wise enough to not challenge the Soviets. The USSR and Khrushchev had just bailed him out of two dangerous situations in 1953, so Ulbricht was probably still haunted by the close calls he had witnessed.

Slyly, Ulbricht knew that he could still appease the Soviet reformer regime while maintaining his own brand of Stalinism within the GDR. He would play to Khrushchev's party line by giving it lip service, "In the months following the XX Party Congress, Ulbricht's disavowal of Stalinism in particular and personality cult in general proved somewhat lukewarm and effected in a rather mechanistic manner" (Fulbrook, 187-188). Pretending at destalinization would not stop Ulbricht from pushing one last purge of the SED, targeted mainly at Karl Schirdewan, a Politburo member. Schirdewan had "strongly opposed Ulbricht's stonewalling after Khrushchev's Secret Speech" (Granville, 478), which was likely a bold challenge that he hoped would be picked up positively by Khrushchev. Unfortunately for Schirdewan and his co-conspirator, the ideologue Fred Oelssner, the Soviets never came to their rescue or made more than light overtures to them. Ulbricht would target them both, along with the necessary underlings, as being proponents of attitudes disloyal to the SED. In the normal Stalinist methodology, they were both accused of party crime and given show trials before they were removed from the party and their leadership jobs. Ulbricht had easily crushed the latest conspiracy against his regime, finally reaching a point at which his party and state were free of old

KPD rivals. The German Stalinist now ruled both entities with complete authority, having protected himself from both the economic and political challenges of the 1950s. It was from this point that Ulbricht would rule as a unitary authoritarian, free from SED accountability and able to focus more on the building heat of the Cold War and solidifying his own rule at home.

From the mid 1950s until the early 1960s, Ulbricht began to focus on bolstering his own nation against western interlopers, as well as petitioning outside governments for international recognition. This was particularly emphasized after the Federal Republic of Germany was granted its full sovereignty by the Allied occupational forces in 1955, giving rise to the idea of their government in Bonn being the only *de jure* German regime. Other members of the communist bloc had been the only states to recognize the GDR as an independent nation; most other governments of the world saw Bonn as the legitimate government of a fractured nation. While East Berlin may have been the *de facto* rulers of the former Soviet occupied areas of Germany, they were not viewed as *de jure*. One of the particular sticking points to Ulbricht was the contested west side of Berlin, still under the control of France, Britain, and the United States, as per the post-WWII agreement with the Soviet Union. West Berlin was surrounded on all sides by East German territory, making it an island within communist territory. Ulbricht, sometimes against the wishes of the Soviets, had always hoped to unify not just Berlin, but all of Germany under socialist rule. This led to a lot of posturing on his part: “On March 30, 1954, Walter Ulbricht proclaimed that the European military missions in eastern Berlin would have to close; countries affected by this decision should establish proper embassies instead” (Gray, 22). This was an unlikely scenario and was mostly

Ulbricht trying to build prestige through threats. The military bases in West Berlin were a major guarantee of the city's freedom, so the allied nations would never allow their shuttering. Ulbricht also thought he could slyly try to blackmail the allies into military withdrawal. He wanted the establishment of embassies in the area, giving the GDR some semblance of diplomatic recognition in the SED's eyes. It should be noted that without Soviet support, the GDR had little hope of backing up these threats. What truly was holding back the GDR's efforts at international recognition during this time period was the so-called Hallstein Doctrine, the formal West German foreign policy dedicated to taking all steps necessary to prevent any nation from diplomatically engaging with East Germany.

At home, Ulbricht was not helping Khrushchev with East-West relations. The porous border between East and West Germany was causing a major brain-drain on the socialist side, with scholars and skilled workers taking their families and fleeing the GDR. Tensions were high in Berlin, especially with the specter of the 1948 Berlin Airlift strong in the communists' minds. The West had shown their determination to support Berlin and West Germany, so all efforts were being made to take advantage of the flight of the East Germans. In order to counter these efforts and the refugee crisis, "On 2 October Ulbricht and (Otto) Grotewohl called for the deployment of 'an offensive against West Germany.'" (Haslam, 177). The East German government, led by Ulbricht and the Social Democrat compromise Prime Minister, Otto Grotewohl, coordinated with the Soviets to place more roadblocks and military checkpoints at the borders with the West, however, it took more goading by Ulbricht to draw a response from Khrushchev. Ulbricht took advantage of the Sino-Soviet split and the backlash of détente that was

engulfing the Soviet regime. In 1961, the GDR and the Soviets began construction of the infamous Berlin Wall. The wall was intended prevent flight from East Berlin and served as the most distinct icon of the East-West divide during the Cold War. Some scholars believe that the Berlin Wall was the culmination of Ulbricht's incessant aggression toward the West and prodding of Khrushchev. Others, like Jonathan Haslam, believe that the "decision to build the Berlin Wall was Khrushchev's alone" (Haslam, 177), through which he strangely paints Ulbricht as the nervous one in the equation. John Lewis Gaddis disagrees stating, "Ulbricht had had plans in place since at least 1952 to stop the flow of emigrants by walling West Berlin off from East Berlin and the rest of East Germany. Soviets and other East European leaders, however, had always resisted the idea" (Gaddis, 114). Likely, both leaders had some sort of hand in the project, seeing "West Berlin as 'a level to break the international deadlock'." (Taubman, 405). Ulbricht had to prevent the influx of West German goods as well, so the Wall was an effective embargo tool to prevent this movement of better West German manufacturing. In the end, the Crisis subsided because the West once again refused to capitulate to the East's demands. Hope Harrison notes that the conclusion to this episode was more negative for Ulbricht than beneficial, "There was growing discord between Ulbricht and Khrushchev...particularly during the Berlin Crisis. While they shared many goals, they had important differences over the relative importance of different goals" (Harrison, 7). Rifts began to appear between the East Germans and Soviets, leading to a major economic and ideological showdown in the early 1960s.

Ulbricht was facing a downward spiraling economy that threatened his own political stability: "In 1960, East Germany was falling economically to West Germany,

losing many skilled workers and professionals who were fleeing to the West” (Taubman, 398). The brain drain and flight of the East German skilled workforce had left the state with a struggling socialized industrial sector. To combat this turn, Ulbricht began work on what would be called the New Economic System (NES) with the purpose of eliminating the Stalinist five-year plans and replacing them with a focus on high-tech industry. There was a move to mechanize the workplaces and eliminate excessive raw material use in an attempt to modernize the struggling East German manufacturing sector. The NES also had significant political undertones, being a major break from the Soviet economic policy that the rest of the Eastern Bloc had followed to the letter. The East German system was “Brimming with buzzwords that would become increasingly familiar to East Germans over the next several years...proclaimed by Walter Ulbricht at the SED’s Sixth Party Congress...to correct the ‘mistakes’ of the past” (Port, 175).

Soviet leaders, however, turned on Ulbricht for his brash attempt to buck the overall economic system of the Bloc. There was also the poorly chosen literature that the GDR chose to publish regarding their system, *Political Economy of Socialism and its Application in the GDR*. Ulbricht had created much of the content and proudly promoted the book, which held within its pages bold new ideas for socialism. The USSR quickly denounced the book for its radical deviations, speaking strongly against it in editorials within the party daily *Pravda*. At a party conference in Prague, the Soviets even decided to publicly chastise the East Germans in front of other international comrades. In the end, despite whatever progress the NES had wrought, Ulbricht had been foolish to challenge the Soviets in matters of communist dogmatic authority. “Moscow flatly rejected the GDR’s bid to present itself as a model of advanced socialism” (Sodaro, 163),

leaving Ulbricht and the SED on the defensive after having to kowtow to Moscow's will once again.

Fortunately for Ulbricht and the SED, world events were changing, allowing him to push for more nationalist recognition for the GDR's independence and individuality through diplomatic actions. In order to achieve the aim of gaining at least one non-communist nation's endorsement, "Ulbricht accordingly demanded an intensification of efforts to 'break through' the Hallstein Doctrine once and for all" (Gray, 140). Overtures were made to non-aligned states like Egypt, Indonesia, and others who might be deemed amenable to arrangements with the GDR. William Gray notes, " 'Special ambassadors' were dispatched from East Berlin with messages from Ulbricht or Grotewohl underscoring the GDR's dedication to world peace" (Gray, 126). These dispatches also included minority communist parties across the world, which had the potential of being bolstered in their own missions through German support; a favor they would hopefully pay back later on. Chile's Salvador Allende Gossens met in East Berlin with "Walter Ulbricht, and with Hermann Axen, the Central Committee secretary for international relations" (Koehler, 311). Yugoslavia in particular, the non-aligned communist power that had rebuffed the USSR under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito, was a target of interest for the SED. "Ulbricht wrote the Yugoslav leader personally about the matter through Communist Party channels, arguing that the European questions of greatest urgency to the Bandung states...could hardly be addressed so long as the GDR was denied its rightful place in Europe" (Gray, 61). Efforts like these would continue into the next decade, but with no luck. Egypt made multiple indications to East Berlin that they would be willing to engage in diplomacy, should the GDR be willing to donate certain

military aid to their state. The GDR was bilked for large portions of armaments, but never saw more than an economic mission and one state visit by Ulbricht to Cairo. The Syrians tried to get in on this arms arrangement with the Germans, but by that point the GDR had figured out that they were being used for the machinations of developing military governments with no likelihood for recognition.

The GDR and Ulbricht also suffered another diplomatic black eye during the ill fated 1966 attempt to gain recognition in the United Nations. It is doubtful whether Ulbricht actually thought he stood a chance in this effort, as the US, France, and Britain were veto members of the Security Council, giving them the automatic ability to block GDR inclusion. Regardless, “At Ulbricht’s initiative, the GDR took a gamble on February 28, 1966, by submitting an application to join the United Nations” (Gray, 189). The idea was promptly shot down by the West, who saw the Stalinist government as destructive and illegitimate, not even allowing them into the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, which West Germany had been a member of since the early 1950s. CDU activists summed it up well that East Germany’s failures rested solely on the continued regime of Walter Ulbricht personally, “Our interest lies in making Ulbricht an anachronism in Eastern Europe” (Gray, 193). For the remainder of his tenure in office, Ulbricht would never see diplomatic recognition in any form outside the Eastern Bloc, a depressing thought considering that Ulbricht linked this effort with his own personal success. “Worldwide recognition, the obsession of Walter Ulbricht and a whole generation of East German leaders, proved to be a hollow and short-lived achievement” (Gray, 233).

The Soviet rebuking of the New Economic System, coupled with Ulbricht’s

international unpopularity due to his lingering Stalinist mentality, began to weigh heavy upon his continued leadership. Ulbricht had been “stubborn and tenacious in pursuing his goals, either by indirectly getting around Soviet preferences through his implementation of policies on the ground in the GDR...or by directly persuading the Soviets” (Harrison, 42). Khrushchev himself was growing tired of Ulbricht’s inability to accept the Soviet lead in the period of East-West détente. The Soviet leader “was often hindered by Ulbricht, whom he found ornery” (Taubman, 405), culminating in instances of direct threats by Khrushchev against East German politics. Ulbricht had failed to show leadership in times of crisis and was suffering from increasing unpopularity at home, where he had become known as a “scoundrel and a swine...not a representative of workers but rather a crusher of workers” (Port, 77). One angry retiree even had the gall to complain directly to the SED leader at a rally, “Look at the difference between my pension and the salary of Walter Ulbricht, who receives 34,000 marks each month. That’s more than the large industrialists and bankers earn in the West” (Port, 240).

The situation was looking bleak for Ulbricht in the mid-1960s, when he would suffer an even greater blow to his legitimacy. Nikita Khrushchev, who had begrudgingly supported Ulbricht after the fall of Stalin, was overthrown and replaced with Leonid Brezhnev. Brezhnev “was not willing to tolerate Ulbricht’s holier-than-thou attitude the way Khrushchev had” (Harrison, 232). This complaint regarding Ulbricht’s patronizing attitude was intensified when the SED leader make public statements appealing confrontationally to his “long association with the international communist movement, to which the likes of Brezhnev and Kosygin were relative newcomers” (McAdams, 114). Despite East Germany’s attempts to appease Khrushchev by supporting the Warsaw Pact

suppression of a Czech rebellion in 1968, Ulbricht was too compromised with the Soviets to save himself from disposal in favor of a more agreeable new German leader. He even personally offended Brezhnev when he pompously recalled his “personal acquaintance with Lenin”, stating that “the father of the Revolution had once taught that even the ‘Russians’ (a derogatory reference in itself) ‘still had things to learn’.” (ibid.). Calling the Kremlin leaders “Russians” was seen as a slur, added to the fact that Ulbricht seemed to be insinuating that the current regime in the USSR had not honored Lenin’s ideological wishes. Erich Honecker, longtime protégé and supporter of Ulbricht, made overtures to Brezhnev as a possible successor to leadership of the SED. The failure of the NES “along with tensions between Walter Ulbricht and the Soviet leadership over Western efforts to normalize relations between the two German states, led to the fall of the feisty Saxon” (Port, 97). Brezhnev personally disliked Ulbricht, so along with “a potential threat to the notion that Soviet preferences should serve at all times as guidelines for the Warsaw Pact members” (Sarotte, 174), the Soviets and East German plotters had finally gained leverage in overthrowing Ulbricht. His ideas of the GDR being a unique socialist experiment that would succeed under his guidance, while steadily separating from Soviet control, would be his undoing.

In 1971, members of the SED Politburo, led by Erich Honecker, sent an overt message to the CPSU Secretariat and Leonid Brezhnev. They officially endorsed the idea of Walter Ulbricht, asserting that he had “offered assessments and raised questions that are inconsistent with the actual circumstances of the German Democratic Republic and with our tasks” (SED Politburo, 1). The letter expressed concerns that Ulbricht had been acting as an autocrat and for a long time chose to ignore the input of the Politburo and the

Central Committee. His actions, they stated, had destabilized the GDR and had increasingly deviated from the process of socialization in Germany. They cited specifically the 14th session of the Central Committee in 1970, when Ulbricht “made closing remarks whose general tenor was inconsistent with what had been said during the meeting and with our common party line” (SED Politburo, 1). The Politburo conspirators claimed that they had been forced to prevent publication of Ulbricht’s remarks and had begun withholding political information from him in order to save sensitive material from his interloping. Ulbricht’s selfishness and personality cult were addressed when they accused him of stubbornly holding to his own tenacious views, laying the blame ultimately on “behavior...caused in part by his advanced age” (SED Politburo, 2). Sticking to this line of concern for Ulbricht’s health, the Politburo questioned his ability to perform his duties at the age of 78. Ulbricht was accused of seeing himself on the level of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, believing that his person was integral to GDR success. The letter concluded with the suggestion that Brezhnev have a conversation with Ulbricht that would relieve him of his duties in the SED and GDR. Brezhnev would swiftly heed this request, speaking with Ulbricht and convincing him in May 1971 to step down from all party posts. This was done without much resistance on Ulbricht’s part, likely because he realized that there was little hope for his political survival now that the SED and the Soviets had forsaken him.

During the 16th Plenary Session of the Central Committee on May 3rd, 1971, the plan of action to remove Ulbricht from office was executed. Erich Mielke, the head of the Stasi and ally to Honecker, cleverly arranged for Ulbricht to be quickly and quietly shuttled before the Central Committee in the night. John Koehler relates the events quite

vividly, describing the: “replacement of Ulbricht’s regular Stasi bodyguards by two Mielke confidants. These men picked up an unsuspecting Ulbricht at his home and drove him to the State Council building in downtown East Berlin. Their assignment was to keep Ulbricht away from his office, where he had a direct telephone link to the commander of the National Defense People’s Army. Mielke feared that if Ulbricht realized that he was about to be booted out, he might become irrational enough to call out the army” (Koehler, 71). Ulbricht was permitted a few hours to walk along the river Spree with the Stasi handlers before he was summoned before the Central Committee. When he entered the chambers “he was informed that Erich Honecker had been elected secretary-general of the party, first secretary of the Central Committee, and chairman of the National Defense Council” (ibid.). The treacherous and plot-based nature of the SED had finally claimed the titles and powers of its own framer.

Ulbricht’s failing health was the official line that was given during Ulbricht’s retirement ceremonies, lauding his dedication to socialism throughout the years and lamenting his biological inability to continue the strenuous work he had allotted himself. Despite the pageantry that the transition of power had seen, Ulbricht was soon placed on reserve by Honecker, his successor, and the SED. In order to silence the complaints of Ulbricht to the Soviets regarding mistreatment at the hands of his former comrades, he “was ‘promoted’ to chairmanship of the State Council, a ceremonial office devoid of any power” (Koehler, 71). He was even banned from attending party meetings on the basis of imposed health restrictions, keeping him away from having any influence over the politics of the GDR. Ulbricht had been deposed and was relegated to being an ignored figurehead, devoid of the centralized power he had built into the system that ultimately

disposed of him. In August 1973, two years after his fall from office, Ulbricht suffered a stroke that would ultimately kill him. He died in his guesthouse north of East Berlin and was honored with a state funeral, commemorated with the simple grave marker that was often used by party officials. After almost 21 years in office, surviving three Soviet leadership changes, Ulbricht finally died of natural causes, having never renounced his own personal brand of Stalinism that had helped build a party and state firmly centralized and built around him.

CHAPTER III

A Man Shrouded in Red Shadows: Analysis

Soviet dissident writer Alexander Zinoviev wrote in his 1982 work, *Homo sovieticus*, about the evolution of man that was being imposed under communist totalitarianism. Someone indoctrinated by Marxism-Leninism in this manner was described as a “‘fairly disgusting creature’ who was the end product of the Soviet regime’s efforts to transform the population into embodiments of the values of communism” (Kelly, 1). Journalist Aileen Kelly describes the horrors that people in the Eastern Bloc witnessed, “Stalinist ideology aimed to transform not only society but the very nature of man. Hence the endless campaigns of purification...ranging from self-critical in the workplace and Party cells to the show trials of the Great Purge” (Kelly, 4). Individuals from the USSR and associated Comintern groups weren’t merely power-players, although a number of them did have these attributes. Stalinists were “true believers” (ibid.) by large, who believed unconditionally in the supremacy of the party as the force for global transformation. Part of this transformation involved purification of the party and was carried out through endless purges within and without the Soviet Union. The modified Bolshevik historicism held Stalin and his vision as the only method for the advancement of humanity. Efforts on the part of the state and party had enveloped the general population, leaving many to see loyalty and fealty to Stalin as “a way to transcend events to a larger design; it offered something to strive for” (ibid.). Without the party as a guiding light, there was no potentiality for individual influence on the progress of humanity. Soviets and Marxists understood well that “the party was the whole meaning of...life, and though Stalin was a monster he was a ‘sort of symbol of the

party.'...faith in the Party's collective infallibility made opposition to Bolshevism from within untenable" (Kelly, 5). It was the infallibility of Stalin and the CPSU that allowed for the more vulgar expressions of authoritarianism that flourished under Stalinism, which some critics at the time derisively referred to as "Red Fascism" (Geyer, 33-37).

Walter Ulbricht was certainly one of the individuals who acquiesced to the cruel inconsistencies of Stalinism. Despite ultimately falling victim to the cold, detached system, Ulbricht had been a willing participant, going so far as to emulate Stalin's USSR in his home state of Germany. He was without doubt a man motivated by personal ascendancy to prestige, but research should not ignore his dedication to Marxism. Such is the case with his personality. Ulbricht was often derided for his bumbling and unfriendly attitude, but lurking beneath his anti-social tendencies was a mentality that was cruel and calculating. Several aspects of Ulbricht's life must be addressed in order to create an accurate representation of the type of man and politician that he was. These factors are political psychology, personality, Marxist and Stalinist ideology, and his relationship with the Soviet Union. By giving credence to these attributes, together with connecting them in a holistic manner, it is hoped that Walter Ulbricht will be revealed as a more detailed and life-like character; one that disproves the stereotypes often attributed to him in academia.

Ulbricht was an unabashed Stalinist until the day he died. Even after Khrushchev initiated the destalinization period in the late 1950s, Ulbricht gave the movement only lip-service and refused to implement meaningful reform that would have changed the authoritarian framework of the SED and GDR. Ulbricht believed genuinely in the merits of Stalinism and its ability to reverse a stagnating economic outlook, "a good Stalinist,

insisted that East Germans could fix this problem by simply working harder: he instituted a program of rapid industrialization similar to what Stalin had undertaken in the Soviet Union” (Gaddis, 106). While it was not necessary to promote rapid industrialization, as Germany had already undergone this step earlier in its history, the SED was eager to begin the agricultural collectivization procedures that came with the progression of Stalinism. This push for collective farming was difficult, though, “When Ulbricht admitted the failure of his drive to persuade farmers to voluntarily join collectives, the East German party’s Politburo agreed that force should be applied... (Erich) Mielke ordered the arrest of all recalcitrant farmers on charges of ‘engaging in activities hostile to the state.’ Hundreds were deprived of their property and sent to prison. Thousands more left for the west” (Koehler, 66). When this forced agricultural reform caused food shortages, Ulbricht was quick to make up excuses to protect his Stalinist ideology. In the case of a butter deficit, “Ulbricht was quick to reply... that butter was withheld deliberately because it was an unhealthy substance—a remark that evoked bittersweet laughter among the populace” (ibid.). Even at the expense of seeming foolish, this showed genuine dedication by the SED and its leader to the economic reforms prescribed by Stalin’s course.

Ulbricht, having survived World War II in Soviet exile, had connected in a deeply personal way with the Russian party leaders. He so firmly believed in the Soviet idea of evolutionary humanism that he conformed completely to the Stalinist duality of Marxism that centered on a type of dogmatic bureaucracy. Max Weber, the German sociologist, accurately described this mentality of authoritarianism, “his conception of the bureaucratic man, the motivations of conformity... and status seeking... are postulated as

the universal drives in human nature” (DiRenzo, 5). Ulbricht accurately portrays Weber’s concept of the bureaucrat mentality: conformity with the party line, no matter the paradoxes or contradictions, was the only guarantee of security. There was also the insatiable thirst for power that was almost primal. This thirst is characterized well in 1953 with “the subsequent establishment of a Council of State under the SED’s First Secretary...Some noted Ulbricht’s accumulation of posts and feared he might ‘follow in Stalin’s footsteps’.” (Allinson, 120).

Gordon DiRenzo wrote, “a considerable amount of research on personality and politics during the past twenty-five years already has established authoritarianism as a personality constellation which has significant implications for political behavior” (DiRenzo, 21). Ulbricht was indeed a constellation of personality traits, which is often discounted on the basis of underestimation by scholars. Despite having been in the German Communist Party for over thirty years by the time he began his rise to leadership, he “reputedly never had one personal friend” (Dall, 17). This seems like a dramatic interpretation of his personal life, but his reputation does give this recount a semblance of truth. Contemporary journalist Robert Dall wrote of Ulbricht that “He hasn’t a spark of humor, and is a miserable speaker, with a high-pitched voice and a clumsy Saxonian accent. He is generally considered as cold and slippery as a block of ice and as suspicious as an alley cat” (Dall, 17).

Catherine Epstein concurs with Dall’s interpretation of Ulbricht’s personality, but rather than portraying them as weaknesses, she shows how they were overcome; “although Ulbricht lacked the personal warmth and fiery rhetorical skills necessary for a popular politician, he more than compensated for these weaknesses with his remarkable

talent for revolutionary grunt work” (Epstein, 21-22). Ulbricht was well known for his organizational skills, cutting his revolutionary teeth with the “distribution of fliers, the hanging of posters, the details of meetings, the editing of newspapers, the collection of funds, and even the producing of illegal weapons” (ibid.). This communist work would often take the place of Ulbricht’s personal life in his passions, depicted through the episode when Ulbricht would marry, have a child, and separate from his family all in the course of one year, due to the nature of his work and his dedication to the movement.

Another part of Ulbricht’s psychology had to do with his “powerful impulse to punish” (Granville, 477). As noted, he was a diehard deputy to Stalinism, so much so that even his own Minister of State Security condemned him for being cold-blooded. The awkward and withdrawn personality of Ulbricht was negated through his “tenacious personality and political shrewdness” (Granville, 486). Historian Hope Harrison notes of Ulbricht’s main personal and psychological qualities that they were an amalgamation of boorishness and Machiavellian despotism. In this instance, Harrison is one of a group who saw Ulbricht in the devious sense. Following the failure of the June 1953 rebellion in East Germany, “Walter Ulbricht was an essential part of the establishment of Soviet communism in Germany” (Harrison, 13). He had been challenged by the episode, but had come out stronger through his tenacity. John Lewis Gaddis, noted Cold War historian, describes how the “Kremlin leadership felt it had no choice but to do whatever was necessary to prop Ulbricht up. The East German leader therefore had the capacity, whenever he wanted, to blackmail his Soviet counterparts” (Gaddis, 136). In this particular instance, Ulbricht came out ahead with a renewed understanding of how best to quell rebellions like a true Stalinist. During a minor insurrection in 1956, “East Germans

never got a chance to assemble at all. Those who did, like the students at Humboldt University, were quelled by the ‘battle groups’ Ulbricht deployed” (Granville, 435). Ulbricht’s psychology had taken on a bloody side that was indicative of his particular ideology, “Disgruntled workers? Arrest the ringleaders. Restless students? Beat them up. Outspoken intellectuals? Lock them up” (Granville, 487). Biographer Carola Stern asserts that “Beyond any doubt, thirst for knowledge, ambition, and diligence were important features in his make-up” (Stern, 9).

The personality cult that Walter Ulbricht attempted to foster was another important factor of his political life that often goes underestimated or caricatured. During the rise of East German sporting, there were “detailed, glorified, and bombastic accounts issued during Ulbricht’s years of office” (Carr, 1). Sport was a subject very dear to Ulbricht, as he had been a member of worker’s sport clubs during his youth and continued to perform intense callisthenic regimens throughout his life. This dedication to sports was the advanced forerunner to his cult of personality, depicting him to the casual East German sporting enthusiast as a “superhuman, almost God-like” (Carr, 2). This was along the Stalin line, but due to his lack of revolutionary or war credentials, Ulbricht had to rely on more mundane depictions, sometimes blatant lies. He utilized a German-Soviet model of propaganda that elevated to the Party and his person to “heroic proportions” (Carr, 3). Despite the shortcomings of Ulbricht’s personality and his relatively bloodless rise to power, he had the ability to create this personality worship to a remarkable level, not only reliant upon his sporting credentials.

The fabricated and amplified achievements of Ulbricht would be pushed to the point of absurdity, with no regard for their believability. Gerald Carr notes of Ulbricht’s

following, “What was remarkable, however, about the Ulbricht cult, was the extent to which it was developed and the fact that there appeared to be no limit to the number of superlatives heaped upon him. Ulbricht was portrayed as a philosopher, an intellectual, a model for the youth, a teacher, a leader, and a friend of all sportsmen in both East and West Germany” (Carr, 3). Carr goes further in describing that “Books written in Ulbricht’s honour displayed an out-of-proportion level of hero worship” (ibid.). One of these absurd displays of clout happened on October 7, 1969, when the GDR’s twentieth anniversary was approaching. William Gray describes the occurrence, when a state birthday had been turned into an occasion for once more impressing the image of the party leadership; “Ulbricht and his party comrades were anxious to turn the obligatory pompous celebrations into a milestone of international respect for the SED’s achievements” (Gray, 212).

Ulbricht’s birthday party was being planned as a lavish event, but was ultimately shut down as a result of Soviet demands; they saw this absurd holiday as blatant cult worship. This took place because of Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin’s cult, which extended to those of the Stalinist deputies. Ulbricht ignored this mandate, mostly, because “In addition to the problem of his own cult of personality, another reason Ulbricht stonewalled on a broad discussion...on the mistakes Stalin had made [was] Ulbricht sought to avoid a critical examination of mistakes he might have made” (Harrison, 69). Instead of taking the Soviet route and eliminating his own status-enhancing, Ulbricht continued his policy of building himself up as a party leader to be admired, choosing to deceptively bask “in public praise for his alleged combat in Pain when, in fact, he had actually spent a few weeks there in December 1936...as a

communist ideological hatchet man” (Krammer, 544). Walter Ulbricht never gave up on his personality cult aspirations until his removal from office. Applebaum recounts, “Toward the end of his life, his personal style even came to mimic Stalin’s, and his birthday parties were celebrated with pomp, circumstance, and poems dedicated to his glory. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then Ulbricht was a great flatterer indeed” (Applebaum, 45). While never realizing the magnitude of success that Stalin had seen in the Soviet Union with his cult, Ulbricht none-the-less emulated his former patron well, holding on to power for almost as long and with fewer credentials with which to market himself to a reluctant German population.

Perhaps Ulbricht’s most successful attribute during his rise to power in the KPD was his beneficial, some would say parasitic, relationship with the CPSU and Soviet autocrat, Joseph Stalin. This all began following Ulbricht’s trip to Moscow in 1926 to attend the Lenin International School; while there “GPU psychologists realized that this uncouth German had the makings of a first-class political agent provocateur” (Dall, 18). What Ulbricht had lacked in formal Marxist training, he made up for in understanding the brutal realities of party life. He saw ideological debates as shadow-boxing, the real power was in garnering favor with those who had control, in this instance he would align himself with Stalin and the GPU. Upon his return, his German comrades noticed that the normally reserved, introverted man had “become self-confident and even arrogant...his colleagues had some inkling of what had stiffened his backbone” (Dall, 18). The honorifics Ulbricht had received in the USSR had boosted his confidence and he became the Soviets’ man in the KPD. He used this position as a bargaining tool for power within the increasingly bolshevized German party. Primarily, he had been entrusted with

weapons acquisition and defensive policy by the USSR, which were essential elements to their revolutionary work and gave Ulbricht more control; “Much of Ulbricht’s power in the defense field derived from the fact that it was he who negotiated with the Soviets” (Wagner, 146). Ulbricht quickly learned not to trifle with Soviet authority when Ulbricht and some political allies in the KPD Central Committee tried to oust leader Ernst Thalmann. In a dangerous chain of events, “Thalmann turned to Stalin, who insisted on the KPD leader’s reinstatement. Many Central Committee members now reconsidered their initial votes. Ulbricht, for example, in Moscow at the time, immediately cabled to protest the Central Committee’s decision” (Epstein, 26-27). Ulbricht had attempted to make a power-grab, but had been shut down by Thalmann’s appeal to the Soviets. He had learned his lesson and quickly turned on his fellow conspirators, choosing the side of the “staunch believer in Marxism-Leninism...quick to defend the Soviet Union as the first communist state” (Harrison, 13).

Even during the Soviet purges of the 1930s, Stalin still understood that there was a use for some of the Muscovite Germans, namely Ulbricht. Perhaps his understanding of their role is simply complete obedience, as Dall summed it up nicely with a quote from a leading Soviet official, “Those who remained were what Nikolai Bukharin had once classified as ‘obedient dunces’.” (Dall, 17). There is even the belief that Ulbricht and Wilhelm Pieck were either complacent or actively involved in the Soviet purges that took the lives of countless KPD exiles. Kurt Schirdewan, later GDR politician and purge victim, wrote in his memoir “I suspected that Walter Ulbricht...who had lived in the Soviet Union for years, know of some of Stalin’s crimes” (Granville, 99). Despite the implications amongst his comrades of his involvement in these purges, it didn’t matter

much considering Ulbricht was now “widely viewed as ‘Stalinist number one’ in the country (Germany)” (Granville, 486). This gave him a certain amount of protection from the socialist motherland, while also reducing him to a position of fealty. However, this arrangement agreed with Ulbricht and he played well the character that the USSR desired “Moscow needed to stay alert and to keep a strong leader like Ulbricht in the GDR, someone unafraid to apply military force and summon Soviet reinforcements” (Granville, 93). With his position came duties to the Soviets, but Ulbricht was more than happy to comply, as he had been doing since the 1920s. Ulbricht carried out Stalin’s commands without question; both men likely understood their relationship and fostered it to both their benefits. Stalin had a deputy in East Germany who would carry out his will and Ulbricht would be insulated from internal and external threats by Soviet shielding.

This loyalty somewhat extended to Khrushchev, but Ulbricht was more the one-sided recipient of the guaranteed protection that had been his cover for years. The Soviets were left with no choice after Stalin’s death but to keep the SED leadership at the helm of East Germany. Because of this, “Ulbricht enjoyed both Soviet support and great influence among many ranking SED functionaries” (Epstein, 158). Ulbricht continued his cruel regime’s tactics during the era of destalinization, without regard for the new post-Stalin CPSU line, knowing that there wasn’t much the Soviets could do to him because they would look weak if they removed Ulbricht from office. As a result, “Ulbricht...brilliantly exploited long-standing Soviet and traditional KPD mores to preserve his position of power. He preyed on veteran communists’ self-abnegation, devotion to party discipline, and fidelity to the Soviet Union and its socialist model” (ibid.). For years after the 1953 June uprising in Berlin, “thoughts of dismissing Ulbricht

were tightly linked to fears of the GDR's collapse" (Granville, 422). Ulbricht had tied his own control to the very fate of East Germany. Without Ulbricht, they believed that there could be no GDR, so yet another guarantee of power was provided to the SED regime. This necessity in the Soviets' eyes was brilliantly exploited by Ulbricht, who had turned from Stalin's yes-man to Khrushchev's blackmailer. This leg up on the USSR didn't diminish Ulbricht's loyalty, though. During the Sino-Soviet split, Ulbricht was one of the most vocal supporters of the USSR's ideological authority, speaking out against both the Chinese and Albanians whenever they questioned the supremacy of the CPSU. This even came to the point where Brezhnev didn't feel the need to ask Ulbricht if he supported Warsaw Pact actions during the Czech uprising of 1968, "They must have assumed that Ulbricht would approve of the invasion" (Granville, 94), and this assumption was likely correct.

Khrushchev and Ulbricht's relationship was staunchly different than how the German had interacted with former USSR head Joseph Stalin. It was complimentary in that Ulbricht by large still dedicated himself to Soviet supremacy, but was characterized more by the Soviets tolerating the SED, rather than directing them. Khrushchev and Ulbricht's relationship dated back to the war, "While overseeing the rebuilding of Warsaw's water, electric, and sewage systems in 1945, Khrushchev met Polish leader Wladislaw Gomulka. He took a liking to him, as he had to Tito and Walter Ulbricht during World War II" (Taubman, 328). This is a rare depiction of Khrushchev having a positive personal relationship with Ulbricht, which would not be the defining dichotomy for long after the Soviet took power. Most acknowledge the fact that "Ulbricht was not ousted in East Germany probably meant that the Khrushchev leadership needed him, or at

least felt it was unnecessary to replace him” (Granville, 421). Destalinization had created a rift between the reformist Khrushchev and the Stalinist Ulbricht. Ulbricht, in fact, had been one of the strongest opponents to the Secret Speech’s ideas regarding Stalin and the cult of personality. The Soviets, however, understood well Ulbricht’s necessity to keeping the fledgling SED as the dominant party in the GDR. There was the understanding in the USSR that “Khrushchev could not in good conscience sacrifice Ulbricht’s regime, not to mention the fact that his support of the GDR was a bargaining chip for keeping West Germany out of NATO” (Granville, 422).

The territorial integrity of Berlin was another divisive point for Khrushchev and Ulbricht. Khrushchev had expressed the desire for Berlin to be a neutral free city, removed from both the allied presence and East German control. Ulbricht, however, was not keen on this idea and actively campaigned against Khrushchev to the point that the Soviets had to give in. Despite the fact that “the other East European leaders supported Khrushchev...and opposed Ulbricht’s plan” (Koehler, 68), there wasn’t much that any of them could do to quash the SED’s demands. Ulbricht’s outrageous demands for Soviet invasion of West Berlin and his hostility with West Germany during an economic stagnation had soured his relationship with Khrushchev even more. Unfortunately for them, the USSR was still over a barrel, “Moscow could not yet disengage from the embarrassing Ulbricht regime” (Haslam, 213). The embarrassment would continue into the 1960s, when the SED desired nuclear facilitation at the Soviets’ expense in order to counter West Germany’s attempts at a similar arrangement with NATO, which in Ulbricht’s opinion wasn’t being opposed strongly enough in the international arena by the Soviets. Ulbricht complained loudly to the Soviets, “they weren’t doing enough to stop

West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer from acquiring nuclear weapons” (Taubman, 398).

This wasn't the end of Ulbricht's demands toward Khrushchev, the German would time and again test the Soviet's patience with increasingly outrageous requests. Due to the geopolitical importance of the GDR, it was difficult for Khrushchev to say no, “Ulbricht demanded increased Soviet action and direct aid to East Germany, to which Khrushchev agreed, despite the economy of the USSR already being strained” (Taubman, 405). This blackmailing on a national scale came to a head as a result of Ulbricht's attempts to replace the workforce he was losing to West Berlin and the FRG. His economy needed more workers in order to stay competitive and exit the downturn that they were experiencing in their manufacturing industry. Ulbricht had an idea on how to solve this crisis, but it did not get the reception that he expected. Khrushchev biographer William Taubman explains this instance, “East Germany was suffering from a severe shortage of workers...Ulbricht had requested Khrushchev import Soviet workers to assist. The idea reminded Khrushchev of Hitler's use of Slavic slave labor, and angered the man” (Taubman, 482). Robert Service directly quotes Khrushchev's indignant response, “Imagine how a Soviet worker would feel. He won the war and now he has to clean your toilets.” (Service, 357). Ulbricht had gone too far, but was still a necessity to the Soviets, preserving his authority when others had been disposed for lesser insults. The SED leader knew his importance to Khrushchev and the Soviets, becoming the tail that wagged the dog.

Walter Ulbricht's dedication to his communist ideology has often been another topic of contention between scholars, some who viewed his orientation as a means to an

end, or as a stepping-stone for his political advancement. In order to deduce his motivations, whether they be genuine dedication or not, there are several instances that we can draw from. One of which was his genuine belief in the Stalinist ideology that he had worked for since his bolshevization in the 1920s. This extended even into the Khrushchev destalinization period, when Ulbricht adamantly refused to renounce or reform his authoritarian political actions. Carola Stern, the East German dissident who wrote a biography of Ulbricht, noted “Stalin had been dead ten years, much had changed in the Eastern bloc, yet Stalinism continued its reign of terror in Germany...For decades, Ulbricht was considered an incorrigible Stalinist” (Stern, 209-210). Even though he faced criticism from his own party and from his Soviet partners, Ulbricht flat out refused to let go of his Stalinist methods of rule. This shows incredible, perhaps even foolhardy, loyalty to the ideology that had brought him to power. Stern also refutes the popular idea that Ulbricht had no understanding of Marxism and did not even personally believe in its tenants. She writes quite frankly, “Sooner or later, when people discuss Ulbricht, they raise this question: ‘Does the man really believe in anything?’ For most people tend to think of him as a cynic and opportunist whose very action is motivated solely by a thirst for power. This is wrong.” (Stern, 14-15). Even though she contends that he did believe in communism as a path to global change, Stern still doesn’t believe that Ulbricht was a scholar of the movement, but an operator. The East German leader, according to Stern, “believes in Marxism, the kind of narrow-gauge Marxism he learned...It is the only kind of Marxism he understands, and it constitutes his one genuine contact with the culture.” (Stern, 15).

Primarily, Ulbricht’s expression of his form of Marxism-Leninism is carried out

through his dedication to the Soviet Union as the future of mankind. Perhaps he associated the USSR with the physical manifestation of the transformative potential of Marxism. Ulbricht made no excuses for his loyalty to the Soviet model, even from the beginnings of his political career he had written, “by stressing the inevitability of imperialist war and the need to defend the Soviet Union” (Stern, 37). In hindsight, Ulbricht’s stalwart belief in the Soviet Union was perhaps to the point of delusional, but at the time he may have had genuine reason to believe in the global proletariat revolutionary potential. In 1940, the USSR had only been in existence for eighteen years and had already become a major power embroiled in a world war. The Soviet Union had bucked the traditional political institutions of Europe and had managed not only to survive, but also progress on their own merits. Perhaps rightfully, Ulbricht had a reason to believe in the USSR’s viability, as it was unfolding before his enthralled eyes. This was a guaranteed progression in his mind, something that the proletariat of the world would guarantee and contribute to, “Ulbricht never entertained the possibility that elections might *not* eventually lead to a working-class majority” (Applebaum, 195). Even the bourgeois nation of Germany, fresh from World War II, was viewed by Ulbricht as somewhere that popular socialism could take root and flourish. This belief permeated throughout the Eastern Bloc with the deputy Stalinists of each nation firmly, almost ignorantly, thinking that the people would support these new institutions. The German SED was especially convinced, “Ulbricht and his entourage believed the left could and would win a popular vote in Germany” (Applebaum, 212).

This rudimentary belief in Marxism, if Stern is to be believed, did not stop Ulbricht from taking increasingly statist attitudes once he gained control of both the SED

and the GDR after the elimination of his rival politicians in the late 1950s. This included an earlier eschewing of anti-fascist rhetoric in favor of protecting those who had defected and helped Ulbricht's rise to power. Krammer notes, "In 1949 Walter Ulbricht, soon to be named General Secretary of the SED Central Committee, declared that 'anyone who raises the question, "Is this person a former member of the Nazi party or not" works against the formation of the National Front'." (Krammer, 539). Going against the international communist mission to eliminate all former Nazis was done in the interest of his own political machine; Ulbricht wanted to quash outrage that might stem from people who questioned his use of these collaborators. Also, stomping out anti-Nazi feelings in Germany would help Ulbricht to solidify his rule through pacification of the population, taking away from them their main outlet of frustration with the former regime. There was also the extent to which Ulbricht solidified his own party and state, differentiating it from other Eastern Bloc institutions in the perceived efficiency and stringent organization seen from the outside. Mary Fulbrook describes this view of Ulbricht's uniqueness from his fellow Stalinists by his own intention, hoping to create a framework that would solidify his power and his regime, "To the outside world, the East German Communist Party appeared a model of efficiency and discipline—communism with a Prussian complexion" (Fulbrook, 31). This is an especially interesting comparison, considering the inherent anti-Prussian sentiments of Marxists in general. However, the stringent bureaucracy of the former monarchist nation was so ingrained in Germans that the SED couldn't help but benefit from its professional organization capacity in their new government system.

Walter Ulbricht also cultivated his personal power through manipulation of

geopolitical alliances in the 1950s. With the FDR's entry into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization on 9 May 1955, the communist states attempted to counteract this alliance with one of their own. The Warsaw Pact, a communist mutual defense organization, was founded five days after West Germany entered NATO. The official reasoning for its creation was as a response to resurgent German militarism, but is widely acknowledged as a countermeasure to protect the GDR from a potential attack by West Germany and its new allies. The GDR regime knew they could play a strong role in the direction of the Warsaw Pact, more so than other allied states of the USSR, due to its focus on their political situation. The SED used their state's geographical position as a political tool to seek military protection and economic benefits, a tactic the West German government had used as leverage for induction into NATO. William Gray goes so far as to say that "Ulbricht and (Konrad) Adenauer enjoyed a strong enough position within their respective alliances to veto any arrangement they found unacceptable" (Gray, 140). It is difficult, considering Moscow's ideological domination of Eastern Europe, to logically believe this bold inference that Ulbricht could have rebuked the Soviets when he disagreed with their policies. But without a doubt, Ulbricht and the GDR certainly held political privileges within the Warsaw Pact that their other neighboring allies did not.

The Ministry for State Security, colloquially known as the Stasi, was another instrument of Ulbricht's power that was well-known both inside and outside the GDR as a tool of his authority. From the point that Ulbricht became the General Secretary of the SED, he had "transformed the Stasi into an instrument for retaining power" (Koehler, 62). Under Ulbricht's guidance, as well as that of several prominent Ministers of State Security, the Stasi apparatus became a feared organization within the GDR. They were

capable of incredible surveillance networks and were projected to have a sizable informant population for such a small nation. Even their exploits were well known outside the Soviet bloc; the West contended with the Stasi's infamous foreign intelligence division, which was run for a long period of time by Markus Wolf, considered one of the greatest spymasters of the 20th century. Historian Andrew Port contradicts popular opinion on the agency when he stated, "the GDR was not a 'nation of spies' under Walter Ulbricht and...the Stasi's popular image as a 'ubiquitous and highly efficient intelligence-gathering agency' deserves revision" (Port, 108). Perhaps Port is speaking more of the early Stasi rather than the later (1970-1980) Stasi, because it is well documented that the organization was incredibly efficient at espionage activities, given their operational capacity. Regardless, Ulbricht helped to pioneer this agency and its guidelines, so his role in their advent cannot be discounted, especially considering that he likely hoped they would function akin to Stalin's NKVD.

From what we can gather, Ulbricht was also a self-centered individual by all accounts when it came to his personal prestige and legacy. Ulbricht had experienced upheavals, rebellions, and setbacks during the first four years of his reign, but none of those had stopped him from gaining a more iron grasp upon his party and state. Notably, "Soviet intervention had saved Ulbricht in June, 1953: paradoxically, though, that demonstration of weakness had given him strength" (Gaddis, 136). As mentioned before, the SED had fled Berlin in 1953 and had only retaken the city with Soviet military aid, but "After the revolt was crushed...any kind of dramatic change seemed inherently too risky, and Ulbricht was allowed to remain in his post" (Sarotte, 10). The turn of events had solidified Ulbricht's regime and had indeed made him seem weak to those within the

Eastern Bloc, but interestingly he was still a necessity to the Soviets. This instance had sent Ulbricht to the brink of failure, but pulled him back stronger and more authoritative than before. Destalinization hadn't even been able to dissuade him from reform, as "Ulbricht was stubborn and tenacious in pursuing his goals" (Harrison, 42). Hope Harrison sums up the SED mentality that bucked Khrushchev, "Ulbricht...resisted Soviet advice and maintained his hardline domestic and foreign policies" (Harrison, 137). He had been called to moderation, but did not see that as the appropriate method of keeping his personal control over the GDR. Stalinist had suited the man for years and it was unlikely that changing his party line would do anything but encourage more uprising. Reform, in fact, had been seen even by the Soviet reforms as a sign of weakness in Germany, so Ulbricht was left to his own designs. The SED leadership was brought into line with Ulbricht's desires and he was able to frame every aspect of national politics around the goal of keeping him in power. Ulbricht being in power was by no means necessary to anyone but himself. However, that alone was the leader's sole ambition, so with the reliance that was placed upon his regime by the Soviets, it gave him the time and capability to consolidate authority. Ulbricht knew that he wanted to remain the chief and nobody could or would attempt to stop him for over twenty years.

The final example of Ulbricht's authority was his adamant hostility to West Germany. Despite attempts at *détente* between the Soviets and the West, Ulbricht the Stalinist never had any hopes but to reclaim the entire nation under his command. This was a staunch differentiation between the East Germans and the other members of the East, as Jonathan Haslam notes "Sharp differences were apparent between members of the Warsaw Pact over dealing with Bonn: Ulbricht was hostile" (Haslam, 251). One way

that Ulbricht hoped to separate East Germans from West was by instituting a specific German Democratic Republic nationality for his people. He imagined that a people who had been united by history and culture for thousands of years could simply be brought under firmer control by forcing a schism. William Gray describes how “Ulbricht actually strove for a more rigid delimitation of East Germans from their Western neighbors by introducing such innovations as separate citizenship law for the GDR” (Gray, 232).

Ulbricht also feared elections in his nation, which is why the SED was set up so that they would always win the plural KPD-SPD vote in the GDR. Tied in with elections was the thought that the new regime would reunite East Germany with its other half, “Ulbricht feared loosening of his tight grip on power would lead to the GDR’s collapse as well as to the collapse of his own personal power, perhaps his primary concern” (Harrison, 8-9).

Once the Soviets finally gave in to Ulbricht’s pestering, the topic of integration with West Germany was dropped and the SED was left in control of a nation that would be theirs for the foreseeable future. Despite this, economically the Germanys were still tied to one another, and “Walter Ulbricht...didn’t want ‘his’ Germany to become too dependent on the West” (Applebaum, 365). Not only did he hate the West, but he also wanted to ensure that his state was completely isolated from its former countrymen across the border, economically and culturally. The only reunification Ulbricht would accept would be under his rule and his party’s conditions, nothing short of total domination of Germany with him as its socialist generalissimo. So strong was Ulbricht’s conviction to his political line that Robert Services states, “His ideological rigidity made even Brezhnev appear flexible.” (Service, 381).

CHAPTER IV

Both Sides of the Ulbricht Wall: Conclusions

At the beginning of this endeavor, the author was firmly convinced that Walter Ulbricht could be relegated wholly to the school of thought that saw him as a power-driven opportunist. Assumptions were made that Ulbricht made mistakes, but was able to overcome them through cunning and guile. There was also the presumption that Ulbricht was not a genuine adherent to Marxism-Leninism and had merely adopted Stalinism as his chosen ideology because it presented the best potential for his own personal advancement. Upon having completed the research that went into this work, there are several conclusions that must be made by the author for the sake of academic honesty and in the interest of future investigations on the subject matter. First, answers will be given to the questions poised at the beginning regarding Ulbricht's motivations and actions. Following that, to conclude, the author will offer a new insight into Ulbricht that has been developed over the course of this effort. This includes an entirely new hypothesis regarding Walter Ulbricht that hopefully will serve as the basis for upcoming scholastic work.

The primary question asked by the author was if Marxism-Leninism motivated Walter Ulbricht or if he was more a power-driven individual seeking personal power. In the course of this study, the author has determined that this is not a "one or the other" answer. The hypothesis originally speculated that Ulbricht was motivated by a combination of both, but was more inclined toward personal motivations. What would perhaps be a better question would be if he was enticed to politics more out of his own convictions or by ideological belief. After conducting this investigation, both of these

presumptions seem to still hold true. Ulbricht's affinity toward Marxism-Leninism should not be as discounted as it has been in period-specific scholarship. Ulbricht was perhaps the most dedicated Stalinist, aside from Stalin himself, proving even during the period of destalinization that Ulbricht was loyal to the party line he had chosen. As Stern mentioned, although Ulbricht understood only a narrow form of Marxism, he adhered to this form and never renounced it until the end of his life. The author believes that Ulbricht's motivations cannot be seen as mutually exclusive, setting forth the understanding that often his Stalinism and personal advancement were complementary attributes. The organizational framework and political mentality of Stalinism fostered self-concerning individuals like Ulbricht, so it would make sense that he would forever pay homage to the system that had done so well for him. There can be no doubt that Ulbricht was clever and understood how to play the game of politics well, but that does not mean that he wasn't earnest at the same time to his creed. Stalinism was the path to power for this man; the system reaped rewards for those who knew how to utilize it. Ulbricht's zeal for this ideology had become a branch of his own egocentric motivations. Even with the statist sentiments that Ulbricht displayed later in his career, they still held function in the Stalinist model of socialism in one state. The SED was free to focus entirely on the internal workings of the GDR, as that was how they would create a base for proletarian uprising. With a state firmly under his grasp, Ulbricht was poised to become the autocrat of his own nation, which he did despite numerous setbacks. Although not genuinely Marxist, he was a dedicated Stalinist and in essence had combined parts of authoritarianism and Marxism to form a system that secured his personal rule, just as Stalin had done.

Stemming from that interpretation of Ulbricht's convictions was the follow-up question of how he had specifically emulated Stalin's political example when he created the SED and the GDR. The first instance of this mimicry was previously mentioned, this being the Stalinist concept of socialism in one state. Ulbricht certainly adhered to this principle; he believed that his state and his party were unique from the rest of the Eastern Bloc, manifested by his attempts to create a model of divergent socialism. While he understood that fealty to the USSR was tantamount to his own survival, this did not dissuade Ulbricht from exercising authority. Under Stalin he would never have attempted to press this notion, but when he had Khrushchev's reformist regime to contend with, he was less afraid to impress his own demands and ideas. Another emulation of Stalin's legacy was that of the Ministry of State Security (Stasi), obviously created in the footprint of the NKVD. Although not as bloody as Stalin's security apparatus, the Stasi was just as intrusive when it came to internal affairs and used similar tactics to bolster the party's hold on political authority. This included methods like widespread citizen surveillance, subjugation of opposition elements, and censorship of any type of anti-party activity. The Stasi became just as intrusive in German life as the NKVD had become in the Soviet sphere, but perhaps had improved in the sense of operational ability. There was never the bloodshed that the NKVD was known for, so Ulbricht never had to account for the murders that Stalin had. At the same time, fear and suspicion were ingrained in East Germany, leading to an unquestioned state security agency that operated with impunity like its Soviet predecessor had.

Ulbricht's attempts to create a cult of personality based around his rule were the other significant methods of control that he took from Stalin's example. His life and

accomplishments, even those that were simply untrue, were pressed upon the German people in the attempt to project him as the benevolent father of this new state. Ulbricht was unquestioned by his party after successful purges and made attempts to bring his citizens under the same control through Stalin-like endeavors. Statues were erected of Ulbricht, portraits of him were present in most schools and homes, and even his birthday was celebrated as other nations might celebrate days of independence. Accolades were heaped upon Ulbricht in the attempt to give him the political and communist credentials that were reserved for heroes of the revolution. The attempts to portray him as a larger-than-life figure were difficult, though, and did not lead to the reverence and omnipresence that Stalin had accomplished before his death. Factors like the shared border with West Germany allowed GDR citizens to gain outside information on the regime that was not possible for Soviet citizens under Stalin. Also, Ulbricht had a murky history that the party hadn't done a good job of covering up; his attempts to portray himself as a brave fighter in the Spanish Civil War fell upon deaf ears. Germans had remembered Ulbricht from the Weimar era and knew that the awkward Saxon was no god among men. Despite his attempts, Ulbricht did not enjoy the success Stalin had when it came to fostering his image of greatness. Fortunately for Ulbricht, other methods of control were possible, but he would never truly earn the blind adoration and worship that he had hoped would place both party and people under his patronage. So much was the population's dislike for Ulbricht that "Graffiti artists depicted Ulbricht on gallows or daubed slogans, such as 'Ulbricht, the Russians' watchdog'. Nine protesters were arrested in Sommerda district on 19 August (1961) alone; one had threatened to murder Ulbricht." (Allinson, 124).

The next question asked was with regard to the strategies Walter Ulbricht used during Stalin's reign to ensure his survival and advancement. The author believes that the Stalin period of Ulbricht's career has merit to these factors, but wishes to amend the answer to encompass the larger extent of his early career, rather than just those that coincided with both of their regimes. Loyalty and dedication to Stalin was certainly a large factor that should be addressed with regards to Ulbricht's rise to power, perhaps even the initial one. Ulbricht was essentially scouted and vetted to become one of Stalin's minions in the German party from the time that he attended the Lenin School. He made contacts with the NKVD, was given Soviet citizenship, and from that point forward never turned his back on the USSR. The Soviet Union was Ulbricht's ideological home, leading him to a career where he would do all that he could to advance their prestige and prosperity, along with his own. Stalin selected Ulbricht as one of the advance vanguard that reentered Germany after the war; sending him to Berlin was a likely indicator of leadership potential. Even though Stalin may have viewed him as a willing stooge, Ulbricht performed well as a German liaison to his Soviet patron, never questioning his actions. Even when the USSR and Nazi Germany signed their non-aggression pact in 1939, Ulbricht vehemently defended Stalin's decision, despite his condition as a KPD exile subjugated by one half of that agreement. Loyalty like this gave Ulbricht the keys to the kingdom. Stalin never attempted to replace Ulbricht or limit his control of the SED, depicting a mutually beneficial relationship between leader and deputy. Stemming from his rapport with Stalin, came the necessity of following the CPSU's international party line, something that Ulbricht did with great enthusiasm. Whether it came to bolshevizing the Weimar KPD or speaking out against Maoism

during the Sino-Soviet split, Ulbricht never showed disloyalty to the Soviet vision for the future of communism. Although he would attempt to experiment with a unique brand of German socialism in the late 1960s, Ulbricht was quick to renounce his vision when it was rebuked by the Russian party.

With this loyalty to the USSR came Ulbricht's ability to make appeals to the Soviets when he was in need, no matter what the occasion. He would call on them politically, militarily, and financially throughout his time in office, often making it more of a demand than a request. Financially the GDR was reliant upon the Soviets, due to the politicking of the FDR, which had imposed a large economic embargo upon its rival neighbor. For a nation as ravaged as East Germany had been in the past decades, these sanctions took a major toll upon the impoverished population. The only major power willing to trade with the GDR on the necessary scale was the Soviet Union; even their fiscal boosts were not enough to help the GDR overcome the hump they needed to become an industrialized nation on par with those of the west. Militarily, the Red Army had in actuality saved the Ulbricht regime in June 1953. The SED leadership had fled East Berlin during the revolt and would not likely have retaken the capital if it hadn't been for Soviet intervention on their behalf. The guarantee of Soviet military backing also provided the GDR with a safeguard against western pressure, as the Cold War divide between East and West brought East Germany under the umbrella of the USSR's nuclear protective zone. The East German regime was fully aware that its survival hinged on the Soviets refusing to allow threats against its satellite regions in Eastern Europe. All of these factors hinged upon the political union of the GDR and the USSR. The Soviets needed strong SED leadership to hold East Germany under socialist control, just as

Ulbricht needed the Kremlin to legitimize his rule. It was a symbiotic relationship that was not preferred, but was the geopolitical reality of the situation. Both regimes needed the other for the time being, with the weaker Ulbricht party reliant upon Soviet guarantees, just as the Soviet patrons found the SED a necessary implementation of their real politick.

The Stalinist-style purges of the GDR were another strategy that Ulbricht used to his benefit. He had adapted the bloody Soviet method to fit his own capabilities, preferring to shame his rivals and force them out of office. Once completed, these offices would come under Ulbricht's direct supervision, giving him even more operational authority over a party that was increasingly becoming centralized to his office. It was through this style that Ulbricht was able to avoid the bloodbaths associated with Soviet purges, leaving his hands relatively clean and avoiding popular outcry over perceived brutality. Party members who had been purged were often even permitted to rejoin the party years later. This happened of course after full confessions of alleged crimes against the state and full documentation of their life activities, which would be used as leverage against future possible outbursts. The German purges claimed mostly notable Ulbricht rivals, mixed in with lower-level functionaries roped in to make the scenarios seem like legitimate factionalism. Ulbricht brilliantly targeted stronger politicians like Fred Oelssner, Karl Schirdewan, and Franz Dahlem for removal under suspicious accusations, but the party was so embroiled in conspiracy that Ulbricht came out the victor. By the time Ulbricht reached his ninth year in power, he had effectively removed possible contenders to his leadership position and had brought the rest of the party in line with his primacy.

The question was asked about what made Ulbricht willingly participate in the transition to Stalinization within the German Democratic Republic. In this respect, loyalty to the Stalin regime was an obvious answer. This part had been discussed already at great detail, but it must not be marginalized. Ulbricht was unquestioning toward Joseph Stalin and his vision for the future of the communist world. He had won power through Stalin's actions and his continued domination of East Germany was reliant upon the Soviet's whims. Ulbricht knew this all too well and made no attempts to contradict or challenge Stalin, lest he suffer the consequences that others had in Eastern Europe. Their relationship was beneficial to Ulbricht, giving ample reason to maintain his obedience until Stalin's death. Walter Ulbricht also possessed a keen sense of opportunity when it came to dynamic shifts in party direction and factionalism. Before joining the KPD, he had switched political affiliations multiple times when it was advantageous to his promotion. He had initially joined the Social Democrats when he was old enough to participate in German politics, but had followed the affiliation shifts of the more radical socialists until finally finding a more permanent home with the KPD. Every time he changed his allegiance, Ulbricht found himself in a better position to move up the party chain of command, proving that he knew when and where to jump the political ship. This sense of timeliness when entering into a new political communion would also benefit Ulbricht when it came to inner-party factional battles that were all the rage in the communist circles. Ulbricht knew how to skirt the line so as to avoid being lumped in with those who were making waves, often playing both sides of the struggle so that he could collaborate with the winners when the outcome was practically determined. He continued with this method of advancement until he had reached the pinnacle of power,

always cleverly associating with the victorious faction. This ability was ingrained in his character early in Ulbricht's KPD days and was sharpened through the revolutionary work that he had performed for the party. Ulbricht was considered a genius when it came to organizational duties, so it made sense that he knew the ins and outs of party struggles from both sides, through his network of contacts and job benefits. Being informed at all times assisted the man in testing the waters before making career decisions, especially ones where failure would lead to disaster. Staying one step ahead of the rest of the party leadership gave Ulbricht the skills necessary to traverse the difficult ideological battles; rather than participate as a mouthpiece for one side or the other, Ulbricht instead wisely chose to keep his mouth shut until advantageous. By the time Ulbricht picked sides, he already knew he was joining with the faction that would come out on top. Such a process of gathering information while patiently avoiding conflict would possibly be Ulbricht's greatest political skill set, taking him all the way to the top of his party's inner circle.

Finally, the author asked what historical cultural, and political factors allowed Walter Ulbricht to become successful in dominating the German communist movement. This question was posed in the framework of explaining away his more negative qualities, such as not being an ideologue and having never been seen as a major party personality during the pre-1945 years of the KPD. However, the author believes that this question has already been adequately answered after further investigation of the subject, who has revealed himself to be a cunning and skillful politician despite lacking the previously stated attributes that are often associated with party success. For the sake of further investigation of Ulbricht's rise, it would benefit the work to briefly mention a few events that proved useful for his personal regime throughout his tenure. The first would

be the advantageous downfall of other party leaders, with or without Ulbricht's influence. The deaths of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht during the German revolution of 1918-1919 left a leadership vacuum that was advantageous to Ernst Thalmann, a protégé of Joseph Stalin's. Thalmann took control of the German portion of the communist movement and with him came Walter Ulbricht, who had again wisely chosen the winning side of such a transition. With Thalmann came a radicalization of the German movement and Ulbricht was able to advance as a follower of the Stalin disciple. In this instance, Ulbricht skipped over many other German communists who had associated themselves with other factions, in particular the larger part of the collective who had rejected the adoption of a more Soviet-centric political line.

Cold War geopolitics also played a significant role in Ulbricht's ability to remain the leader of the GDR for as long as he did. As mentioned, the German reunification ideas of Stalin had failed post-war, so the Soviets were left with little choice but to back their socialist German client state. In backing the GDR's rise from the Soviet administrative zone, they in turn had to support its chosen leader, Ulbricht. East Germany's positioning as the buffer between the western and eastern blocs in the realigned Europe gave the stronger USSR a reason to help protect the GDR from falling. There was also the presence of West Berlin deep in East German territory, a thorn in the side of the Soviet machinations from its initial conception. The west half of the German capital was heavily militarized by the US, UK, and France, which left the Soviets with no choice but to keep a large military contingency in East Germany so as to protect their interior from attack by the occupying forces. In this regard, Soviet military presence would be a deterrent force that kept both interior and exterior opportunists from

overthrowing the Ulbricht regime, a trump card that the SED would often bank on. The Germans were also a people who had been spiritually and physically exhausted from the last forty years of revolutions and wars. A generation of Germans had lived through World War I, the German revolution of 1918, Nazification, World War II, and the division of their former nation at the hands of the Allies. Perhaps they saw the formation of the GDR and the tense standoff of the Cold War as a break in the violence, hoping to rebuild their lives under the shield of a forced peace. Germans by large did not like the communists or the regime that had been forced upon the east portion of their country by the Soviets, but was it not an improvement from dubious rule of the Kaiser and the Nazis? Submission and pacification took hold of the East German population, who rebelled only once in 1953 and quickly returned to order after the Soviets had made their presence known. Ulbricht and the SED likely capitalized on this cultural weariness, promising their people an end to wars and a more stable government, even if it wasn't the one they desired. The docility of the Germans allowed Ulbricht and his associates to easily take control of the Soviet administered zone after World War II. Their passiveness also allowed the SED to build a new state that was based around the assumption that the communist movement would be unquestioned and left in charge for the foreseeable future. The German people had essentially allowed Ulbricht to take their half of the country hostage and with the exception of 1953, watched as he built a solid state under his absolute authority. Indeed, the SED delivered the peace and stability they had promised Germans when they rose to power, creating a party presence that was intertwined in all aspects of life and forced the illusion that it was the only factor keeping Germany from descending into anarchy for the fifth time in that generation's lifetime.

To conclude, the author wishes to briefly discuss new insights into the figure of Walter Ulbricht that have been developed over the course of this work. It is hoped that these revelations may be further discussed in the future, creating a basis from which to challenge the modern understanding of Ulbricht and his political career. It is the author's wish to change the framework with which scholarship views the subject. By altering the assumptions and correcting the negligence given to this important political figure, it is believed that future works may benefit and give academia a better understanding of the Cold War era. The first distinction to be addressed is with regards to the schools of thought regarding who Ulbricht was as a person and as a leader. Many works cut corners when they discuss the figure of Walter Ulbricht, often casting him in single-dimensional roles for the benefit of neglecting his historical influence. Rather than quickly brushing him aside as a stooge, an idiot, or a self-centered megalomaniac, it would be more beneficial to understand the complexities of his character, rather than pigeonholing his person to fit certain expectations of the author. As such, the author wishes for Ulbricht not to be underestimated in the scholarly world, but instead to be given the proper credit for being a complex individual that related figures like Joseph Stalin enjoy. Not all of the schools of thought regarding Ulbricht are incorrect; they all depict certain elements of him that are important aspects of his personality. Taking out prejudices and deprecations, this work has attempted to show that Ulbricht was in fact an amalgamation of all these depictions. He was a man that was grossly unpopular and had an irritating vocal pattern. He was also a calculating individual who was one of the most astute manipulators of the Cold War paranoia complex. Ulbricht suffered numerous failures and embarrassments, sometimes only escaping with his job or his life by the grace of luck. Marxism wasn't

just a tool to Ulbricht, but rather a complimentary accessory that benefitted his agenda through strict practice of his chosen variety. The author aspires to bring attention to the intricacies of Walter Ulbricht's complex persona, joining with existing scholars to alter popular understanding of who he was and what role he played in the 20th Century.

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