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"This is not a Politburo, but a madhouse," The post World War II Sovietization of East Germany up to the 1953 worker's uprising.

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"This is Not a Politburo, But a Madhouse,"

The Post World War II Sovietization of East Germany Up to the 1953

Worker's Uprising

by

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ABSTRACT

The end of World War II brought forth many problems for the allies that had not been completely resolved by the victors. One of the most important was what to do with the defeated Germany. Within the first decade after World War II, the division of the former German superpower had become the front line of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. In the first eight years after the war (1945-53) East Germany, the Soviet controlled sector, quickly became 'Stalin's unwanted child' and was the first communist country to rebel against the imposed Soviet style socialism. The post war build up and Sovietization of East Germany was the catalyst for the 1953 East German uprising, which became the model that other Soviet influenced countries followed (Hungary, Czechoslovakia).

After viewing internal Soviet documents sent from East Germany to Soviet Foreign Ministers and reviewing interviews with eyewitnesses, it is clear that the 1953 East German uprising was a worker's revolt triggered by the ill treatment they received from the German Democratic Republic (GDR). It was not a popular uprising (a revolt where much of the population is represented by specific groups).

Introduction

Within the first decade after World War II, the division of the former German superpower had become the front line of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. In the first eight years after the war (1945-53) East Germany, the Soviet controlled sector, quickly became 'Stalin's unwanted child' and was the first communist country to rebel against imposed Soviet-style socialism. The post war build-up and Sovietization of East Germany was the catalyst for the 1953 East German uprising, which became the model that other Soviet-influenced countries followed (Hungary, Czechoslovakia).

The end of World War II brought forth many problems for the Allies that had not been completely resolved by the victors. One of the most important was what to do with the defeated Germany. The final design of dividing Germany into sections was a result of the European Advisory Commission's (EAC) attempt to ensure the demilitarization and democratization of the aggressor nation. But the repercussions of such an action turned out to be much more than the simple rebuilding of a defeated Germany. New sources have come to the forefront of East German history with the fall of the Berlin Wall. In 1992 Hungary, East Germany and the Soviet Union opened up their archives to historians and a flood of new material concerning the complete and accurate history of the communist countries became available.

When the archives opened in 1992, a flood of new material became available to the public. This has enabled academics to begin the process of analyzing the events

surrounding the Sovietization of East Germany that inexorably lead to the 1953 East

German uprising. By piecing together information from these newly available sources (in

my case specifically East German Archives, Hungarian Central Archives, Archives of the

Russian General Staff, and Archive of Foreign Policy of Russian Federation) and recently

produced secondary sources, a new interpretation of the events leading up to and the

ramifications of the 1953 East German workers' uprising is beginning to take form. After

viewing internal Soviet documents sent from East Germany to Soviet Foreign Ministers

and reviewing interviews with eyewitnesses, it is clear that the 1953 East German

uprising was a workers revolt triggered by the ill treatment they received from the

German Democratic Republic (GDR). It was not a popular uprising, a revolt where

specific groups represented much of the population. However, the East German uprising

must be viewed against the backdrop of the rise of the Soviet satellite state that preceded

it.

Zones of Influence

The treaty that ended the European phase of World War II also ended the existence of a single unified German state.

> The allies had no clear idea during and immediately after the war concerning what should be done with defeated Germany. Although quite radical plans for its dismemberment and reconstitution as a number of smaller states had been mooted during the war, such a scheme had never actually been approved. The eventual division of Germany four years later was an ad-hoc, unintended result of the emerging Cold War between the superpowers, rather than the outcome of conscious Allied policies for Germany.[1]

The victorious Allied powers divided Germany into four zones of occupation (British, French, American and Soviet). The British, French, and American sectors were located in West Germany and comprised close to 70 percent of Germany's total area. The Soviet Union's occupation zone was comprised of the eastern 1/3 of Germany (known as East Germany) plus East Berlin. The Allies who controlled West Germany's fate had problems of their own: Britain could barely feed their population and the United States decided punishing former Nazis was less important than containing the spread of communism. Thus it was that West Germany became an ally in the fight to defend 'freedom and democracy' against the evils of 'totalitarian' communism.[2]

Although Stalin continually said that he wanted East Germany to become a democratic state, his real intention was for East Germany and the other Soviet satellites

(e.g., Hungary and Czechoslovakia) to follow their own national roads to socialism without *obvious* Soviet intervention.[3] But, according to Konrad Jarausch, "to most outside observers, the East German state remained an indistinct country, overshadowed both by the hegemonic power of the Soviet Union over its own bloc and by the larger size and economic influence of its Western twin, the Federal republic."[4]

From the outset, the Soviets sought to transform their zone into something more akin to the Soviet mold. "The Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) were founded as conscious attempts to develop new forms of state and society, radically breaking with the Nazi past, and based on explicit political ideologies and theories of society."[5] They were in effect tests in reality of opposing theories of how to create a 'good' society.

Post World War II Build Up

Following Stalin's plans, the Sovietization started with the resurgence of the Communist party in Germany by inserting handpicked party members back into Germany to revitalize the almost forgotten group. Immediately after the Soviets occupied East Germany a group of leading German Communist Party (KPD) functionaries was sent from Moscow to different sections of the Soviet zone of occupation. Walter Ulbricht, who would become the key politician affecting the future of East Germany, was the head of the group and went to Berlin; Anton Ackermann was sent to Saxony; Gustav Sabottka went to Mecklenburg. One Soviet military document indicated "that the work of these groups was to organize the population in the manner desired by the Soviet authorities rather than initiate immediately independent German political activity."[6] They were to establish and organize a newspaper, radio, book publishing and local law enforcement in their areas. The men were directed to purge the local existing government offices and schools. The groups were responsible for choosing a mayor for each town and establishing a central government made up of anti-Nazi personnel.

> Though they were not identical in composition they had the appearance of having been put together according to a formula. Often the mayor was non-party or had belonged to one of the small Liberal parties before 1933. His deputy would normally be a communist. A number of appointments were made on the basis of technical knowledge, there was usually a sprinkling of Christians, a fairly strong Social Democrat group, and a strong Communist presence.[7]

This 'democratic' East Germany would act as a springboard for the German Communist Party (KPD) to take control of the country in the future. Since Stalin could not afford to jeopardize his fragile relations with the Western powers by attempting to create East Germany as a communist state during the country's infancy, he decided to 'Sovietize' East Germany slowly and somewhat removed from the Soviet Union. To accomplish this goal, Stalin used Ulbricht to increase the power of the KPD in Germany and to seek out new members. Ulbricht's motto was "it must look democratic, but we must control everything."[8]

Stalin knew that communists had played a significant role in German politics. In 1933, the KPD controlled about five million votes and had an active underground organization. Stalin hoped to re-ignite the East German communist party by placing handpicked communist officials in positions of authority throughout the GDR.[9]

Communists and Social Democrats emerged in towns and cities all over East Germany as the war was winding down. They were deeply influenced by the twelve years of Nazi tyranny and oppression. Contact between members in both groups was slight during the Third Reich's regime. The organizations attempted to keep functioning underground, but quickly realized the ferocity of Nazi persecution.[10] This led to small pockets of Communists and Social Democrats spread throughout the country with no effective means of communicating with each other or the outside world. In some cases there were multiple groups in the same town that were unaware of each other's presence.

When the Soviets arrived in search of communists, they found that many of the KPD and German Socialist Party (SPD) members were teaching old-fashioned ideologies that had not been used in the Soviet Union since the late twenties and early thirties. In a

report drawn up by the Leipzig KPD in the summer of 1945, it was concluded that the isolation of party members made it extremely difficult for them to keep up with events and to interpret correctly the national and international situation.[11]

In practice, the Soviets attempted to balance the small active minority with the passive majority by allowing the minority to get involved in fundamental changes while not upsetting the general population. The KPD described its main goals in the 'Appeal' of 11 June 1945, which declared that, although the entire German population must share some responsibility for the Nazi's actions, the majority of the blame would be directed at "Nazi leaders, their hangers on and accomplices."[12] KPD officials announced that all essential public services (water, gas, electricity) must be brought under public ownership and all land owned by the Nazi leaders would be expropriated. All these claims were aimed at pacifying the general population.

The KPD also assured the East German people that they were not attempting to 'Sovietize' East Germany (even though they were). They asserted that all their efforts were aimed at creating "an anti-fascist, democratic-regime, a parliamentary-democratic republic with all democratic rights and freedoms for the people."[13] At that point, the KPD made it appear that they wanted nothing more than to gain the trust of the masses. They worked along-side other anti-fascist organizations and claimed that they were now a people's party rather than an elite group that few were allowed to join.

By trying to appeal to both the active minority and the passive Nazi-influenced majority, the KPD ended up pleasing neither. It was said: "The political orientation of the Soviets and the KPD leadership was always in danger of falling between two stools: neither radical enough for the activists nor conservative enough for the Nazi-influenced

masses. As a result, the whole united front strategy was inherently unstable, for it presupposed a degree of political cohesion in the population that simply did not exist."[14]

The KPD and SPD both had problems controlling lower level functionaries posted to the distant provinces. These men, who had spent the last decade under Nazi rule, were confused by the new party doctrines. This was important because, if the anti-fascist bloc could not control them through political means, then they would have to turn to forceful means of control. One of the many problems confronting the hard line KPD members was the idea that the party should become a 'People's Party' rather than remain the traditional elite caste that it once was. Such a transformation could only take place if the party became open to the working class, farmers, peasants, students, and non-traditional party members. Many established members expressed disgust for this plan because they spent twelve years under Nazi oppression while the 'common folk' had blindly supported Hitler and his regime. The idea of allowing these people to join the party now, without recourse taken against them for their actions, did not sit well with the party elite.[15]

In response to this opposition, Ulbricht brought in many young communists and tactically removed the older communists who would not conform to the new policies. In Leipzig for instance, "the KPD leadership sent out the instruction that older KPD members 'who are no longer so flexible…may not insist on being given posts which are beyond their capabilities.'"[16] One ex-KPD member, Oskar Hippe, said of the situation: "Many older comrades turned their backs on the party because they were not prepared to tolerate the policies of Walter Ulbricht…At demonstrations, they watched from the sides of the streets as bystanders."[17]

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In order to help bolster its membership, the KPD utilized German Communist Party POWs held in Czechoslovakia by the Russians to revamp the party after the war. But some (about 30 percent), who were not presented with an accurate portrayal of occupied East Germany, fled West upon gaining their freedom from their Soviet oppressors.

The most important factor used to decide which POWs would be released in order to help rebuild the KPD, was whether or not the prisoner had had ties to the Nazis or to the Hitler Youth. As one official said: "Particular education is not mandatory, only being able to write and speak good German."[18]

Stalin believed that he would have to revolutionize East Germany's various social, economic and political factions because the Soviet Union would inevitably once again be confronted by a revitalized, revived, and hopefully reunified Germany. By letting the East Germans follow their own path to socialism, Stalin intended that the Soviet Union would not be cast in the role of a ruffian, but, rather, would be viewed as a "big-brother" figure who was there to "help" the East Germans to recovery. That plan worked slowly, but surely, in most of the Soviet satellite countries except East Germany.

Creation of the Socialist Unity Party (SED)

In 1945, Stalin sought to merge two of East Germany's most powerful political parties in an attempt to create a single unified working class party which he could later control. In a speech given in November 1945, Ulbricht and Wilhelm Pieck harped on the fact that "division within the working-class movement must be replaced by unity."[19] The unity they had in mind was to result from joining the KPD and the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Ulbricht and Pieck threatened SPD members that "to disagree with the Communists' appeal for unity was to split both the working class and the nation."[20] The KPD needed the SPD to ensure Stalin's vision of a united SED.

In April 1946 the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) merged to create the Socialist Unity Party (SED) as a result of Soviet "compulsion and self-deception."[21] On 4 February, Otto Grotewohl, chairman of the SPD from 1945-46, said: "not only was the strongest pressure being brought to bear on them personally (he spoke of being tickled by Russian bayonets)…their organization in the provinces had been completely undermined …there was no point in resisting…the 'iron curtain'…had come to stay."[22] Otto Buchwitz, a former leader of the SPD, put forth four reasons why he thought unification was necessary: First, communist leaders believed that after the Nazi tyranny, a dictatorship was not possible; second, revolutionary socialism was the next logical step after the failure of Weimar reformism; third, socialism was already laid out in Russia and the Western powers wanted to bring back a 'bourgeois-capitalist' order; fourth, even though the Soviets were pressuring the SPD, they had no

interest in imposing their system on Germany. SPD members also recognized that they would make up over half of the new party's membership and, therefore, the party would be molded to their standards.[23]

Unification took considerably longer than either party had anticipated. Factionalism ran rampant throughout the party. By the middle of 1948, "the SED had about two million members, some 600,000 of whom were former Communists, 680,000 of whom were former Social Democrats, but over 700,000 of whom had joined only since unification."[24] As one historian observed, "striking cultural differences remained; for example, the Social Democrats' use of the polite *Sie* for 'you', against the communists' preference for the informal *Du* in conversation. On the political level two main tendencies could be discerned: "'Sectarianism' on the left and sympathy for the West German SPD on the right."[25] One former SPD member believed that soon the party would be reformed and when this happened that many of the ex-SED members would join the re-founded SPD.

In May 1948 a group of main line former Social Democrats (SD) met at Max Fechner's (high-ranking SD member) house to discuss how the two socialist traditions split the party rather than uniting them and swore to limit the power of the standoffish Walter Ulbricht. But, in the ensuing weeks, the group disintegrated.

The height of Stalinization in East Germany began with the first party conference of the SED in 1948, at which the party leadership elected a Politburo that would lead the party in the direction of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin. The SED took a decidedly stronger turn toward the Sovietization of East Germany. The East German Supreme Court was established in late 1949 and convicted over 78,000 people of political crimes in 1950

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alone.[26] Many Social Democrats were quickly purged from the party as the SED called

on its members to expose the bourgeois-nationalist elements because they were enemies

of the state. "Stalin and his followers of the Soviet bloc, such as Ulbricht, threw

overboard the excess baggage of the dissonant memories of World War II and the

Holocaust as they turned the shape of the state around to fight the Western

imperialists."[27] Ulbricht proclaimed the SED a 'party of a new type', which referred to a

party based on the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, rather than the SED's previous

tenets. This proclamation proved to be the beginning of the turn from the former 'German

road to socialism' to an all out push toward the Soviet model of communism. The party

was transformed from a mass membership party into a cadre party, full of active

revolutionary members. This allowed the SED to purge unwanted or undesirable

members and to control more effectively the admission of new comrades.[28]

As the SED implemented new policies, other East German parties were

transformed into instruments of Soviet policy. In June 1948 Ulbricht, used his control of

the SED to rid the party of all those suspected of harboring sympathy for social

democratic ideals. He accused these men of infiltrating the party and sabotaging its

operations. Some people believed that by the autumn of 1948 it was more dangerous to

be a former member of the SPD than an active Nazi.[29] As with the purges in the Soviet

Union, those who opposed the action taken by the SED were imprisoned and sometimes

shot. Between 1948 and 1950 almost 600 members of the Christian Democratic Union

(CDU), a right of center moderately conservative Christian party, were imprisoned. Many

of the captives mysteriously died or disappeared in 1950.[30] Thousands of former and

current SPD members were tracked down and arrested for resisting the new policies.

Ulbricht sought young recruits whose minds were still impressionable, rather than allowing the longtime, powerful, members to express their disgust with the direction the SED was heading.

In his attempt to bring new members into the SED (including ex-communists who were scared of joining because of their Nazi pasts), Ulbricht declared in a speech that a person's current political attitudes were more important than previous actions:

> Today, the measure of who is a peace-loving individual and who seeks German unity is not what party membership book they had earlier, and whether or not they belonged to the Hitler party. Rather, the only measure is: Are you for a peace treaty? Are you against the Atlantic Pact, as a result of which West Germany would be made into a base for war? Are you for the unity of Germany? Are you for the withdrawal of occupation troops following the conclusion of a peace treaty, or are you for a forty-year occupation and colonization of West Germany? Today, under these conditions, anyone who raised the question 'Is this person a former member of the Nazi party or not' works against the formation of a National Front.[31]

Getting people to join the SED was not an easy task for Ulbricht. The majority of Germans who survived the war wanted nothing more than to put food on the table and attempt to piece their pre-war lives back together. Politics, in their minds, was closely associated with Nazism and very few were interested in getting involved again. The shortage of food took precedence over any political aspirations:

> The major part of the population still remains politically reserved. In particular the middle classes, which lived through the period of the Wilhelmine system and the period of the Weimar Republic to their great

disappointment, but which took fresh hope from National Socialism and which are now witness to the downfall of the National Socialist regime, have lost faith in everything. Trust in any new political movement does not yet exist among them.[32]

Soviet Reparations Policy for East Germany

The Soviet Union initially had three main goals in East Germany: "first to equip occupying forces with the necessary supplies; second to secure the payment of reparations; and finally to insure the basic needs of the German population."[33] As early as 1943 the Russians planned to take equipment rather than money in satisfaction of East Germany's reparations obligations. This was a Soviet version of "industrial disarmament policy aimed at reducing Germany to an agrarian economy."[34]

Post World War II East Germany was not stable economically either. What became East Germany was historically central Germany. Although not uniform throughout the region, this area did have a rich industrial base that offered some of the most advanced technology in the world. Much of the land around Berlin was primarily agricultural, but within the city there were large concentrations of industry. The East Germans were famous for their ability to produce the highest quality machine tools and machines, having provided up to 80 per cent of Germany's machinery before World War II. East Germany was also home to important chemical plants located close to Leipzig and Merseburg which produced dye, film, and synthetic rubber. By the end of the war, East Germany had the largest chemical company in Germany both in number of employees and capacity (Leuna plant).[35]

Goals of Soviet Restructuring

Disassembling industrial plants in East Germany and removing them to the Soviet Union accomplished two of Russia's three goals, by ensuring that Germany could never attack Russia again and improving Russia's own industrial base by using German materials and technology taken from the Soviet zone of occupation. The first problem was retooling the plants for peacetime production. A second problem was the lack of research and development to aid in technological innovation. Berlin was home to some key companies in this field, but the vast majority were stationed in West Berlin. The foremost companies that did have research and development capacities, like Zeiss (a world leader in optics), lost many of their top scientists when the American occupation authorities evacuated the Soviet zone in 1945 (Zeiss lost 84 of their scientific and technological personnel in the evacuation[36]).

Since many of the major companies were located in West Germany, East Germany also lost many of its top level managers. In some cases, whole corporations relocated toward the end of the war. Siemens, for instance, moved from Berlin to Munich.[37]

In 1945 the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS) assessed the damage done to the German economy by allied strategic bombing. It concluded that, although the collapse of the German economy was due to heavy bombing, the Allies did very little damage to German industrial capacities. The majority of the damage was inflicted upon the oil industry and infrastructure systems (rail lines, sewage, water, etc.). Industrial

factories had little exterior damage, and even less harm was done to the machinery inside.[38]

The USSBS also found marked regional differences in the amount of damage. Even though the Soviet zone contained important industrial factories that produced war materials including chemical and rubber production, comparatively few facilities were affected by the allied bombing strategy. The GDR only lost 15 percent of its 1944 capacity, whereas the Federal Republic lost 22 percent of its industrial capacity. [39] In general, the damage to buildings far exceeded the damage to industrial plants throughout Germany. The majority of factories had the ability to resume production only weeks after the war ended. Much more damage was done to the East German industrial capacity when Russia removed whole factories. For instance:

> Aluminum and magnesium capacity…was intact at war's end, but stood at zero in September 1946. Magnesium-oxide capacity was removed entirely. Ninety-five percent of automobile tire production plant was dismantled. Eighty percent of soda capacity disappeared. All of these were sectors that had survived the war intact.[40]

What did the Soviet Union intend to do with these factories? The majority of facilities that had been designed specifically for wartime production were removed. Their uses, as they stood, were limited. The machines would need to be retooled and reconfigured for peacetime production. Also, wartime manufacture was constant, so the machines and parts used to produce goods would need to be replaced soon because of their extreme use.

Some of the factories that were removed to the Soviet Union were rendered useless and discarded, but many were put to good use. The Soviets studied plant removal carefully, so as to figure out which plants were salvageable and which were not. Therefore, they were much more prepared to remove quality plants and selected their targets deliberately:

> The Soviets concentrated on plants containing equipment and machines that could be safely transported. Close comparison of removals in Manchuria and East Germany indicates that almost 100 percent of removals had high salvage value and were easily transported, i.e., machine tools, precision instruments, and small items of equipment *not* made of fabricated sheet metal. On the other hand, the Western Allies in Europe appear to have concentrated their removals on plants with relatively low salvage value. [41]

The Soviets focused on machines, not systems. This allowed them to incorporate the machines into their own pre-existing systems.

The Soviets also seized scientific papers and documents to help further their own research and development. They also forced large numbers of engineers and scientists to move to the Soviet Union to work on R&D projects there. According to David Holloway, "The war provided the Soviet Union with a major infusion of foreign technology, mainly in form of captured German scientists, technicians, equipment and production plant."[42] Around 3,000 specialists and their families were transported to the Soviet Union and detained for up to twelve years. [43] Their fields ranged from optics and nuclear research to aeronautics. This action hindered technological development in East Germany by instilling fear in the remaining scientists and engineers who saw what would happen if

the Soviets thought they could be utilized in the Soviet Union. This caused a large number of leading scientists and engineers to flee West from the GDR. However, the industrial losses were only one facet of the Soviet's plan to transform East Germany into the German Democratic Republic.

Life in East Germany versus Life in West Germany

East Germany was a special case. As a divided country with a divided former capital, comparisons between the life in the capitalist West and life in the communist East were impossible to avoid. By 1948 it was clear that the East Germans were very poor in comparison to their counterparts in West Germany, and the difference in quality of life between the two was marked. While the Marshal Plan pumped money into the West German economy, allowing it to expand and prosper, the Soviet Union's forced reparation payments had the opposite effect on the East German economy.

East Berliners were reminded daily of the vast difference in standard of living. A British Broadcasting Corporation correspondent in West Germany observed, "any East German could go to West Berlin at anytime, by simply crossing into West Berlin . . . "[44] This freedom to travel from East Berlin to West Berlin was a fundamental cause of dissatisfaction because the experience of visitors to West Berlin served as "the most powerful propaganda, the effect of the things in the shops, a much better life, better dressed people, freedom to travel…."[45]

East Germans became jealous of the wealth afforded to the West Germans and questioned the East German and Soviet goals for East Germany. The stark contrast in living standard so close to home obviously acted as a catalyst to spread discontent. Seeing the difference in wealth inhibited East Germans from ever truly accepting communist rule. Thus Stalin needed to tighten the Soviet grip of East Germany.

Towards Soviet Style Socialism

Believing (and rightly so) that he was losing his hold on East Germany, in 1948 Ulbricht introduced a plan of accelerated industrialization and collectivization in an attempt to speed up the process of East Germany becoming a socialist nation. This was the final retreat from his original plan of allowing each nation to follow its own road to socialism and led to a bout of ruthless Sovietization during which all Soviet satellites were forced to introduce Soviet economic and political practices. This Soviet style terror was introduced between 1948 and 1953.

In 1952, at the Second Conference of the SED, an accelerated construction of socialism was introduced by Ulbricht, which put major strains on industrial workers by raising their output quotas by up to ten percent. It was obvious that the East German people were unhappy with the way in which their state was heading. Although the Soviets had dreams of a united popular front in the west, which would aid the Soviets in their initial quest for a united Germany, the increased Sovietization created an incurable rift that inexorably split the two Germanys further and further apart:

> Ideological dogmatism created a new political reality, since it meant that the state had to underscore the importance of an effective security system which saw a tremendous expansion after 1950. It also found expression in the tightening of East German criminal codes, such as the draconian 'Law regarding the protecting of inner German trade,' and influenced the GDR judicial system in the establishment of which Stalin was supposed to have exercised 'decisive assistance.'[46]

Many forms of repression were put in place during this time period, although the "class war" that was instituted in the GDR was more on an ideological level rather than the bloody purges of most Eastern Bloc nations. The Soviets professed that the elimination of 'Western, decadent' influences was intended to be constructive in a certain way - art and culture of the Soviet Union were a better alternative, while Soviet science "had long surpassed the science of the capitalist countries."[47] This repression resulted in reactions by those being subjugated including flight to the West, passive resistance, and acts of desperation. These reactions in turn brought forth more repressive acts, some in the form of Soviet Directives.

The Soviet Directives put forth in 1952 were viewed as an illustration of how outside influences affected the progression of the GDR. Western powers rejected an offer put forth by the Soviet Union to re-unify Germany on the condition that the new Germany would remain politically neutral. Stalin said, that "irrespective of any proposals that we can make on the German question the Western powers will not agree with them and will not withdraw from Germany in any case. It would be a mistake to think that a compromise might emerge or that the Americans will agree with the draft of the peace treaty."[48] Ulbricht and Stalin, therefore, knew that the Western powers would not agree to their proposal, and the Western powers' denial allowed Stalin to announce that the GDR would "have to create its own army and establish agricultural cooperatives."[49]

If the West accepted the re-unification of Germany, it would have hindered the Western assimilation of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG, or West Germany). Ulbricht followed this announcement with another bout of Sovietization, which not only led to the creation of a 'people's army' and of agriculture collectives, but also to the

abolition of the previous states of the GDR, the creation of a centralized administration along Soviet lines, and the tightening of border controls towards West Germany. There were two key directives involved in the further Sovietization of the GDR. The first was the abolition of the private sector in industrial production—from the end of 1952, the people would own the factories (at least eighty one percent of them). The second was the collectivization of agricultural production. The state punished landowners by adding new repressive measures to the transformations. The landowners were accused of sabotaging attempts to feed the populace.[50]

The GDR leadership proclaimed all East German youth were to be prepared to serve Germany in the form of military service. The creation of a new army would eventually cost the GDR 500 million Deutsch Marks, not including foodstuffs, which would be taken away from other consumers.[51] The GDR had not planned for the creation of a military and therefore had not included it in the 1952-53 budget. Money and specialists, whose expertise was necessary to the armament of East Germany, had to be taken from other projects.[52]

In July 1952 the SED declared that no offices could employ any young men between the ages of 18 and 24 in an industrial capacity. These men were to serve as "barracked" police troops. The SED turned to the nation's young women to fill in the industrial workforce gap. Although this helped move women toward greater employment, the economy was still on the verge of collapse because of the cost of reparations payments the GDR owed the Soviets and the Soviet Directives that were in various stages of implementation. The SED seemed unable to recognize the growing sense of dissatisfaction or the reasons for such discontent. Thus further measures only served to

further worsen conditions. For instance, the party attempted to relieve foodstuff shortages by suspending rationing for certain groups, which failed to relieve the specific situation and only created new frustrations.[53]

The number of East Germans fleeing to the West increased from 166,000 in 1951 to 182,000 in 1952.[54] West Germany proved appealing because of the higher salaries and standard of living caused by the "Korea Boom." The Korean War led to increased economic output and urgency in both Germanys, but West Germany offered many more incentives and money for similar positions in East Germany. In essence, West Germany was rapidly becoming more established as a productive state with the ability to direct its own government and people. East Germany, on the other hand, was becoming more destabilized.

West Berlin acted as a destabilizing catalyst for the GDR, especially among the youth by offering people an image of a better life for their families. East German youth traveled across the borders in huge numbers, seeking out all that Western technology and science had produced (televisions in store windows, record players, etc). Walter Ulbricht knew that this could be extremely dangerous and stated in June 1952 that any university student who had connections to the West would be expelled. The death of Stalin on March 5, 1953 brought a period of even greater uncertainty and confusion.

Stalin's Death: A Turning Point

Stalin's death marked a turning point for Soviet satellites and the future of Soviet strength in East-Central Europe. When he died, East Germans hoped for change. Stalin had not selected a clear successor. Therefore the top four or five party officials struggled to seize Stalin's position. The post-succession Kremlin power struggle put all external issues on a back burner during what proved to be an inflammatory time for the satellite countries, especially East Germany.

According to Sergo Beria, Laverentii Beria's son, Khrushchev, Malenkov, Bulganin and Beria came up with a plan for deciding who Stalin's successor would be. Beria proposed that Malenkov succeed Stalin, because he had a weak personality and would be easily controllable.[55] Beria "knew what Malenkov amounted to but considered that he was good enough for the role he meant to let him play."[56]

When Georgi Malenkov was named Stalin's successor the SED hoped that the he would answer its cry for help. Ulbricht and the SED had requested aid on numerous occasions to assist the GDR's failing economy and in April of 1953 Ulbricht again requested massive aid infusions to halt the total collapse of the East German economy.[57]

The Soviets denied all Ulbricht's reports as fabrications. When Russia finally requested its own studies of the mounting problems in East Germany in late April 1953, the Politburo was astounded.[58]

Problems in the Soviet Satellites

The Soviet study concluded that over 447,000 people had fled East Germany from January 1951 to April 1953. Many of these refugees were workers, scientists, and youths, which the SED desperately needed to keep East Germany afloat. A number of these people were peasants and farmers, which led to 26 per cent of the agricultural land lying fallow. During a four-month period in 1953 more than 2,700 SED members and candidates fled.[59] This is important because the SED was the governing party and further proves that the discontent was pervasive throughout society. The "intensification of class struggle" was one motivating factor that led to the increase in the number of people leaving the GDR.[60] These problems were pinned on Ulbricht because he acted as a dictator rather than as the leader of a group.

In early 1953, the USSR Council of Ministers convened to decide the GDR's fate. They believed that Ulbricht and the SED had implemented Stalin's rapid industrialization plan "without the presence of its real prerequisites, both internally and internationally."[61] The SED forcibly developed a heavy industry which lacked raw materials, restricted private initiative and revoked food ration cards from private entrepreneurs. They also hastily built agricultural cooperatives without foundations in the countryside where there were no supply routes. Additionally, this era of crash socialization was marred by harsh regimentation and persecution, as extensive arrests and trials accompanying the new policy added to the pressures on the East Germany socio-economic fabric.[62] Ultimately, East German production fell as a result of Ulbricht's industrialization measures.

The Soviet leadership concluded that it was time for change. Laverentii Beria, one of the top members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), investigated the possibility of allowing the GDR to stray from its present socialist path. He believed that the GDR had failed to become a socialist state and that now the only path was one of accommodation. He sought a unified Germany governed by a coalition government. Beria particularly wanted to get rid of Ulbricht, and personally blamed him for the failure of the GDR. Beria sought an East Germany that would have an autonomous government in a re-unified Germany, where both Soviet and Western influences played an equal role.[63]

GDR not the only problem

East Germany was not the only Soviet satellite that experienced such egregious problems. Hungary also dealt with many similar issues while attempting to cope with the ruthless Stalinisation program instituted in 1948. In Hungary, during just a two and half year period more than 1.5 of 9.5 million people were persecuted much in the same fashion as East Germans. The army soldiers punished 177,000 in little more than a year, almost one punishment for every person in the army. [64] Nikolai Bulganin, one of the new leaders of the CPSU, said of the Hungarian situation "This is not the road to socialism, but the road to catastrophe."[65]

Hungary built iron plants for which no country or foreign government had promised iron ore, a natural resource Hungary lacked. They implemented collectivization without the appropriate economic base, which led to the collectives having a lower productivity rate than individual producers. Additionally there were no quality goods in Hungary because the best goods had to be exported attempting to achieve a balanced trade, similar to the GDR. [66]

Another similarity between Hungary and East Germany was that the Soviets leadership blamed the top political figure for the problems within the country. It was obvious to the Soviets that their satellites were inexorably heading for a complete breakdown. In Hungary, Matyas Rakosi ruled much like Stalin in Russia and Ulbricht in East Germany. He had no second in command, because he considered the people surrounding him to be incompetent. In a meeting between Soviet and Hungarian leaders,

Rakosi could not name his primary deputy because "whenever someone's name came up, comrade Rakosi always immediately had some kind of objection."[67] Rakosi blamed his 'bossiness' on direct teachings from Stalin. When the Soviets confronted Rakosi about his dictatorial style he said "regarding hubris, that's an illness that one cannot detect, just like one can not smell one's own odor."[68]

Another satellite country that experienced problems was Yugoslavia under Tito (Josip Broz). Tito was a Croatian communist who devised a political program in 1944 that emphasized federalism and self-determination, which appealed to many. Under Tito, Yugoslavia was one of very few nations to liberate itself from the German Army. This accomplishment was possible because Hitler had to move troops from Yugoslavia to fight on the Russian front and also because the Red Army sent direct aid. Tito instituted a federal structure, as promised. His independent line resulted in Yugoslavia becoming a key member of the world's 'non-aligned movement' and also led to the country being excluded from the Soviet orbit in 1949. Ulbricht, as the head of the SED had similar problems with authority and implementing the Soviet's plans for the GDR.

"New Course" equals New Hope

Before the Soviets put forth the "New Course," they discussed a multitude of options pertaining to the strengthening of the East German people's opinion towards the Soviet Union and socialism. The Soviet Ministers believed it was "crucial to correct and strengthen the political and economic situation in the GDR and to strengthen significantly the influence of the SED in the broad masses of workers and in other democratic strata of the city and country."[69] It was agreed that the recent propaganda about the necessity of the GDR's transition to socialism which pushed the party organization of SED to simplified and hasty steps both in the political and in the economic areas were incorrect.[70] The Soviets wanted to get rid of the forced pace toward socialism and thrust the German peace treaty debate back onto the international scene in order to show East and West Germany that the Soviets favored a unified Germany. By offering this re-unification to both Germanys, the Soviets were hoping to improve their relationship with the East Germans. Malenkov and the Soviet Union realized that the GDR was heading for a catastrophe. In an effort to pre-empt such an event, the Soviet Union put forth the "New Course" on June 2, 1953 which guaranteed:

-General amnesty for East German refugees
-Assistance to small and medium size private enterprises
-Liberalized inter-zonal travel
-Eased campaign against the Protestant church
-Reissued ration cards to the middle-class
-Return of German POWs in Russia [71]

Every effort was made to help people who had fled West to come back and get reinstated in their old positions. Expelled students were allowed to go back to school and make up exams they missed. Prisoners accused of minor offenses were to be released and those already sentenced were to be pardoned.[72] The Politburo admitted that "the interests of certain sections of the population such as small farmers, retailers, tradesmen and the intelligentsia had been neglected with the result that many people had left the Republic."[73] This was a major step towards appeasing the East Germans, but it left out appeal to one major component of the GDR: the workers.

The workers had been upset since Ulbricht's failed efforts in July 1952 to increase the GDR's productivity by raising work norms and quotas. However, the GDR still had the new quota system in effect during this time of strife. When the "New Course" was implemented, everyone except the workers seemed to get a break, and the new plan fomented in these workers hatred against the SED and the Soviets.[74] The East German workers were fed up with their miserable living conditions and the high reparation payments owed to the Soviet Union. With the "New Course" as an impetus, the workers of East Berlin and then East Germany united to strike.

Worker's Uprising or Popular Revolt?

Prior to the opening the archives, many people thought the attempted 1953 revolution had occurred because East Germany was fed up with the Soviet style of government working towards a socialist state. The new archival evidence proved that many previous conceptions were incorrect.

Earlier there was much debate over the occurrences in the GDR on June 17, 1953. Many people believed that a popular uprising had taken place in an attempt to overthrow the SED and install a new democratic form of government much like West Germany's, but was crushed by the iron hand of the Soviet Union. Many Soviets believed the West had caused the uprising by promising support for any and all who took part in the strikes, so that when the GDR fell, the Western allies would be there to help East Germany form a democratic society. The Soviet Union used the fact that the strike occurred in about 400 cities simultaneously to support the idea that the West was behind the strike. Some of the archival evidence points to this as a possibility, as well. Although it became clear from some documents that there was mass discontent throughout East Germany (proven, if only, by the numbers of refugees fleeing West), the East German uprising did not incorporate all of the East German people. Only three to four percent of the total population was involved. No one really knew what happened because the Soviets and the SED kept the actual information secret.

The new evidence proved that the uprising was aimed at addressing workers' problems, not those of the population as a whole. The demographics reveal that

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somewhere around ninety percent of the 500,000 people involved were industrial

workers. The other ten percent or so was comprised of farmers and, in some cases, school

children supporting the uprising. The workers on strike shouted anti-Soviet slogans,

demanded decreases in prices by forty percent and wanted to liquidate the East German

State. [75] But, with only three to four percent of the total East German population (around

18 million), the strike cannot be a considered a popular revolt against the GDR.

Was the West a Catalyst?

It seems very unlikely that the West acted as a catalyst for the events. Discontent among the East German workers was present long before the strikes occurred. The accelerated industrialization put forth by Stalin in 1948 started a long road of unrest among the workers. During the Second Party Conference in 1952, when Ulbricht decided to raise work quotas to catch up to the Soviet Union's demands, workers lived in abject poverty in the cities.

At the Second Party Conference, Ulbricht stated "the political and economic conditions and the attitude of the working class and of the majority of the workers…had progressed to a point where the establishment of socialism had become the fundamental task [facing the state]."[76] He meant that the process of socialization in the GDR was to be sped up, as the conditions were prime for such action to take place. Agricultural collectives were formed soon after this conference, with craftsmen's collectives close behind. The GDR was also split up into 14 districts rather than its original five provinces.

This marked the beginning of the GDR's seclusion from the Western world. Travel was severely hindered; telephone and roads in Berlin were cut off at sector boundaries; all who were not outwardly pro-GDR were put under a watchful suspicious eye.[77]

Conflict between workers and the SED began long before the June 1953 uprising. The first dispute took place in January 1951 when the SED introduced collective agreements. The SED declared that workers would undertake "both individually and

collectively, either to increase their output or to achieve the production target laid down by the state ahead of schedule."[78] Even with open ballot votes watched over by SED functionaries, many factories refused to endorse the new plan, because they thought they would be worse off under the new laws than under the old tariff arrangements. Many believed that the focus on heavy industry would be detrimental to consumer interests and that the collectivization of agriculture created dislocations in the food supply and brought on mass disaffection.

These early events acted as a precursor to the 1953 uprising. The collective agreement disputes proved that if the workers stayed united, they could stand up to the regime. It also demonstrated to the SED that workers were unwilling to follow the regime's chosen path.[79] In the following years of collective agreement meetings, almost no pressure was put on workers and factories. The following year, they were asked to enter into agreements voluntarily, both individually and corporately.

In 1952, the turn out for the SED Party Conference was much more favorable than the previous year. As a result, Rudolf Hernstadt, chief editor of *Das Neue Deutschland* and a member of the Politburo, used the positive atmosphere to bolster workers support for the new regime. Hernstadt blamed the 1951 disputes on poor decision-making by the SED functionaries and tried to show workers that the SED had made a change for the better. By the start of 1953 though, socialism in the GDR was in full swing and the SED dropped its conciliatory attitude toward workers.

The Soviet evidence put forth to substantiate the claim that the uprising seemed to be a major planned uprising covering the whole territory of the GDR, aimed at replacing the government relies only on the fact that strikes occurred in over 400 cities in the GDR

and that all factions had similar demands. [80] This is also why the SED charged the West with having a hand in preparing the strikes.

What they did not take into account was the use of the radio as a means of promulgating information about the strikes. A week before the main uprising small-scale strikes occurred at a factory in Gotha that acted as an indicator for the large-scale uprising to take place. The main strike started on the afternoon of June 16, in East Berlin with construction workers protesting the introduction of the raised output quotas, not the overthrow of the government. By the early evening big crowds had developed, with "a band of up to 2,000 people…throwing stones at the I.V. Stalin monument at Stalinelle…"[81] During that time, anyone could walk back and forth between East and West Berlin, so it was not hard for news to travel across to the Western sector.

When news arrived in West Berlin, GDR workers asked Radio In the American Sector (based in West Berlin, here on RIAS) to disseminate the information over the radio. The "accounts of what had happened in East Berlin on the sixteenth were heard by virtually everybody in East Germany and so by 9:00am the following morning, when the general strike was proclaimed, everybody went out on the streets."[82] RIAS sent radio-commentators to East Berlin, "where they were doing live radio-commentary in the places where clashes between East Berliners and the People's Police occurred on the morning on 17 June."[83]

RIAS was a powerful propaganda tool for the West. At a time when most East Germans could not afford a television, the radio was the center of attention at home. As much as they wanted to, the SED could not prevent East Germans from listening to the radio. East Germans received their daily news from RIAS, including news about the

uprisings.[84] By the end of the 17th the strike in East Berlin was over. The Soviet Red Army had successfully dispersed the crowds with their tanks, but the strikes in other parts of the GDR continued for another two days.

Local Nature of Strikes

The Soviet and SED leaders did not take into account the fact that many workers were striking about issues purely local in nature, thus discounting the theory that all the strikers encouraged the overthrow of the government. At the *Feinspinnerei* in Karl-Marx Stadt, women were striking against a Sunday night shift. Workers in a privately owned textile company near Plauen wanted the same wages as state run factory workers. Some groups were striking for seemingly insignificant issues like a lack of toilet paper or serving tea in rusty urns.[85] Obviously, these workers had other demands, but the fact that they concentrated on local grievances gives credence to the view that not all strikes were pre-arranged and not all were specifically aimed at overthrowing the government. The revolt was basically a worker's uprising against the Stalinist construction of forced socialism. Even many SED members were unhappy with this policy and the situation it created in East Germany. The state concerns such as 'free democratic elections' that the Soviets point to as proof that the West started the strikes really acted as an adhesive to try and tie all the local strikes together to give the protesters more leverage with the SED.

Many SED members led or joined the strikes, claiming they were "dissatisfied with the worsening living standard among the working people and justified their actions by referring to the SED Politburo's published admission of mistakes."[86] During the Strikes many SED members quit the party. All over East Germany thousands of SED members had fallen prey to mysterious or sudden sicknesses, or failed to return from

vacations, or randomly took off their SED party badges and claimed they had forgotten or

lost them.[87] These actions served only to further embarrass the SED.

The GDR Reaction

At first, some SED members in different localities tried to stop the strikes by diplomatic means. While attempting to calm a group of strikers at a factory, an SED member, the Minister of Transport and Farm Mechanical Engineering, Weinberger, "displayed cowardice and bewilderment during the events, by signing a protocol in which he promised to raise salaries, to establish a new vacations system, to compensate workers for travel from residential areas to the enterprises, to pay for their staying apart from their families, etc."[88] The strike committee at this particular factory also demanded the dissolving of the GDR, releasing prisoners, and canceling the state of emergency, to which the SED Minister made no objections and ended up releasing two of the strike organizers arrested by the police.[89] More than showing their cowardice as the evidence states, the SED members promises prove that many SED members believed the workers had a right to strike and empathized with their anger directed at the SED.

Ironically, the uprising against Ulbricht's forced socialism (i.e., higher output quotas in an attempt to bring the economy back to life) cemented his position in the SED by forcing the Soviets to stick by their divided Germany policy which Ulbricht had masterminded. The Soviets had no idea what else could be done for the GDR. They did not necessarily like Ulbricht or agree with his policies, but much like Matyas Rakosi in Hungary, the Soviet's did not have many options for a successor because Ulbricht handled most of the workload on his own. His motto in the SED was "No one can do

anything without me."[90] At one point SED members could not even get in touch with Ulbricht because he ordered the telephone operators not to connect calls to him.[91]

The SED members had many complaints about Ulbricht. Frederick Oelssner, an SED member, believed Ulbricht had not understood the incorrectness of his conduct. That he had "not understood that as a matter of fact he lost touch with the masses and that his methods of dictatorial leadership were one of the serious reasons errors were committed."[92] Oelssner went further and said Ulbricht was still inclined to create an atmosphere of pomp around his person, as if he never did anything wrong.[93] But many SED members and Soviets realized that the strikes showed the hollowness of Ulbricht's regime. The SED claimed its power from the strength and resolve of the workers. They were supposed to stand as a symbol to other socialist nations as the base of socialism. But when the workers went on strike, the hollowness of all that Ulbricht had created became obvious. Ulbricht needed help to put down the worker's uprising.

The SED acted quickly to pre-empt the strikers from the possibility of taking over the GDR. Initially the East German People's Police could not handle the strikers and failed to disperse the demonstrators. The Soviet Red Army was called in to quell the riotous strikers with men and tanks. Martial law was declared with the intention to restore public order and terminate the anti-government demonstrations. The most important aid came in the form of Soviet tanks. The tanks acted as crowd dispersal units and worked as a deterrent to people gathering in one place. One policeman said that all roads were blocked by troops, tanks, artillery and that tanks and armored personnel carriers finished dispersing the demonstrators.[94]

The People's Police intentionally did not arrest many leaders of the revolt on June 17. Rather, they waited until late that night to break into their homes and arrest them so that they could not be seen as martyrs and no one would miss them for a day or two. Many of the strike organizers received swift punishment: military commanders announced that death sentences had been carried out against the organizers of the disturbances on June 18.[95]

The GDR's Rectification Program

After the June uprising was quelled, many SED members thought the situation could have been avoided. Oelssner "criticized the party leadership for not heeding the signals of discontent among the populace earlier and for not understanding that this discontent could have serious consequences."[96] Oelssner believed that the measures put in place by the SED to improve the living standard among the workers had not yet yielded the expected results. He believed the workers continued to take a wait and see position, not yet trusting the party.[97]

Once again SED delegates traveled to factories and promised the workers everything they demanded. "Moreover, every official making a report considers it his duty to surpass the promises of his predecessor. As there is no practical fulfillment of promises, the workers have again stopped believing in them."[98] The Soviets and the SED had come to realize that rectification was necessary. They also recognized that trust between the SED and the workers was necessary for the party to move forward. The workers had risen up against the government and, if the SED did not make some concessions to the workers, the whole regime would be in danger of collapsing. Promises for change, however, were not enough, especially because the lack of trust between the workers and the SED still existed.

In the ensuing months the Soviets initiated measures toward revitalizing the East German economy. By July, the Soviets talked about:

creating a stable economic situation in the Republic and to raise the

standard of living of the GDR's populace to that of West German's

populace, to examine the issue of halting delivery of goods to the Soviet

Union and Poland and of counting the export of goods to the USSR as

revenue for the Soviet enterprises in the GDR from the first half of 1953

with the aim of applying these goods toward the development of the

GDR's external trade and the satisfaction of the internal needs of the

Republic.[99]

 The Soviets first agreed to offer financial support in the form of an economic aid

package, similar to the Marshall Plan. The Soviets also agreed to officially terminate the

reparations payments, a main factor that had thrust East Germany into its economic

hardship. And finally, the Soviets officially announced the GDR to be a sovereign state,

further supporting the Soviet ideology of a two-Germany doctrine.

Effects of the East German Uprising

The East German uprising acted as an icebreaker for revolting against the Soviet repressive measures instituted in East-Central European Bloc nations during the Cold War. One historian believed that the uprising "came to stand for a hard line repressive resolution of internal unrest and the ultimate ratio of Soviet military intervention, and as such was central [to] Ulbricht's hard-line approach to crises in Eastern Europe in 1956, 1968…" The myth surrounding the uprising set the standard for other Soviet satellites to follow. Since no hard information was readily available, rumors spread that popular discontent was rampant in East Germany and that the people united to lash out against the GDR. Obviously, many people were unhappy in the GDR. Other Soviet satellites heard about the uprising and automatically inferred that the people must be trying to overthrow the government and therefore other East-Central Bloc nations felt a common bond between them. It was obvious to Hungary that other nations had similar problems and the East German uprising demonstrated one way for Hungary to deal with such problems.

Unexpected Outcome of the Uprising

The worker's uprising also set the precedent for Soviet intervention in East-Central Bloc nations. Much like the United States' implementation of the Truman Doctrine, the Soviets pursued an unspoken doctrine which allowed them to use whatever force was necessary to keep their satellites from straying towards capitalism, as shown in the Hungarian uprising in 1956 and the Czechoslovakian uprising in 1968. The 'Brezhnev Doctrine', as it came to be known, asserted that in a socialist society "rules and norms of the law are subordinate to the class struggle…"[100] The Soviets gave themselves the right to intervene when any counter-revolutionary element rose up or any time any regime was under the threat of foreign intervention.[101]

Conclusion

One of the most important problems the allies had to face post World War II was how to deal with the defeated Germany. The division of Germany into four sections was an attempt to ensure demilitarization and democratization of the former aggressor. But the simplicity of the plans did not carry over into the reality of rebuilding a defeated nation. The East/West Germany split became the front line of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union.

In the first eight years after the war ended (1945-53) Soviet controlled East Germany became the first communist country to rebel against Stalin's Soviet style of socialism. The release of previously unseen archival evidence in 1992 brought forth new theories on the causes and ramifications of the 1953 East German uprising. After viewing internal Soviet documents sent from East Germany to Soviet Foreign Ministers and reviewing interviews with eyewitnesses, it is clear that the 1953 East German uprising was a worker's revolt triggered by the ill treatment they received from the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

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