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Comrades-in-Arms and Partners in Crime: The German Democratic Republic (GDR) and China in the 1950s and 1960s

AXEL BERKOFISKY

This article analyzes the quality of selected aspects and issues regarding relations between the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and China¹ in the 1950s and early 1960s. How was Chinese dictator Mao Zedong's Hundred Flowers Campaign perceived and interpreted in East Berlin, and why and until when was GDR leader Walter Ulbricht enthusiastic about Mao's disastrous Great Leap Forward are among the questions this article will seek to answer. As it turned out, East German leaders' assessments and newspaper reporting on Mao's domestic and foreign policy and government propaganda did not in any way correspond with China's on the ground realities. The East German authorities took Chinese propaganda and entirely false statistics and data on steel and agricultural production at face value and ordered its mouthpiece newspapers to do the same. The same was true for Chinese reporting and propaganda on Ulbricht's decision to divide Berlin with a wall in 1961: misleading and nonsensical reporting in support of a fair-weather friendship, which in the wake of the Sino-Soviet Split in the early 1960s would turn into enmity (as ordered by Moscow).

Introduction

This article examines the quality and scope of relations between the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and China in the 1950s and early 1960s. The GDR was ruled by the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED²) and its Moscow-installed and Moscow obedient leader and party Secretary-General Walter Ulbricht. China was ruled by Mao Zedong who until his death in 1976 propagated that domestic and foreign policies must be accompanied by violence, purges, and violent campaigns against “capitalists,” “revisionists” and all other enemies of the day. The analysis of East German-Chinese official exchanges available in East German archive sources³ and articles from the Chinese newspaper *People’s Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*) examined for this article will allow the reader to understand and interpret the quality and tendencies of the selected aspects and areas of bilateral relations in the 1950s and early 1960s. The transcripts of dialogues between East German and Chinese officials, in particular, are of relevance when examining how East German leaders interpreted (and were concerned about) Mao’s *Hundred Flowers Campaign* and the *Great Leap Forward*. In turn, the analysis of East German-Chinese exchanges documented in East German archive documents is shedding light on Beijing’s position on and support for East Berlin’s decision to divide Berlin with a wall to stop the flow of millions of East German citizens escaping from the GDR at the time.

Why this article: the analysis of relations between the GDR and China during the Cold War is still an under-researched area and topic of research and this article seeks to make a contribution to the analysis of bilateral relations between two countries, which first were allies and comrades-in-arms and then—due to the Sino-Soviet falling out—the *Sino-Soviet Split*—in the early 1960s, turned into enemies. This analysis of East German-Chinese relations will focus on the analysis of how Mao Zedong’s *Hundred Flowers Campaign* in 1956/1957 was perceived and interpreted by the political leadership in East Berlin and East Berlin’s perception of and reaction to Mao’s *Great Leap Forward* in 1958—an economic and social campaign that turned into an enormous humanitarian disaster

claiming up to 40 million casualties all over China. Lastly, China's peculiar reaction to and support of East Berlin's decision to erect the Berlin Wall in August 1961 will be examined. Moreover, an analysis of the GDR's reaction to and perception of China's domestic policies and foreign policy campaigns against the background of the GDR's near-complete dependency on Moscow and the obligation to align its foreign policies with those of Moscow: "East Berlin enjoyed sovereignty at Moscow's mercy," as the German historian Joachim Scholtyseck writes.⁴ Indeed, while East Berlin over the decades insisted that it adopted its foreign policies independently, not following orders from Moscow, reality was decisively different. East Berlin's foreign policy autonomy—like it was in the case in other East European Soviet satellite states—was very limited, if existent at all.

The 1950s: The happy beginnings

In October 1949 Beijing announced the desire to establish diplomatic relations with the GDR.⁵ Chinese foreign minister at the time Zhou Enlai⁶ announced in grandiose style that the establishment of the GDR is not only the "desire of the entire German nation but indeed the desire of all peace-loving countries of the world." To be sure, when he said "entire German nation" he must have meant the one de facto imprisoned in the Soviet-occupied East Germany. East Berlin's dictators of course were enthusiastic, calling the invitation to establish diplomatic relations with China a "great honour." Bilateral diplomatic relations, East Berlin declared, "will be of great significance for the maintenance and strengthening of global peace."⁷ However, the Soviet Union's near-complete control over East Berlin's foreign policies was an obstacle to closer bilateral relations with China. The rulers in East Berlin too were wary of too "much" China in the GDR, i.e. "too much revolution" and "calls to arms" as propagated by Mao.⁸ In other words: Mao-style "revolution" and violent "anti-imperialism" were acceptable unless and until East German citizens could decide to take Mao's calls to arms too literally and turn against the regime in East Berlin.

Furthermore, the East German authorities prohibited on various occasions throughout the 1950s the establishment of East-German friendship associations, clubs, and other forms of East German-Chinese encounters.⁹

In the 1950s East German writers such as Anna Seghers and Bodo Uhse contributed to the illusion that East Berlin and Beijing were “natural allies” sharing the same ideology. They naively applauded Mao’s radical agricultural collectivization of the 1950s, which they said—like their political masters in East Berlin announced—allowed all Chinese people to achieve similar living standards in a country without any social classes. The *Great Leap Forward*, some East German writers and intellectuals claimed naively in the late 1950s, is therefore the very definition of socialism.¹⁰ Bodo Uhse’s¹¹ accounts on day-to-day life China in particular were utterly nonsensical, and a result of a “romantic” vision of a country that did not in any way reflect the reality of Chinese on-the-ground-realities at the time. During a visit in 1954, for example, Uhse praised the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) fighting on the Korean Peninsula, which he “explained” heroically fought against Wall Street’s alleged attempt to take over world domination. Without obviously explaining why and how exactly Wall Street—with “Wall Street” he meant what was in East Berlin was referred to *monopoly capital*¹²—supported Washington’s alleged attempts to take over the Korean Peninsula.

Romantic and misguided accounts of a country governed by Mao who put violence and violent campaigns against alleged “capitalists” and “revisionists” on the very top of his domestic and foreign policy agendas were in East Berlin in the early 1960s then replaced by the realization that Mao’s China would never be a sustainable and reliable partner among the community of socialist countries.¹³ Indeed, despite the sympathy and the at times very naïve admiration Walter Ulbricht expressed for Mao in the late 1950s, the Moscow-educated and Moscow-installed Ulbricht was much less of a “revolutionary” than Mao and instead more interested in material than ideological or military victories. In fact, Ulbricht was constantly obsessed with the objective of “his” GDR overtaking West Germany’s industrial production

and output at all costs. Ulbricht, of course, must have known at all times that this was always going to be unrealistic and, until the GDR's collapse in 1989, West German credits and financial aid saved the GDR more than once from premature economic and financial collapse. To be sure, the way the GDR authorities and the internal security forces in general and the *Stasi* in particular practiced socialism within the GDR was everything but non-violent or reconciliatory either. Terror and oppression, psychological pressure and torture were the preferred methods of the *Stasi* to make sure that there was no opposition to the prescribed lifestyle in the East German "workers' paradise."

In December 1955 two East German delegations visited China, both led by then East German Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl. During these visits East Berlin confirmed in a joint declaration¹⁴ its support for Beijing's objective to end what Beijing referred to as the "illegal occupation" of Taiwan.¹⁵ What Berlin meant by "illegal occupation" was the presence of US military troops in Taiwan. For what it was worth—realistically little as the GDR (like West Germany) became a member of the United Nations only in September 1973—East Berlin at the time called upon the United Nations to grant mainland China (and not Taiwan) its supposedly "rightful" place as permanent member of the UN Security Council.¹⁶ Given, however, that the GDR was not a member of the UN at the time, that was little more than a symbolic political favor East Berlin was doing Beijing knowing that such a call would not be relevant to any of the interested parties, i.e. the Western allies led by the United States. Hence, it was not more than a favor without any consequences.

Checking-in with Mao

In September 1956, SED leader Walter Ulbricht himself headed a GDR delegation to Beijing, where the delegation was invited to a two-hour meeting with Mao.¹⁷ During that meeting Ulbricht displayed a near-obsession to explain when and how the GDR would overtake West Germany in terms of agricultural and industrial production. Ulbricht also warned during the meeting that the GDR would have to overtake West Germany by 1960 in terms of living standards. Otherwise, he said, things could become "dangerous" in the GDR as he put it.

What he meant was the “danger” of even more East German citizens leaving the GDR to settle in West Germany in search of material prosperity (and life free from oppression, obviously). This, Ulbricht warned in dramatic fashion, would then lead to West Germany seeking to invade and absorb the GDR. Mao and Ulbricht furthermore shared the concern that 90,000 soldiers of the GDR’s *National Peoples’ Army*¹⁸ would be no match for what Ulbricht and Mao both claimed are 500,000 West German soldiers equipped with nuclear weapons (and ready to invade the GDR at any given moment). In reality, the German Bundeswehr never had 500,000 troops and West Germany did not have nuclear bombs, either.¹⁹ In particular, Mao was concerned that should the US, France, and Great Britain decide to withdraw their military troops from West Germany, the Soviet Union would have to do the same in the GDR, which would leave the GDR exposed to Western German aggression. Furthermore, Ulbricht assured Mao that the GDR authorities in general and the notorious (and notoriously brutal) *Staatssicherheitsdienst (Stasi)*, in particular, identified and punished the conspirators of the June 17, 1953 demonstrations in the GDR.²⁰ Most of them, Ulbricht lied, were not GDR citizens but instead foreign “agents” deployed to the GDR to conspire against the regime in East Berlin. Ulbricht furthermore claimed that West German agents and agencies—Ulbricht called them members of the old “Hitler clique”—were committing acts of sabotage in the GDR. Ulbricht also claimed in his conversation with Mao that West German militarists²¹ were not only planning to take over the GDR but were also planning to invade France and Belgium. It would be German World War II-style militarism all over again, Ulbricht warned—obviously without providing any evidence for his (absurd) warnings. Finally, during their conversation Mao mentioned the *Chinese Wall*, which according to his accounts was built to keep the Mongols out of China. Today, it cannot be verified whether Mao talking about the *Chinese Wall* gave Ulbricht the “inspiration” to build the *Berlin Wall* in 1961, but Ulbricht’s warnings during his meeting with Mao that East Germans would continue to migrate to West Germany unless the GDR were able to raise the standard of living does allow for the conclusion that Ulbricht already had a plan for how to keep East Germans from escaping from the GDR.

Agreeing on repression

Parts of the literature suggest that in the mid-1950s China and the GDR completely agreed on ideology and issues related to domestic and international policies. That is not unremarkable as East Berlin and Beijing agreed on issues Moscow had different views on. Both East Berlin and Beijing, for example, were very sceptical about or indeed opposed to Soviet leader Khrushchev's de-Stalinization policies of the mid-1950s. Furthermore, East Berlin cheered when Mao in 1957 decided to end the *Hundred Flowers Campaign* and ordered the arrest and torture of thousands of intellectuals and ordinary citizens in the course of the so-called *Anti-Rightist Campaign* following the *Hundred Flowers Campaign*. East Berlin also welcomed Mao's disastrous idea to require all Chinese peasants and farmers to work and live in the *People's Communes* during the *Great Leap Forward*. However, Ulbricht's support for Chinese domestic and foreign policies was not entirely genuine but rather and also a result of a shared East German–Chinese fear of regime change as M.J. Esslin wrote in the journal *China Quarterly* in 1960. "There certainly have been at times indications that Ulbricht and the Chinese leaders have been on the same side in disputes on tactics and ideology, particularly since the emergence of Khrushchev as undisputed leader of the Soviet Union. In the sphere of international relations the reasons for this are clear enough: at times when Khrushchev was working for a détente it was in the interests both of Peking and of Pankow²² to keep the tensions high. If Communist China fears the consequences of a rapprochement between the Soviet Union and the United States, Ulbricht has every reason to dread the spectre (however remote it may be) of a settlement of the German problem through free elections or any other method of self-determination."²³ As Esslin concluded, the chances of free and democratic elections taking place in East Germany in the mid-1950s followed by regime change were indeed very slim, to say the very least. However, the East German political leadership under Ulbricht (like Honecker after him) proved more than once over the years and decades that it was quick to fear for the stability of East Germany's dictatorship and that free elections in the GDR would obviously be the worst-

case scenario as far as Ulbricht and his regime sidekicks were concerned. When Soviet dictator Khrushchev talked about *peaceful co-existence* with the West in the mid-1950s, the alarm-bells must have gone off in East Berlin (as they did in Beijing too) as peacefully co-existing with the West was not—putting it bluntly—something that East Berlin’s leadership had on its foreign policy agenda. To be sure, from East Berlin’s perspective, continuing not to continue *co-existing peacefully* with the West in general and West Germany in particular was a matter of regime survival as *peaceful co-existence* (accompanied by economic reforms) was in East Berlin always and until the GDR’s collapse in 1989 associated with the threat of regime change. Then again, joint East German-Chinese opposition to Moscow’s attempts to de-escalate tensions with the West in the mid-1950s did not in any way lead to any joint actual East German–Chinese policies (opposing Soviet Union policies). A number of obstacles stood in the way, among others priorities and autonomy, or the lack thereof in East Berlin. Indeed, while Mao was about to unleash the domestic *Great Leap Forward* with its disastrous consequences for China’s economy and society, East Berlin under Ulbricht was far less free to adopt independent foreign policies, i.e. foreign policies without the “approval” from Moscow, than his often grandiose rhetoric on the level of the alleged autonomy of East German foreign policies suggested.

Panic in Pankow—Mao’s Hundred Flowers Campaign

In May 1956 Mao pretended to want to allow (constructive) criticism of CCP governance under his leadership. He announced to “let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend.” An invitation was extended to Chinese intellectuals, artists, students, etc. to come forward and propose criticism aimed at—at least as far as Mao was concerned—improving the governance of the Communist Party: the *Hundred Flowers Campaign*. The country’s intellectuals followed Mao’s invitation to speak their minds and challenged the CCP’s governance, albeit very reluctantly. The memory of Mao’s purges and terror campaigns throughout the 1950s against “land-

lords,” alleged “capitalists,” and what Mao called the “Chinese bourgeoisie” were still fresh enough in the minds of the country’s intellectuals for them to be cautious when asked to provide criticism. Eventually, the intellectuals came forward but not with the kind of “constructive” criticism Mao had in mind. When he asked the intellectuals to criticize the party, he believed that they would inevitably come to realize that socialism as practiced in China is superior to all other forms of governance. Mao then turned to acting very quickly and the *Hundred Flowers Campaign* turned into a crusade against intellectuals, artists, students, and others, resulting in torture, imprisonment, and executions. In fact, the purges—coordinated on Mao’s order by Deng Xiaoping—to identify, arrest and punish intellectual, artists and students turned out to be too comprehensive and well-organized to have been spontaneous. Instead, scholars like Frank Dikötter argue that the *Hundred Flowers Campaign* had instead from the very beginning been a campaign aimed at identifying and eradicating any kind of opposition against Mao and his governance.²⁴

Initially, The *Hundred Flowers Campaign* was welcomed by East German intellectuals and also by parts of the SED—as by Chinese intellectuals—as the campaign was perceived as an opportunity to write and think more freely without having to follow and propagate the official party line and thinking. In December 1956 SED Politburo member Karl Schirdewan,²⁵ later the victim of a purge ordered by Ulbricht, praised the *Hundred Flowers* policy in an article in which he explained that the government’s invitation to criticize the governance of the Communist Party meant “for research work in literature, art and science . . . freedom to think independently, freedom of debate, freedom of creation, freedom of criticism.” Walter Ulbricht begged to differ strongly and warned of what he called “harmful idealistic thinking” in China that would not be tolerated in the GDR on his watch. Ulbricht was citing Chinese newspaper articles published in the wake of the *Hundred Flowers Campaign* and used the flowers analogy when he suggested that flowers should be separated between those who are allowed to “bloom” on the one hand and “pest plants” that need to be eradicated on the other hand. “Pest plants” are,

Ulbricht decided during the SED Central Committee meeting, “counter-revolutionaries” who aim at toppling the socialist order.²⁶ Ulbricht talked about “counter-revolutionary”²⁷ movements in the GDR and was in that context warning of the so-called *Harich Group*²⁸ within the SED, which he warned was planning to review and abolish Stalinist policies, and instead endorse the “dangerous” ideas of the *Hundred Flowers Campaign*.²⁹ Ulbricht declared to know what the counter-revolutionaries’ alleged “plan” was. That plan, Ulbricht panicked, went far beyond applying the ideas of the *Hundred Flowers Campaign* in the GDR. Following the counter-revolutionary example of the Hungarian *Petofi Circle*,³⁰ he decided, the plan was to let all flowers, including the “pest plant” cultivated by Harich and his alleged fellow conspirators, “bloom” in the GDR. And he had more conspiracy theory scenarios up his sleeve: the aforementioned “counter-revolutionary” movements are part of a conspiracy to join NATO-sponsored plans to topple the regime in East Berlin. Reality, of course, was decisively different. The *Harich Group*’s programme suggested to complement the Marxist-Leninist theory with ideas and thoughts of Rosa Luxemburg and what Harich called “social-democratic thinkers and theorists.” Furthermore, the group suggested that the GDR leadership should embrace the discussion on Marxist-Leninist theory in China as suggested by Chinese intellectuals during the *Hundred Flowers Campaign*.³¹ None of this, of course, was of interest to Ulbricht and his aides who decided that Schirdewan had to be fired from the Politburo.

At least for a while Beijing disagreed with East Berlin on what should be allowed to exist or must be eliminated. “We let the poisonous grass and plants grow, as we cannot deny that they exist. In our socialist system there are Marxists and Non-Marxists. Those two categories will continue to exist in communist societies. The ideological fight between those two categories is a long-term struggle. If one wants to fight that fight, work of persuasion must be conducted,” Chinese party officials and policymakers pointed out in a meeting with East German officials in February 1957 in Beijing.³² Eventually, however, Mao agreed with Ulbricht that the aforementioned “flowers” are all “pest plants” that must be eliminated. He launched the so-called “Anti-Rightist Cam-

paign,” during which those who had naively believed that Mao had sincerely endorsed the principle of free speech and expression were persecuted, arrested and punished instead. An East German delegation visiting China in 1959 was re-assured by Mao that those who in 1956/1957 took up on Mao’s offer to criticize the party during the *Hundred Flowers Campaign* got what they deserved: severe punishment. They were “neutralized,” as Mao put it. “100,000 counter-revolutionary and rightist elements were expelled from the party.”³³

Cheering misery and starvation—East Berlin and the *Great Leap Forward*

Mao’s *Great Leap Forward* (1958-1962) goes down as one of the most disastrous man-made and ill-fated economic and social policy campaigns in human history. The records and the empirical evidence—above all those provided by the aforementioned scholar Frank Dikötter—show that up to 40 million Chinese citizens lost their lives because of Mao’s (from the very beginning unfeasible) plan to increase China’s production of steel and agricultural products through radical collectivization. The *leap* was intended to allow China’s steel production to overtake that of the UK within 15 years. China’s grain production, Mao decided and ordered in 1958, was to catch up with and overtake US grain production over the same period. Of course, none of this turned out to be in any way realistic and Mao’s idea to oblige millions of unskilled Chinese peasants lacking the instruments and know-how to produce high-quality steel in small furnaces in their backyards was doomed to fail from the start. The GDR leadership, however, was enthusiastic about the *leap* and as will be shown further below Walter Ulbricht even flirted with the idea—at least temporarily—of introducing Mao’s *People’s Communes* into the GDR

When Mao launched the *Great Leap Forward* in 1958 Ulbricht’s main source of information on the *Great Leap Forward* was the GDR’s embassy in Beijing.³⁴ Systematic research on China, the scholar Beda Erlinghagen explains, was developed and funded in the GDR only in the 1960s.³⁵ However, that did not mean—as Erlinghagen seems to indicate – that SED leaders and the general public at

large had no other sources to inform themselves on the *leap's* negative consequences. Already in early 1959 Mao himself admitted that the *leap* had resulted in famine as opposed to record harvests. In fact, the East German embassy in Beijing in December 1958 reported about “supply shortfalls” in China, citing reports from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.³⁶ In retrospect it is impossible to know to what extent the East German embassy in Beijing completely understood the extent to which collectivization of Chinese agriculture and Mao’s plan to turn peasants into steel workers (without any steelmaking skills) would result in the much more than the aforementioned “temporary supply shortfalls.” However, the East German embassy must have known that the Chinese countryside and its peasants were neither equipped with the know-how nor with the instruments and expertise to produce high-quality steel in small furnaces in their backyards. Political pressure from East Berlin might have done its share to make the embassy decide not to report on the real and disastrous conditions on the ground in China.

A great idea

Initially, East Berlin and the ruling SED seemed to have liked everything about the *leap*: the inclusion of women into the labour market,³⁷ the *People's Communes*, and the alleged enthusiasm of the Chinese peasants and workers. In April 1958 *Neues Deutschland's* China correspondent Lutz Zempelburg, for example, reported that hundreds of millions of peasants and workers not only worked hard and enthusiastically to increase agricultural production but also built irrigation systems all over China to maintain and increase the ground’s fertility. Furthermore, in complete defiance of the realities on the ground, the East German correspondent reported that China’s industrial production was running at full steam. The production of steel, coal, and cement, according to Chinese statistics cited by the paper, was increased by 30% from 1957 to mid-1958. Politically too, the newspaper reported, the situation in China is admirable, not least due to the what the correspondent called a “political and ideological victory over rightist elements of China’s bourgeoisie.”³⁸ *Neues Deutschland* reported in August 1958 that Beijing executed a success-

ful re-education campaign of China's "bourgeois capitalists" obliging them to "get in line" as Zempelburg put it.³⁹ Zempelburg then reported that Shanghai-based Chinese alleged capitalists with their 150,000 small and medium-sized companies had developed so-called "self-transformation plans" to convert their capitalist into socialist companies, as he put it. This, he wrote, does not take place only in Shanghai but also in other cities in China and is part of a wider "self-re-education" scheme in the country. Part of this campaign is physical labor in the countryside as a means of "detoxication from capitalism," he reported. *Neues Deutschland* then reported in October 1958 that within only a few months after the launch of the *Great Leap Forward*, 90% of Chinese peasants decided voluntarily and indeed enthusiastically to work in and move to the *People's Communes*. That, however, was simply not true. Working and living in the *People's Communes* was ordered by the authorities and, while peasants initially and for a very short period were given a choice on whether to join the *communes*, that choice was taken away from them throughout the course of 1958.⁴⁰ In other words: they had no choice but to live and work in *People's Communes*. *Neues Deutschland* claimed in December that the *Great Leap Forward* and the *People's Communes* had raised interest in other countries, including India which dispatched a government delegation to China to experience the progress in terms of agricultural and industrial production the *Great Leap Forward* had facilitated.⁴¹ *Neues Deutschland* also reported in December of the same year that Mao during the CCP Central Committee meeting in Wuchang decided to renounce China's presidency and instead spend more time studying and developing Marxism-Leninism.⁴² The paper, however, did not mention that Mao's partial withdrawal from Chinese frontline politics was everything but voluntary.⁴³ In fact, what in Wuchang in December 1958 happened was that Mao's less than voluntary withdrawal from what the literature refers to as the "front line" to the "second line" of Chinese politics became official.⁴⁴

Surreal reporting from a parallel universe

The *Leipzig Spring Fair* in February 1959 hosted an exposition on the *leap* including peculiar (i.e. nonsensical) explanations of how China

was allegedly able to double its production of steel within one year.⁴⁵ Based on such completely inaccurate information and data presented by Chinese propaganda, East Berlin concluded throughout 1959 that through the *Great Leap Forward*, China would achieve its goal to produce more steel than Great Britain not within 15 but already 10 years. Walter Ulbricht took part in this pseudo-scientific debate when he claimed that Mao was able to apply Marxism-Leninism in what he called a “creative manner” in accordance with the conditions in China. China’s communist party, Ulbricht cheered, has successfully fought for the “purity” of the Marxist-Leninist thought and teaching.⁴⁶ In March 1959 the *Berliner Zeitung* reported that the production of steel and farm products had increased so much that East German companies had difficulties in keeping up providing China with the machinery China had ordered.⁴⁷ However, that was true only because East German companies—due to inefficiencies and factors related to productivity (or lack thereof)—were unable to provide China with the ordered machinery in time. In other words, the problem was probably not so much an enormous demand from China but rather East German delays and inefficiencies. In the same article the *Berliner Zeitung* repeated the non-credible claim that China from mid-1958 to mid-1959 increased its industrial production by 65%. That included the production of steel, textiles, coal, and others.⁴⁸ In November 1959 the *Berliner Zeitung*’s Beijing correspondent reported on the construction of hundreds of small blast furnaces—the smallest of their kind in the world, the paper pointed out.⁴⁹ They were indeed very small, and if the correspondent had taken the effort to verify the quality of the steel produced in such kind of small furnaces, he would have been obliged to conclude that the small furnaces did not any way produce good enough steel fit for domestic use, let alone for export. Needless to say, he did not undertake such efforts and instead took Chinese propaganda and data at face value.

The aforementioned Esslin wrote that parts of the radical agricultural collectivization taking place in East Germany in the late 1950s were also inspired by Mao’s plan to increase agricultural production by obliging peasants to eat, live, and shower together like prisoners

and/or slaves. “There have even been indications that the East Germans are toying with the idea of copying such radical Chinese devices as the communes. More to the point perhaps is the recent drive in East Germany for the establishment of Socialist House Communities⁵⁰ in which the families occupying a block of tenements are grouped together by sharing cooking and eating facilities, even bathrooms. Other practices that appear to have been copied from the precepts of Mao Tse-tung are the workers’ meetings (*Rote Treffs*⁵¹) held after the day’s work in factories, which are said to have been introduced by Mao Tse-tung as early as 1942,” Esslin wrote.⁵² However, when Ulbricht began to sound enthusiastic about the introduction of Chinese-style communes into East Germany, East German farmers very quickly rebelled and made it very clear that the Chinese-style *communes* are a folly they were not wanting to get introduced in the GDR. The introduction of Chinese-style communes never made it onto the agenda and when Ulbricht was later asked whether about them, he lied that he never deemed them suitable for East German collectivized farming.

In 1959, East Berlin continued to invest resources into attempting to maintain good relations with Beijing. An East German delegation led by Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl visited China from January 22-29, 1959. As a result of that visit, the GDR and China adopted a joint declaration which confirmed bilateral cooperation to jointly fighting Western imperialism and the West’s alleged colonial and aggressive policies. Both East Berlin and Beijing emphasized the importance of East Berlin adopting a peace treaty with West Germany to avoid West Germany joining NATO’s alleged plan of threatening the socialist world with nuclear war. Consequently, the Soviet Union adopting a peace treaty with West Germany in January 1959 was, from East Berlin and Beijing’s view, an important step in the right direction, i.e. a step towards seeking to avoid a nuclear war. Beijing for its part endorsed East Berlin’s proposal to create a united German federal state and to “de-militarize Berlin.” As it turned out, what they meant by “de-militarizing” West Berlin was to oblige Western military troops to leave West Berlin (while Soviet military would continue to remain deployed in East Berlin and all over the

GDR). The East German delegation was reportedly impressed about what the Chinese authorities presented as China's industrial and agricultural production facilitated by the *Great Leap Forward*. The *People's Communes*, the Grotewohl-led delegation said were the basis for the enormous increase in industrial and agricultural production in China. In sum, East Berlin said everything China wanted to hear: opposing the US policy of "Two Chinas" and the alleged conspiracy to permanently pursue the alleged "unlawful occupation" of Taiwan. Finally, Beijing and East Berlin agreed to open an East German consulate in Shanghai and to adopt a trade treaty on goods transported on ships.⁵³

Cheering the Berlin Wall

Between 1949 and 1961 and before the erection of the Berlin Wall roughly 2.7 million GDR citizens escaped from the GDR. The running joke among East European diplomats based in East Berlin at the time was that if the authorities were not able to stop GDR citizens from leaving, the only ones left in the country would soon be Walter Ulbricht and his mistress. As we know it did not come to this and after mid-August 1961 those trying cross the border between East and West Berlin were shot at and killed. When the wall was built overnight on August 13th of that year, abruptly and indefinitely separating friends and families, Beijing congratulated East Berlin on the erection of the *Berlin Wall*. East Berlin called it the "anti-fascist wall" supposedly protecting GDR citizens from West German "fascists" and "militarists." On the days following August 13, the *People's Daily* could not detect anything unusual in the "democratic sector" of Berlin (the paper meant East Berlin).⁵⁴ The same newspaper reported in late August 1961⁵⁵ that West Germany's Ministry for All-German Affairs⁵⁶—in collaboration with the U.S. Secret Service—was engaged in human trafficking, i.e. the trafficking of East German citizens into West Berlin. One week later the *People's Daily*⁵⁷ published a similar article calling West Berlin a "hotbed for US-sponsored fascists, militarists who occupy West Berlin as basis of the Cold War." In September 1961 East Germany's Ambassador to China Josef Hegen met China's Politburo

member Chen Ji. During their meeting Chen applauded East Berlin's decision to order border guards to shoot at East German citizens trying to leave the GDR.⁵⁸ Chen also concluded that because the West had not reacted to the building of the *Berlin Wall*, it must have understood and accepted that Berlin is a permanently divided city.⁵⁹ Finally, Chen "approved" East Berlin's repressive domestic policies and agreed that it is necessary to oblige GDR citizens with force to remain in the country. "I am in total agreement with your measures regarding political-ideological education and measures of suppression. I fully support the police shooting at those who violate the border."⁶⁰ This does not mean, of course, that East Berlin needed any outside approval or support for its repressive policies.

Beijing's half-hearted support

At the end of 1961, the GDR authorities began complaining that Beijing's support for the GDR's statehood and nationhood was waning. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs lamented in a note that the Chinese press did not report enough on the 12th anniversary of the GDR. The Chinese reporting on the anniversary, the report complained, did not go beyond the reporting of any other anniversary in other socialist countries. Against the background of the ongoing "West Berlin problem" Ulbricht and colleagues, the report indicated, hoped for more and more enthusiastic coverage on the GDR in the Chinese press. More importantly, the report complained that the Chinese press did not report on whether Beijing would be prepared to adopt a separate peace treaty with the GDR should the Western powers refuse to adopt a peace treaty with the two German states.⁶¹ During a meeting between East German Ambassador Hegen and Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Chi in Beijing at the beginning of December 1961, Hegen was confident that the Western Allies leaving West Berlin would only be a matter of time.⁶² However, both Hegen and Chi agreed that U.S. President Kennedy would not easily give in to East German pressure to order Western military troops to leave West Berlin. Indeed, both must have known that the chances of the Western Allies—with or without pressure—leaving West Berlin were next to non-existent. Hegen then announced "some-

thing big” could happen in Berlin if the situation escalated. What he must have meant by “something big” was the US reacting with the use of military force in case Moscow and East Berlin decided to unilaterally end Western access to West Berlin. At the beginning of 1962 East Berlin then concluded that Beijing no longer supported Moscow and East Berlin’s position on the *Berlin Question* and the peace treaty proposed by Moscow to both German states. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs complained in a report that Beijing accused East Berlin and Moscow of caving in to US pressure to negotiate on the status of West Berlin. The Ministry cites a number of newspaper articles from the *People’s Daily*, which criticize Moscow’s preparedness to negotiate with Washington on transit routes to and from West Berlin and the (symbolic) presence of Western military in West Berlin as a sign of weakness when dealing the West. The report concludes by saying that Beijing does not or no longer supports East Berlin and Moscow’s policies towards the *German* and *Berlin Questions*.⁶³

When Moscow allowed and indeed ordered Soviet-installed East German political leaders to proclaim the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1949, Walter Ulbricht created the fiction that the division of Germany did not only create two German states but also miraculously gave birth to a second German nation. That second German nation, the GDR’s political leadership around Walter Ulbricht defined, was socialist, “anti-imperialist” and “anti-fascist.”⁶⁴ Next to the *German Question* was the *Berlin Question*, which kept Ulbricht and his aides awake at night: West Berlin occupied by the Western Allies in the middle of GDR territory, which led East Berlin to declare that West Berlin does not belong to West Germany but instead to the GDR. Incorporating West Berlin as an integral part of the GDR, it was hoped since the foundation of the GDR, would make GDR statehood complete.⁶⁵ That, as we know, did not take place and West and East Berlin were reunified only in 1990.

Conclusions

As long as Moscow and Beijing got along and called themselves “allies,” so did East Berlin and Beijing. As shown above, Ulbricht’s

fears that Mao's *Hundred Flowers Campaign* could destabilize the country by allowing constructive criticism from within turned out to be baseless. After Mao temporarily pretended to encourage free speech and thinking, he changed his mind and did what he always did: respond with violence and purges. East Berlin and Beijing then found themselves again in alignment that the aforementioned "pest plants intellectuals" must be punished severely. In 1958 and 1959 the East German political leadership around Walter Ulbricht misread Chinese disastrous realities on the ground during the *Great Leap Forward* at a time when even Beijing realized that the *leap* had not produced massive amounts of steel and grain but instead nationwide starvation and economic near-collapse. The *leap*, the regime in East Berlin had seemingly decided (in defiance of the actual facts on the ground), is or indeed must turn out to be successful from (alleged) evidence that (economic) socialism is superior to (imperialist) capitalism. East Berlin and Beijing were comrades-in-arms who were lying for each other when Western capitalism and alleged imperialism had to be "defeated." Put differently: believing and applauding each other's false statistics was part of the "socialist-comrades-in-arms" deal in order to display self-confidence and optimism in defiance of objective realities on the East German and Chinese grounds. And the aforementioned East German newspaper reporting did its share to contribute to painting a completely inaccurate picture on the Chinese ground and like its government in East Berlin was forced to choose to rely on and trust Chinese propaganda and false statistics.

After a relatively brief period of an East German-Chinese honeymoon in the very early 1960s when Beijing applauded East Berlin's decision to lock up its citizens and shoot at "border violators," the fair-weather East German-Chinese friendship ended abruptly and became a victim of the *Sino-Soviet Split*.

Notes

- ¹ The People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded in October 1949.

- 2 *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* in German.
- 3 The archive sources used for this article originate from the GDR's former Institut für Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung, Zentrales Parteiarchiv (ZPA), the archive of the GDR's ruling Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschland (SED). Since 1993, that archive material has belonged to Germany's Bundesarchiv (Federal Archive) and is called Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisation der DDR im Bundesarchiv. The sources are cited as "SAPMO-BARch, ZPA" in this article.
- 4 See J. Scholtyssek, *Die Außenpolitik der DDR*, R. Oldenbourg Verlag München 2003, p.14; also see e.g. D. Childs, *The GDR: Moscow's German Ally*, George Allen and Unwin London 1983.
- 5 Telegramm der chinesischen Regierung an die Regierung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik; People's Republic of China Documents on Relations with Foreign Countries: Volume 1-10, Beijing 1957-65, Volume 1 (1949-1950), Beijing 1957, p. 14.
- 6 And later Prime Minister until his death in 1976.
- 7 Antworttelegramm der Regierung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (Deyizhi minzhugongghe zhenfu de fudian); in: *Zhonghua renmingongheguo duiwai guanxi wenjianji*, People's Republic of China Documents on Relations with Foreign Countries), Volume 1 (1949-1950).
- 8 See xJ. Roesler, *Der Handlungsspielraum der DDR-Führung gegenüber der UDSSR*, *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 4/1993, pp. 293-301.
- 9 Attempts to limit access to Chinese propaganda and information material in the GDR was also accompanied by racism and warnings of the "yellow peril" in the GDR in the 1960s.
- 10 For details see e.g. M. Wobst, *Die Kulturbeziehungen zwischen der DDR und der VR China 1949-1990*, Berliner China-Studien Band 43, Lit-Verlag Berlin/Münster/Wien/ Zürich London 2004. For Bodo Uhse's awkward sounding account on his visit to China from April to June 1954 see B. Uhse, *Tagebuch aus China*; Aufbau Verlag Ostberlin 1956.
- 11 A writer in the GDR, who in 1948 emigrated to the GDR

- (from Mexico). Until 1930 Uhse was a member of Hitler's National Socialist German Workers' Party. After that he joined Germany's Communist Party and fled to Paris in 1933. *Monopolkapital* in German.
- 12
13 A community ordered to take orders from Moscow—something Beijing under Mao Zedong was never be prepared to do.
- 14 Grotewohl's Chinese counterpart who signed the joint declaration on China's behalf was Zhou Enlai.
- 15 The Republic of China (ROC).
- 16 The first East German delegation visited China from December 8-18, the second from December 22-26, 1955. See Gemeinsame Erklärung der Regierung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik und der Regierung der Volksrepublik China 1955; Dokumente zur Außenpolitik der Regierung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, Vol. III (1955); Deutsches Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Berlin, pp. 355-358.
- 17 See Aufzeichnungen über eine Unterredung zwischen den Genossen Mao Tse-tung, Liu Schao-tsch'i und Wang Tschia-hsiang; SAPMO-BArch, ZPA NL 182/220.
- 18 *Nationale Volksarmee* in German.
- 19 In the late 1950s West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer was—together with France—talking about jointly developing and deploying nuclear weapons. In November 1957 Paris and Bonn held secret talks about the possibility of jointly developing a nuclear weapons programme. During the secret meeting in Bonn on November 17, 1957 between Adenauer and French Undersecretary of State Maurice Faure, Paris and Bonn agreed to undertake efforts to jointly develop a nuclear weapons programme. Six months later in June 1958, however, French President Charles de Gaulle decided that France would not be part of any joint nuclear weapons programme; see e.g. W. Zank, Adenauers Griff nach der Atombombe, *Die Zeit* 26. Juli 1996; https://www.zeit.de/1996/31/Adenauers_Griff_nach_der_Atombombe; K. Wiegrefe, Adenauers Heimliche Pläne für eine eigene Atombombe, *Der Spiegel* February 21 2018; <https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/unter-konrad-adenauer-gab-es->

[planspiele-fuer-eine-deutsche-atombombe-a-1194239.html](#).

20 Workers' demonstrations against the regime 1953. The GDR authorities—together with occupying Red Army troops—ended the demonstrations with force on June 17 of that year.

21 He meant the West German government.

22 The government district in East Berlin.

23 See M.J., Esslin, *East Germany: Peking – Pankow Axis, China Quarterly*, No.3 (Jul.–Sept. 1960), p. 87.

24 Deng identified half a million "rightists"—students, intellectuals and other 'bad elements' accused of wanting to destroy the party. Torture, self-confession sessions, and forced hard labor in the countryside followed; for details on the *Hundred Flowers Campaign* see also T.J., Dreyer, *China's Political System* 9th Edition 2; Routledge London & New York, p. 94-97.

25 Already after Stalin's death in 1953, Schirdewan urged the GDR leadership to critically assess Stalin's policies and not dismiss Khrushchev's de-Stalinization in the Soviet Union as irrelevant. Walter Ulbricht, however, sacked Schirdewan from the Politburo in 1958.

26 See Stenographische Niederschrift der 30. Tagung des Zentralkomitees der SED im Amtssitz des Präsidenten der DDR in Berlin-Niederschönhausen vom 30.1. bis 1.2.1957; SAPMO-BArch, ZPA IV 2/1/170.

27 For there to be a counter-revolution there had to have been a revolution earlier. However, there had not been one in the GDR unless one chooses to refer to as "revolution" the Soviet Union occupying East Germany and installing Soviet-educated politicians to govern in East Germany.

28 Led by Wolfgang Harich, then editor-in-chief of the journal *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*. For his alleged "counter-revolutionary activities" Harich was imprisoned in 1957 and released from prison in 1964.

29 Between Stalin's death in March 1953 up until the *Great Leap Forward* in 1958 Beijing sought to diversify its foreign and foreign economic policies. The (temporary and short-lasting) application of the *Principle of Peaceful Co-Existence*

- Chinese-style led among others to China's participation in the Geneva Conference in 1954. For details see also K. Möller, *Die Außenpolitik der Volksrepublik China 1949-2004*, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften Wiesbaden 2005, p. 49/50.
- 30 A group of young Hungarian intellectuals, who laid the intellectual foundations of the *Hungarian Uprising*.
- 31 See Auszug aus dem Programm der Gruppe Harnich; SBZ-Archiv, Nr.5/6, 25 3. 1957, p.77.
- 32 See Aktenvermerk über eine Unterredung im MfAA der VRCh am 7.2.1957, zwischen dem stellvertretenden HA-Leiter, Tschen Bo-tjin und dem Unterzeichneten; SAPMO-BArch, ZPA NL 182/1218.
- 33 Kurze Niederschrift der Aussprache der Regierungsdelegation der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik mit dem Genossen Mao Tse-tung; SAPMO BArch, ZPA NL 182/1219.
- 34 See Material für W. Ulbricht über die Volkskommunen in der VR China 15.12.1958; SAPMO-BArch, FBS 363/15324; see also Felber, Roland, Zur gegenwartsbezogenen Chinawissenschaft in der DDR; in: Berliner China-Hefte, Nr. 14 (February 1999), p. 34-45.
- 35 B. Erlinghagen, Anfänge und Hintergründe des Konflikts zwischen der DDR und der Volksrepublik China. Kritische Anmerkungen zu einer ungeklärten Frage, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung, 49, 3 2007.
- 36 See Abschrift eines Telegramms des Gen. Wandel an das Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten 12.12.1958; SAPMO-BArch, FBS 363/15322.
- 37 In that case obviously not on a voluntary basis.
- 38 See Volkschinas Großer Sprung, Neues Deutschland 24 April 1958.
- 39 See Chinas Kapitalisten reihen sich ein, Neues Deutschland 7 August 1958.
- 40 650 Millionen Chinesen feierten ihren großen Sieg, Neues Deutschland 2 October 1958.
- 41 See Wie Indien den 'Großen Sprung' sieht, Neues Deutschland 25 December 1958.

- 42 See Plenum des ZK der KP Chinas zog Fazit des Großen
Sprungs, Neues Deutschland 18 December 1958.
- 43 For details see H. He, *Dictionary of the Political Thought of
the People's Republic of China*, Routledge London &
New York 2015.
- 44 In April 1960 Liu Shaoqi formally took over China's
presidentship and by the mid-1960s his authority and
popularity reached a peak. Mao felt threatened and took
revenge. Liu was imprisoned in 1966.
- 45 «China demonstriert Sprung nach vorn», Neues Deutschland
25 February 1959.
- 46 See Freundschaft zu China – Herzenssache von Millionen,
Neues Deutschland 2 October 1959.
- 47 See Chinas Eisenschmelzer zeigen ihre Kraft, Berliner Zeitung
5 March 1959.
- 48 See China wird Großbritannien rascher überholen, Berliner
Zeitung 22 August 1959.
- 49 See Zehntausende Öfen glühen in China, Berliner Zeitung 26
November 1958.
- 50 *Sozialistische Hausgemeinschaften* in German.
51 Literally *Red Meetings*.
52 Esslin, p.87.
- 53 Gemeinsame Erklärung der Regierung der Deutschen
Demokratischen Republik und der Regierung der
Volkrepublik China; Dokumente zur Außenpolitik der
Regierung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik Band VII
(1960); Deutsches Institut für Zeitgeschichte Berlin, pp. 329-
335.
- 54 People's Daily 18 August 1961; cited in W. Meißner, *Die DDR
und China 1949 bis 1990-Politik-Wirtschaft-Kultur*.
Akademie Verlag Berlin 1995 p. 200/201.
- 55 Cited in Meißner, p. 203.
- 56 Ministerium für Gesamtdeutsche Fragen (in 1969 re-named
to Bundesministerium für Innerdeutsche Beziehungen).
- 57 People's Daily 30 August 1961, cited in Meißner p. 204/205.
- 58 The order which would go down in history as the
Todesschussbefehl (Shoot-to-kill order)
- 59 See Aktenvermerk über ein Gespräch des Botschafters mit

dem Mitglied des Politbüros und Außenministers der VR
China, Genossen Tschen Ji; SAPMO-BArch, ZPA IV 2/20/123.
60 The GDR authorities called those who were trying to cross
the border *border violators* (*Grenzverletzer* in German) and
invested enormous resources into training East German
border troops on how to shoot at and kill East Germans
trying to escape to the West along the wall.
61 Ergänzung zur Einschätzung der Haltung der VR China zu
den Fragen des Abschlusses eines deutschen
Friedensvertrages, der Lösung des Westberlin-Problems;
SAPMO-BArch, ZPA IV 2/20/115.
62 See Aktenvermerk über ein Gespräch zwischen dem Stellv.
Außenminister Dji Poeng-fee und Botschafter Hegen;
SAPMO-BArch, ZPA IV 2/20/123.
63 See Zur Haltung der VR China zu den Fragen des deutschen
Friedensvertrages und des Westberlin-Problems; SAPMO-
BArch, ZPA IV 2/20/115.
64 Ironically, it emerged that more than 40% of the members of
the GDR's Volkskammer in the 1950s were former members
of Adolf Hitler's Nationalist-Socialist Party
(Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei Partei
(NSDAP).
65 For further details on the *German and Berlin Questions* see
also R. Steininger, *The German Question, 1945–95*; in Larres
K. (ed.), *Germany since Unification*. Palgrave Macmillan,
London 2001, p. 9-32; D. Schoenbaum, E. Pond, *The German
Question and other German Questions*; Palgrave, Macmillan
1996; J. Rynhold, *The German Question in Central and
Eastern Europe and the Long Peace in Europe after 1945: an
integrated Theoretical Explanation*; «Review of International
Studies» Volume 37 Issue 1 January 2011, pp. 249-275.

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