

KATJA HOYER



# Beyond the Wall

EAST GERMANY, 1949–1990

'Forget everything you thought you knew  
about life in the GDR' *SUNDAY TIMES*

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## BEYOND THE WALL

'Tremendous. Until the publication of *Beyond the Wall*, there hadn't been an English language history of the GDR with which to colour in that vanished country's past' Peter Hoskins, *Prospect*

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'Through interviews and personal experience, Katja Hoyer brings a new understanding to a country that has now vanished . . . A fresh look at what life was like for average people in East Germany . . . intriguing and surprising' ABC Radio National

'Utterly brilliant. This gripping account of East Germany sheds new light on what for many of us remains an opaque chapter of history. Authoritative, lively and profoundly human, it is essential reading for anyone seeking to understand post-WW2 Europe' Julia Boyd

'A beyond-brilliant new picture of the rise and fall of the East German state. Katja Hoyer gives us not only pin-sharp historical analysis, but an up-close and personal view of both key characters and ordinary citizens whose lives charted some of the darkest hours of the Cold War. If you thought you knew the history of East Germany, think again' Julie Etchingam

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'The joke has it that the duty of the last East German to escape from the country was to turn off the lights. In *Beyond the Wall* Katja Hoyer turns the light back on and gives us the best kind of history: frank, vivid, nuanced and filled with interesting people' Ivan Krastev

'A refreshing and eye-opening book on a country that is routinely reduced to cartoonish cliché. *Beyond the Wall* is a tribute to the ordinary East Germans who built themselves a society that – for a time – worked for them, a society carved out of a state founded in the horrors of Nazism and Stalinism' Owen Hatherley

'Katja Hoyer is becoming the authoritative voice in the English-speaking world for all things German' Dan Snow

'Katja Hoyer brilliantly shows that the history of East Germany was a significant chapter of German history, not just a footnote to it or a copy of the Soviet Union. To understand Germany today we have to grapple with the history and legacy of its all but dismissed East' Serhii Plokhy

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katja Hoyer is a German-British historian, journalist and the author of the widely acclaimed *Blood and Iron*. A visiting Research Fellow at Kings College London and a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, she is a columnist for the *Washington Post* and hosts the podcast *The New Germany* together with Oliver Moody. She was born in East Germany and is now based in the UK.

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# *Beyond the Wall:*

*East Germany, 1949–1990*

KATJA HOYER

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In memory of Harry, the most faithful of companions, the most trusted of confidants, and always a calm refuge in hours of storm.

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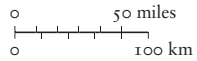
Cold War Europe in 1989





**Divided Germany split into Länder.**

The GDR's division into five Länder was dissolved in 1952, but they will be used as place names throughout the book for clarity and consistency.



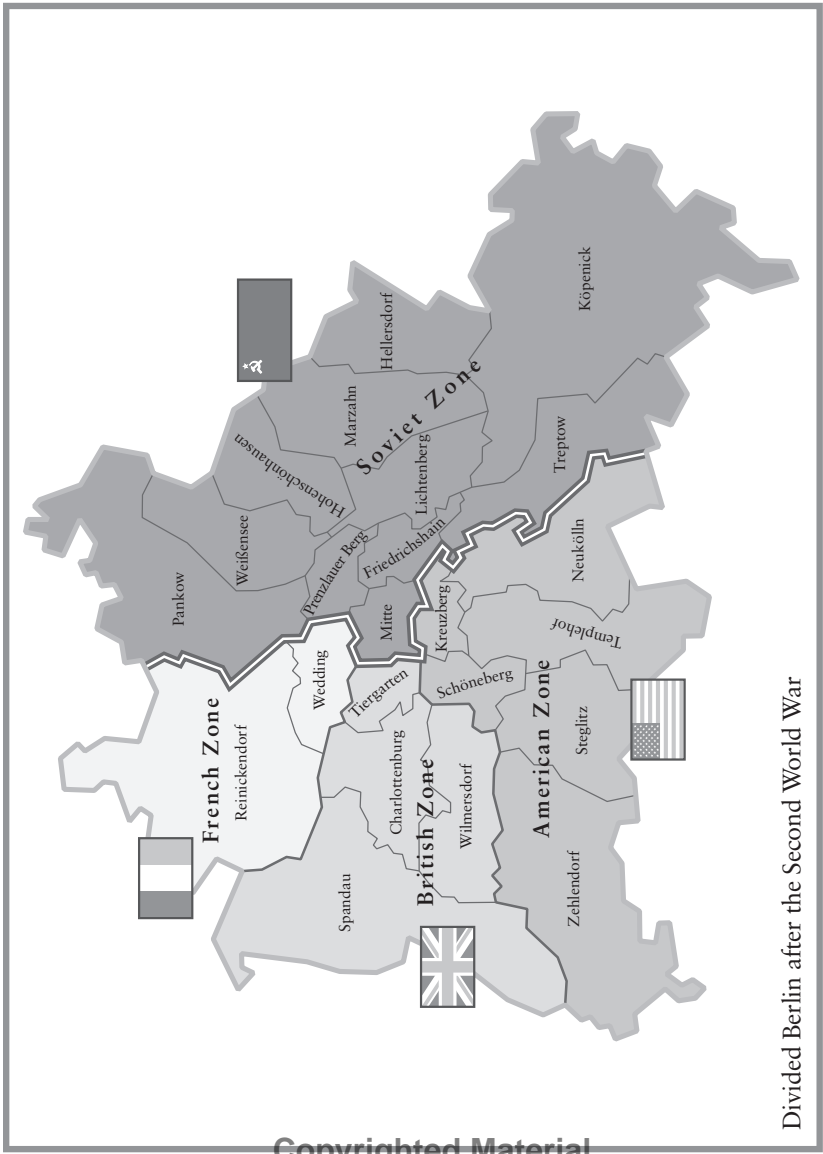
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The GDR administrative districts from, 1952-90

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Divided Berlin after the Second World War

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## *Preface*

**Halle, Saxony-Anhalt, 3 October 2021.** A sixty-seven-year-old woman in a cream-coloured blazer and black trousers took to the stage. Perhaps the most powerful woman on earth, her image was instantly recognizable. Her trouser suits, blonde bob and matter-of-fact demeanour had become iconic. As she took her place between the flags of Germany and the European Union and adjusted the microphones on the lectern, many in the audience felt they were witnessing a historic moment. After sixteen years at the helm of Europe's largest democracy, the outgoing German Chancellor Angela Merkel had come to speak about national unity.

3 October is the closest thing Germany has to a national day. Known as German Unity Day, it marks the anniversary of the country's reunification in 1990 after forty-one years during which two separate German states existed: the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in the west and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the east. Thirty-one years to the day had passed since then, not enough time to bury the era of German division in the depths of history. On the contrary. Reunification, the outgoing Chancellor began her speech, was an event that 'most of us have experienced consciously and that has changed our lives'.<sup>1</sup>

1990 was a watershed moment not just for the nation but for Merkel personally. It marked the beginning of her steep rise to the pinnacle of German politics. In 1954, when she was only three months old, her father had moved the family from West to East Germany. Merkel would spend the first thirty-five years of her life east of the inner-German divide. They saw her grow from pastor's daughter to confident scientist and shaped her at least as much as the three decades since 1990.

Angela Merkel's long career at the top of German politics stands

testament to the many successes of reunification. When the East German state that had been her home suddenly disintegrated and became part of the West German system it had opposed for so long, Merkel hit the ground running without looking back. Or at least without doing so in public. She understood that on paper her East German background was a political asset in a country that wanted to show it was now a united nation. But in reality that was true only so long as it remained her background rather than her identity. The establishment didn't want a constant reminder that the wall in East and West German minds would take longer to tear down than the physical one.

On the rare occasions when Merkel revealed details of her life in the GDR, this was met with hostility in the circles of power that are still largely dominated by former West Germans. When she said in 1991 that her doctoral dissertation in 1978 had required her to write an essay entitled 'What is the socialist way of life?' journalists moved heaven and earth to find the piece. 'Who knows what scandal they hoped to uncover,' Merkel later mused.<sup>2</sup> Such political work was part and parcel of university life in the GDR and seen as a chore by many, including Merkel herself, who received her only bad mark for this essay in an otherwise stellar set of academic achievements. As with many other aspects of life in the GDR, this episode too showed that 'it is obviously incredibly difficult to understand and make comprehensible how we lived back then', as Merkel remarked shortly before she became Chancellor in 2005.<sup>3</sup>

While Merkel had resigned herself to keeping a tight lid on her East German past, it remained a part of her she could not relinquish. In October 2021, with her political retirement in sight, she used the opportunity of her last German Unity Day in office to take issue with the way East German life stories like hers have been treated as skeletons in the national cupboard. A publication by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, a foundation close to Merkel's own political party, had praised her political adaptability in light of what they called the 'ballast of her East German biography'.<sup>4</sup> This unfortunate phrase clearly bothered the Chancellor. 'Ballast?' she bristled

at this description of her early life. 'An unnecessary burden that can just be shrugged off?'<sup>5</sup> In this unusually personal public moment, she emphasized, she was not speaking as Chancellor but as 'a citizen from the East, as one of more than 16 million people who lived a life in the GDR and who experience such judgements again and again . . . as if this life before German reunification didn't really count . . . no matter what good and bad experiences one had'.<sup>6</sup>

Merkel's frustration with the way her early life in East Germany is still dismissed as irrelevant is shared by many of her fellow former GDR citizens. Surveys taken since 1990 have shown that the majority have continued to feel that they are treated as 'second-class citizens' in the reunified country. Two thirds continue to feel this way today.<sup>7</sup> Many have experienced explicit or implicit pressure to jettison their East German 'ballast' and seamlessly adjust to a culture that was new to them. Even Merkel, who adapted to the post-reunification world extremely successfully, climbing a steep political career ladder all the way to the top, was still reminded by the press that it occasionally 'shone through' that she was 'not a born Federal German and European'<sup>8</sup> – as if she was not a 'native', not an 'original' citizen of the country she had been elected to lead. After sixteen years in the highest political office of the land, this East German still had to prove her allegiance, disavowing what came before.

Just as individual East Germans are asked to minimize traces of their pre-1990 past, the nation as a whole seems supremely uncomfortable with the GDR as a chapter of its history. In many ways, the process of writing the GDR out of the national narrative began even before its final demise. In 1989, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the former West German Chancellor Willy Brandt famously declared, 'Now what belongs together will grow together.' For many Germans, East and West, the division of their country, which had seemed a fact of life during the Cold War, now looked like an unnatural state of affairs, a product of the Second World War and perhaps a punishment for it. By 1990, had Germany not done enough to overcome this dark chapter of its past? Did it not deserve a fresh start without constant reminders of it? Francis Fukuyama's framing

of the end of the Cold War as 'the end of history' seemed particularly apt for Germany. The nation wanted, indeed needed to see reunification as a happy ending to its tumultuous twentieth century. Acknowledging the continuing impact of Germany's decades of division as anything other than distant history destroys this comforting illusion. If the GDR is to be remembered at all, then it is as one of Germany's dictatorships – as remote, sinister and irredeemable as Nazism.

Drawing a line under both German states and seeing 1990 as a fresh start for all Germans was also out of the question. West Germans had grown too fond of the idea of 1945 as their 'zero hour', the point from which the tender shoots of democracy were growing out of the ashes of the Second World War. Whatever problems the infant Federal Republic may have had, the prosperity and stability it had produced were like a comfort blanket to a population that had known little but tumult since 1914. Here was a Germany to be proud of. West Germany was declared the continuity state and East Germany the anomaly. Reunification in 1990 therefore seemed a satisfying end to forced separation. And to many East Germans too it was just that. In 1989 and 1990, many voted for the dissolution of their country in both word and deed.

Consensual reunification does not mean that life in East Germany deserves to be forgotten or filed away as irrelevant history. The ups and downs of the GDR as a political, social and economic experiment have left a mark on its former citizens, who have brought these experiences with them – and not as mere 'ballast'. Millions of Germans alive today neither can nor want to deny that they once lived in the GDR. While the world that had shaped them fell with the Berlin Wall in 1989, their lives, experiences and memories were not razed with it. Yet the way much of the Western world saw it, the GDR had well and truly lost the Cold War on German soil, morally invalidating everything in it. When the German Democratic Republic vanished literally overnight on 3 October 1990, it lost the right to write its own history. Instead it had *become* history. And history is written by victors – East Germany's is no exception.

Much of the West is struggling to see even why anyone would choose to remember their lives behind the Iron Curtain. Winning the Cold War seemed to have proved alternative models of life wrong. Where Western consumerism and liberal values are remembered in full colour, the GDR is pictured as a grey, monotonous blur – a world without individuality, agency or meaning. In the Western imagination, East Germans wasted forty-one years in a walled-off Russian colony, controlled by the Ministry for State Security, better known as the Stasi. What is there worth remembering?

Writing off the GDR wholesale as a footnote in German history that is best forgotten is ahistorical. The East German state lasted for over forty years, longer than the First World War, the Weimar Republic and Nazi Germany combined. It was never the static land that time forgot between 1949 and 1989. Those decades saw immense change. Indeed, much of the GDR's trajectory was shaped by people and events whose formative years lay in the decades not just before the Wall was built in 1961 but before the country itself was founded in 1949. Germany had been in a near-constant state of upheaval since 1914 and the economic, political, social and psychological consequences of the tumultuous first half of the twentieth century did not suddenly disappear when the GDR was set up.

This book traces the roots of the German Democratic Republic beyond its foundation to provide context for the circumstances out of which the country was born in 1949. I outline the developments that followed through all four decades rather than treating them as a static whole. In the 1950s, the infant republic was almost entirely preoccupied with stabilizing its foundations politically and economically. It did so both with and over the heads of its citizens, resulting in a decade that was marked by a can-do spirit as well as violent outbreaks of discontent.

When the Berlin Wall was built in 1961, bringing the exodus of skilled labour to West Germany to a forced halt, the country seemed to settle. Ambitious building projects such as the reimagining of Alexanderplatz in Berlin with its iconic TV tower combined with

the space craze and scientific breakthroughs to create a real sense of progress and national identity. Many East Germans were proud of their achievements as social mobility provided unprecedented opportunities for the working classes.

As the fruits of their labour created the highest living standards in the communist world in the 1970s, the GDR established itself on the world stage, becoming a member of the United Nations and being recognized by many countries around the world. East German products were exported as far as Britain and the United States. But the oil crises of the decade highlighted the GDR's inherent vulnerabilities and dependence on the Soviet Union (USSR). When Moscow reneged on its promised deliveries of oil and gas, East Germany could no longer uphold the living standards its people had been accustomed to without bankrupting itself in the process.

The ageing regime was beginning to lose touch and ran out of ideas. By the mid-1980s, the system had calcified, leaving it inflexible and brittle, in dire need of reform. When that wasn't forthcoming, the East German people themselves took the initiative to bring about change. Phases of opening to the West and drawing in on itself ebbed and flowed throughout each decade, and the experiences of East Germans, good and bad, were shaped by these complex tides of history.

The Stasi watched and often meddled with lives at every stage of the GDR's history, yet it did not render the East German people passive. Similarly, the state itself, while dependent on good will from Moscow, was never a passive Soviet satellite. East Germans lived and shaped a distinctly German experiment that spanned much of the second half of the twentieth century. Its political, economic, social and cultural idiosyncrasies deserve a history that treats it as more than a walled 'Stasiland' and gives it its proper place in German history.

Drawing on interviews, letters and records, this book makes room for a wide range of East German voices. Their life stories are integral to my account of the state they shaped and were shaped by. Interviewees for this book include politicians such as Egon Krenz,

one of the last leaders of the GDR, and entertainers like pop singer Frank Schöbel. The majority consisted of those who made the state work: from teachers, accountants and factory workers to police officers and border guards. The result is a new history of the GDR that shows all facets of their vanished country – from high politics to everyday life.

The context of the Cold War created simplistic images of the Other on both sides of the Iron Curtain. The GDR painted an image of the West in broad and hostile brushstrokes while it in turn became a caricature of the monochrome world of communism that supposedly lay beyond the Wall. Over three decades have now passed since the disappearance of the GDR and a new generation of Germans has grown up without physical borders dividing them. They have never experienced the system competition of two Germanies nor the existence of two German armies pointing a terrifying arsenal of weapons at one another. As the Cold War and the intense hostility it bred drifts further into the past, we have new opportunities to study East Germany with emotional and political detachment.

Perhaps the wounds of separation, of identities lost and gained, were too raw to be examined during the immediate post-reunification era when it seemed preferable to allow them to scab over. Now, it is time to dare to take a new look at the GDR. Those who do so with open eyes will find a world full of colour, not one of black and white. There was oppression and brutality, yes, and there was opportunity and belonging. Most East German communities experienced all of this. There were tears and anger, and there was laughter and pride. The citizens of the GDR lived, loved, worked and grew old. They went on holidays, made jokes about their politicians and raised their children. Their story deserves a place in the German narrative. It's time to take a serious look at the other Germany, beyond the Wall.

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## 1. *Trapped between Hitler and Stalin (1918–1945)*

*Siberia will freeze your big mouth shut!*

### *German Communists*

**Sverdlovsk, Siberia, 16 August 1937.** Twenty-four-year-old Berliner Erwin Jöris was pushed into a small cell. The darkness stank of sweat, excrement and fear. Of the fifty-eight other political prisoners who already languished there only a handful wearily turned their gaunt faces to the door to eye up the newcomer. Erwin looked around for somewhere to sit, but there was no space on the cramped floor. So he stood in the only place he could, by the latrine – a large barrel with a lid. He stood for hours, then days, then weeks. His feet swelled up, his mouth went dry and his throat burned with every rasping swallow. One day, he collapsed, clutching his chest with weak hands as he was dragged off to the sick bay. There a doctor looked him up and down, concluded that he was only feigning illness and sent him back into the cell.

The food rations in Sverdlovsk prison were not enough to sustain even a fit young man like Erwin Jöris. Once a day, a piece of ‘Stalin Cake’ was dished out – stale bread with a ladle of coffee. When Erwin collapsed again, nobody paid him any attention. In his delirium, he heard the prison door open. A soldier shouted a name into the cell, somebody answered, ‘Here!’ ‘You’ve got ten years. Come. With your belongings.’ The prisoners around him began to talk of trials and of ‘waves of arrests’. One said, ‘These tribunals only flick through your file briefly. If they have slept well, it could be your lucky day and you get five years. If they are drunk: twenty-five years.’

Every time the door opened, silence fell among the prisoners. Who would it be this time?<sup>1</sup>

Erwin Jöris was one of many German communists who had emigrated to Soviet Russia in the 1930s. Since communism and socialism had grown out of their obscure intellectual roots in the mid-nineteenth century, they had become mass movements in Germany, fuelled by industrialization and urbanization. While German far-left politicians and activists had been used to the deployment of varying degrees of state violence against their ideology, the ascent of Adolf Hitler was a new milestone. Erwin and his comrades were forced to flee from the Nazi regime in Germany, which began to crack down hard on the left once Hitler became Chancellor on 30 January 1933. They sought refuge in the Soviet Union. With its political and ideological roots in the October Revolution of 1917, it was the first and only realization of the political utopia they had dreamt of as they toiled and starved through the years of hardship that had followed the First World War. There, they would show their gratitude by doing all in their power to help build a better world. According to the historian Peter Erler, roughly 8,000 adult German political émigrés lived in Russia by the middle of the decade.<sup>2</sup> Apart from politically active communists, this included workers, actors, musicians, artists, architects, scientists, teachers, authors and many more individuals bound together by their disillusionment with everything that had gone wrong in their fatherland since 1914.

Born on the eastern outskirts of Berlin in 1912, Erwin Jöris belonged to a generation of young socialists that had cut their teeth (figuratively and literally) on the streets of German cities rather than in the trenches of the First World War. He was still a young boy when his father helped push Kaiser Wilhelm II, the last German monarch, into exile during the German Revolution of November 1918. His childhood was marked by the blood-soaked tales of the Spartacist Uprising in January 1919 and by the poverty and hunger his family experienced during hyperinflation in 1923.

The anger, squalor and violence of the working class neighbourhoods around him formed the backdrop to Erwin's upbringing.

Capitalism had failed the working classes for whom there had been little but misery during his lifetime. It was no wonder that by 1928, at the age of sixteen, he decided that there must be another way for his generation. Erwin joined the Young Communist League of Germany (KJVD), the youth wing of the German Communist Party (KPD). They organized marches, trained their recruits in street fighting, writing and distributing propaganda leaflets, and published a newspaper called *Die Arbeit* (Labour). This was supposed to prepare their teenage recruits to continue their parents' class struggle. Between 35,000 and 50,000 young Germans joined the KJVD and fought for what they hoped would be a better Germany.

Erwin Jöris and his comrades ran into serious trouble after Adolf Hitler had been made Chancellor on 30 January 1933. When an arson attack on the German parliament, the Reichstag, happened barely a month later, on 27 February 1933, the Nazis claimed that the culprit was one Marinus van der Lubbe, a young Dutch communist who admitted the deed under torture. Hitler convinced the eighty-five-year-old and increasingly frail German President, Paul von Hindenburg, to grant him emergency powers to squash the communist revolution the Dutchman had supposedly tried to incite. An increasingly feeble-minded Hindenburg agreed and used the emergency powers that Article 48 of the constitution afforded the German President to sign the infamous Reichstag Fire Decree. The legislation suspended civil liberties and allowed Hitler's men to arrest opponents at will and without charge or trial. This in turn amounted to a death sentence for many German communists.

In Prussia, around 10,000 communists were incarcerated within a fortnight after the fire. Among them was Erwin Jöris, who was sentenced to protective custody and interned in one of the earliest concentration camps, KZ Sonnenburg, which was opened on 3 April 1933 near Kostrzyn in what is now Poland. Youngsters like Erwin were small fry to the Nazis. They were after the leaders of the KPD who might yet deny them success in passing legislation through the Reichstag, which they needed to do in order to dismantle democracy under a legal guise. Communist deputies still held 100 of the 584

seats since the last election in November 1932. After the fire, a merciless manhunt ensued on each and every one of them.

Only a few days after the fire, on 3 March 1933, the Nazis arrested the KPD leader Ernst Thälmann, nicknamed 'Teddy'. On the same day, a Prussian commission had lifted legal restrictions off the Gestapo, the newly established secret police. This practically allowed them free range in terms of policing methods and punishments. Thälmann would be the first victim of a ruthless secret police force let off the leash. He was repeatedly mistreated as the authorities tried to gather information for his trial. On several occasions, he was dragged from his cell in Moabit prison into the Gestapo headquarters in the Prinz-Albrecht-Straße in Berlin. There he received the worst kind of punishment that a lawless security apparatus was capable of. On 8 January 1934 four of his teeth were knocked out and he was beaten bloody with a sjambok, a rhino-hide whip that would later be associated with the apartheid regime in South Africa where it was widely used by police forces. Thälmann would eventually be murdered in KZ Buchenwald in 1944.

In order to escape Hitler's thugs, many German communists fled abroad. Some continued to be politically active and built resistance cells in Prague and Paris with the help of the Communist International (Comintern), an organization promoting world communism directed by the Soviet Union. Many former KPD members moved straight to Moscow where they offered their services to the communist state. They took their spouses and children with them and began to build new communities in a place they had idealized over the course of their struggles in the 1920s and early 1930s. It would be in Moscow rather than Berlin where ideas for communism on German soil began to germinate.

### *Life in Paradise*

**Moscow, late October 1936.** Wladimir Leonhard was beginning to get used to life in the Russian capital. The teenager had moved there

in the summer of 1935 with his mother Susanne Leonhard, a German communist writer. The two were close, bound by their shared political outlook for which they had both been forced into exile. Susanne had even named her only son after her great idol, Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, better known as Lenin. It had always been just the two of them for as long as the boy could remember. His mother had divorced his father Rudolf Leonhard in 1919 after only one year of marriage and moved from Berlin to Vienna where she worked in the Soviet embassy and fell in love with the ambassador himself, Mieczysław Broński. As their marriage too was dissolved after only a short time, the couple went their separate ways. Mother and son retained the name of Susanne's first husband and moved back to Berlin where she worked as a journalist and devoted all her time to communist activism. Like so many of their comrades, they had had to flee from the Nazi regime and emigrated to Russia.

In Moscow, the single mother had been unable to find suitable accommodation for herself and fourteen-year-old Wladimir, and so the boy was put up in the Kinderheim Nr. 6, an orphanage that became famous for housing the children of mainly Austrian communists who had been killed or gone underground. The teenager enjoyed the privileged life the home afforded him but was always glad to see his mother, who had taken residence as a lodger in a shabby flat in a different part of Moscow.

When they met up on an afternoon in late October 1936, Wladimir was enjoying himself as he always did when he saw his mother. She bought him sweets at his favourite shop, Vostochnye Slastosty (Eastern Sweets). He told her that he was worried about some technical drawings he had to finish as homework, and she promised she would help him. When they said their goodbyes, Wladimir rushed off in a hurry as he had more work to do. His mother stood in the street and waved. When the boy returned the next day to see his mother, she was not there. She had been arrested and would be dragged off to the Vorkuta gulag, a work camp nearly 2,000 kilometres north-east of Moscow, where around a quarter of a million prisoners were to die over the next two decades.

His mother's arrest came as a complete shock to Wladimir. Like thousands of their fellow Germans, the Leonhards felt they had all to gain from emigrating to the USSR. Not only would they escape the devastating Nazi sweeps that had put so many of their friends and colleagues into concentration camps and prisons, but they would also get a chance to help build a better world. With the Russian Revolution in 1917, the first real communist experiment had begun. German socialists and communists had hoped in vain for the revolution that their compatriot Karl Marx had prophesied in the middle of the previous century. Even the First World War had failed to be the moment of truth for their fatherland. Yet the idea of a world revolution as salvation for the working classes had never lost its pull for many of the poorest labourers. The endless violent street battles, the precarious work that never seemed to generate enough money and the chaos and hardship of the 1920s were endured in the belief that Marx was right. The revolution would come.

In the post-war years of the 1920s and early 1930s, millions of disillusioned, hungry and tired workers toiled in Germany's industrial cities. They were ignored by a wealthy urban elite so preoccupied by their own desire for mind-numbing entertainment that they paid little heed to the invalids in the street, the twitching wrecks of the shell-shocked and the war stories of those with injured pride and broken dreams. German workers in turn became bitter and hard. They saw their meagre savings wiped out, while their jobs were insecure at best and often completely gone after the Great Depression began in the wake of the Wall Street Crash of 1929. They saw their often conservative values trampled and belittled by those who embraced the growing Americanization of German culture. What seemed exciting, new and adventurous to the urban middle classes appeared frivolous and amoral to those who neither had the time nor the money to indulge in the new culture.

Many German workers needed purpose and a sense of belonging. Communist meetings, the social activities provided by workers' associations and even the violent street clashes with the nationalist veteran groups called the *Freikorps* and later Hitler's SA thugs

provided much-needed escapism in a world that seemed to hold no future for them. In this context, a 1925 brochure called *What Did 58 German Workers See in Russia?* became instrumental in creating a paradisiacal image of the Soviet Union. It was inspired by the communist Hermann Remmele, who had led a group of his comrades on a grand tour of sorts through Russia. The pamphlet was based on their reports and boasted of ‘female workers who proudly talked of their equal treatment’<sup>3</sup> and of wages that were ‘33 per cent higher’ if one takes into account that workers lived rent-free and had excellent healthcare. All of this must have made the Soviet Union seem like the promised land to the unemployed and the destitute as well as to idealist intellectuals. Having experienced the First World War and its appalling consequences, older German communists wanted to believe there was a better alternative and saw the Soviet Union as a beacon of hope, especially after the waves of arrests in Berlin in 1933.

For most German political refugees their time in Moscow began as a great adventure. ‘Are there Germans here in Moscow?’<sup>4</sup> asked the teenage Wladimir Leonhard when he arrived at Moscow station with his mother and was driven to 5 Granovsky Street where an acquaintance had agreed to put them up for a few days. To his surprise there were thousands of Germans in the neighbourhood. There was a diverse group of exiles who had all hoped to find a fairer society in the capital city of the first ‘actually existing socialism’ (‘real existierender Sozialismus’), as the bulky German phrase had it. There were many workers and politicians, as one would expect, and also actors, artists and Bauhaus architects who had made names for themselves in the vibrant urban atmosphere of Weimar Germany and were despised by the Nazis for their left-leaning ideology. Among the émigrés were many Jews, for whom life in Germany had become even more dangerous since 1933.

Most of the high-profile German communist exiles were quartered in the Hotel Lux in Moscow. Its guest list read like a who’s who of world communism. Among its most famous residents were Ho Chi Minh, Johannes R. Becher (a writer who would make a

name for himself in the GDR), the Hungarian Imre Nagy, who would be executed as a result of his role in the Hungarian Uprising of 1956, and Clara Zetkin, one of Germany's earliest communists and women's rights activists who died in Moscow and whose urn was carried to its resting place by none other than Joseph Stalin himself. In 1933, the Hotel Lux had 300 rooms laid out to house a total of 600 guests. While initially there had been high praise for it from visitors who had travelled there for conferences of the Communist International from 1921, the building had since had two more levels added and was still bursting at the seams after the mass exodus from Germany in the mid-1930s. Post-1933, sources speak of broken door hinges and rats more often than of elaborate banquets and silk curtains.

The German Bauhaus architects, like other Hotel Lux guests, were attracted by the idea of building a new world – quite literally in their case. Their left-wing leanings had already jarred with German conservatism during the Weimar years and many were ready to start a new life in the Soviet Union well before the Nazis seized power in Berlin. The most prolific group of exiled German architects was the so-called Brigade Meyer, an eclectic mix of men and women, students and staff of the Bauhaus School in Dessau. They had followed the Swiss architect Hannes Meyer, who had moved to the Soviet Union from Dessau, where he had been a master architect at the school. In 1930, he took up a post in Moscow, where he lectured on architecture and attracted a circle of German followers.

The German Bauhaus enclave very quickly became disillusioned with their work in Russia. Initially welcomed as elite visionaries, they were increasingly hemmed in by Soviet bureaucracy, the lack of building materials and frustratingly low quality standards. The cracks in their new buildings reflected those in their relationship with the Soviets around them. Those they worked with regarded their privileged position with envy; those in the upper political ranks began to view the foreigners with suspicion. Meyer himself eventually had enough and moved back to Switzerland – convenient

for him as he had a refuge, unlike his German followers who were now trapped between Hitler and Stalin.

Margarete Mengel, a Jewish-German communist who had been Meyer's secretary, partner and mother of his son Johannes, could not get a visa for Switzerland and had to stay. She was arrested and shot on 20 August 1938. Johannes was only eleven years old when his mother was murdered and ended up in a home for criminal youths. He was still a teenager when he was deported to the Ural region as a forced labourer, working in mines. Johannes did not find out what happened to his mother until 1993 and then decided to move to Germany, aged sixty-seven.<sup>5</sup>

Other people in Meyer's group did not fare much better. Philipp Tolziner, a Munich-born Jewish architect, was arrested in 1938 and sentenced to ten years in a gulag near Solikamsk. Under torture, he confessed to having been a German spy and gave up the names of two further colleagues who he mistakenly thought had left the country.

### *Stalin's German Operation*

#### **NKVD Order 00439 by N. Yezhov, 25 July 1937.**

*Through recent material produced by agents and through investigation it has been proved that the German General Staff and the Gestapo organized widespread spying and espionage in the most important and especially in defensive industries and that for this purpose they are using the German nationals that now live there . . . In order to suppress this activity of German reconnaissance completely, I ORDER:*

*From 29 July of this year the arrest of all German nationals who work in military factories or in factories which produce defence goods or goods for the railway system or have been dismissed from any of these sectors.<sup>6</sup>*

This order was issued under the name of Nikolay Yezhov, head of the USSR's Ministry of the Interior (NKVD), but it is missing his

handwritten signature and is known to have originated directly from Stalin himself. By 1937, the dictator had become convinced that the Nazis' sharp rhetoric against the Soviet Union would soon convert into a real invasion. As early as 1926, when Hitler had argued in the second volume of his book *Mein Kampf* that 'in Russian Bolshevism we must see the attempt undertaken by the Jews in the twentieth century to achieve world domination',<sup>7</sup> he had portrayed the fight between Germany and its Russian foe as a struggle for survival between mutually exclusive civilizations. By the middle of the 1930s, Hitler's flagrant breaches of the Treaty of Versailles in his rearmament programme were being paraded in public while much of the West looked on and congratulated him. To Stalin, a Nazi invasion was a question of 'when', not 'if', and he was convinced that the USSR would stand alone when it happened.

Naturally prone to paranoia, Stalin turned 'the bureaucratic institutions of the Soviet Union into extensions of his inner personality', according to political psychologist Raymond Birt.<sup>8</sup> Among the many characteristics of a paranoid personality which Birt sees in Stalin, there is a tendency to play the victim and a need to 'prove that persecution is real'.<sup>9</sup> Stalin began to see Hitler's agents everywhere, busy preparing the imminent attack. He had let German architects build his new cities. German politicians seemed to be infiltrating the Comintern, something Stalin had long been suspicious of as the German contingent made up one fifth of its members and had still failed to prevent the Nazi takeover in their home country. German men and women worked in mines and ammunition factories. German schools and children's homes trained new recruits right under his nose. In short, there were Germans everywhere and if they conspired to help their compatriots at home, they could do some serious damage.

Stalin's fear had been simmering since 1933 and by 1936 it had reached fever pitch. Hitler's fifth column needed to be eradicated. Completely. Stalin's suspicions went way beyond the recent German exiles. Anyone who spoke German, had German citizenship, was ethnically German or had no citizenship but some connection to

Germany was targeted. He was talking about tens of thousands of people.

NKVD Order 00439 started the so-called German Operation in which a total of 55,005 people would be arrested. Of those, 41,898 would be shot and 13,107 receive long sentences.<sup>10</sup> This also included three quarters of all the political émigrés. No matter how favoured they had once been by the Soviet regime, nobody was safe as entire families, blocks, streets and factories were wiped out. More members of the KPD's executive committee died at Stalin's hands than at Hitler's.

Hermann Remmele, the leader of the group that penned the propaganda brochure *What Did 58 German Workers See in Russia?*, was to endure a fate that would stand in for many German communists. Once a darling of the Soviet political elite (Grigory Zinoviev had called him 'the best and most precious asset of the German party . . . the gold of the proletariat'), he was arrested in Russia in May 1937 on charges of spying and sabotage. Two years later, he was sentenced to death and shot on the same day, 7 March 1939. His son Helmuth died on his way to a gulag in Siberia and his wife Anna would succumb to health problems caused by a horrific spell in Moscow's Butyrka prison.<sup>11</sup> Such family tragedies would repeat themselves thousands of times as Stalin's communist utopia turned out to be a dystopian hell.

In a bitter twist of fate, those who had been incarcerated by the Nazis in early concentration camps in 1933 made it to the top of the list of suspicious individuals. In the eyes of Stalin and his henchmen, anyone who had escaped Hitler's clutches must have given the Nazis something in return. Perhaps a promise to infiltrate the Soviet Union, get a job in a munitions factory and begin to organize systematic sabotage to prepare a German invasion.

When Erwin Jöris was arrested in his workplace in Siberia in 1937, the authorities quickly found out that he had somehow escaped a Nazi concentration camp. Now he was working in one of Stalin's industrial centres. After four months in Sverdlovsk prison, Siberia, Erwin was transferred to Lubyanka prison in Moscow. The

handsome neo-baroque building with its distinctive yellow brick facade had been built at the turn of the century on the site that had once housed the headquarters of Catherine the Great's secret police. Now Stalin's infamous security chief Nikolay Yezhov directed the Great Purge from his office on the third floor. Like many of his fellow German exiles, Erwin had been oblivious to the scale and nature of the purges and thereby to the grave danger to himself.

The German Operation formed only a fraction of the terror. Since Stalin's personal paranoia had become state policy, whole factories, streets and communities were emptied. Millions of people were arrested between 1936 and 1938, usually charged with 'counter-revolutionary' activities. The total number of deaths during the Great Terror is estimated to be around a million. Executions at Lubyanka prison, where Erwin was held, were carried out in a purpose-built chamber in the basement, or at a nearby courthouse on Nikolskaya Street which was later dubbed the 'shooting house' by many Moscow exiles. Lubyanka is still in use now – as a prison and as the headquarters for the KGB's successor organization, the FSB (Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation).

The prison cells at Lubyanka had no windows. There is still an argument as to whether prisoners were located in the basement of the building or in the windowless upper floor as they were taken there blindfolded and deliberately disoriented with sleep deprivation. What we do know from the testimonies of those that survived was that men and women were held at Lubyanka without trial and tortured until they confessed to having been members of a fascist or Trotskyist conspiracy. Some were humiliated by being shackled naked to the cold floors, while guards insulted and beat them. Others were shot, hanged or committed suicide. Those that survived were sent to gulags in the east. Gallows humour had it that Lubyanka was the tallest building in the capital – you could see Siberia from its basement.

The NKVD had an easier solution for the prisoner Erwin Jöris. As a German national, he was sentenced to deportation. This

happened to many German communists in exile as it fulfilled the twin roles of appeasing Hitler in the build-up to the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact by denying his enemies safe sanctuary and eliminating suspicious foreign elements without dirtying Soviet hands. The NKVD knew they were delivering their former comrades straight into the arms of Heinrich Himmler's security apparatus. In April 1938, Erwin was put on a train. A Gestapo officer was already waiting for the troublesome communist before he had even reached the Polish border. Upon arrival in Berlin, he was transferred to Moabit prison, the very same in which KPD leader Ernst Thälmann had languished while the Gestapo questioned and tortured him.

Even high-profile figures such as Willi Budich, a German communist of the old guard who had been a member of socialist parties since 1910, were unable to escape the accusations that they had somehow made a pact with the Nazis to be released from incarceration. His story is another harrowing tale of a German communist who had escaped Hitler only to be targeted by Stalin.<sup>12</sup> Budich had spent a lifetime fighting for his communist ideals. When his future wife, a Russian law student called Luba Gerbilskaia, first met him at the World Congress of the Comintern in December 1922, he already bore the mental and physical scars of his struggle. She would later remember that 'he looked older than his thirty-two years . . . This was due to the hard and dangerous life of this revolutionary and heroic communist, but in his eyes shone humour and a warm heart.'<sup>13</sup> Budich had been a KPD Reichstag deputy when the Nazis came to power in 1933. In 1932, he had already proved that he would fight tooth and nail to keep the 'brown pest' at bay. In a violent brawl with Nazi thugs in the debating chamber itself, his kneecap had been bashed into a pulp with a chair. He would never regain the use of his leg. After the Reichstag Fire in 1933, the SA hunted him down and interned him at Columbia concentration camp in Berlin where they tortured him half to death. When he was released, it was with broken legs and severely impaired vision and hearing. His wife, who had fled to Moscow with their two young daughters Irina

and Marianne-Leonie, organized for him to be transferred there as well. Yet decades of ideological struggle and a crippled body to show for it would not be enough. He had somehow evaded prolonged imprisonment in Nazi camps and this made him suspicious. In September 1936, Budich was arrested for being a member of the 'Wollenberg-Hoelz-Organization' – a fictitious group invented by the NKVD to enable them to charge seventy German communists with being members of a 'counter-revolutionary, terrorist, Trotskyist conspiracy'.<sup>14</sup> Budich was tried in March 1938 and shot on the same day. He would only be rehabilitated posthumously in 1956, three years after Stalin's death.

The idea of German spies played right into the irrational fear of a counter-revolution stoked by Western agents in the USSR. It was a powerful seed of suspicion that found fertile soil in minds brutalized by years of violence. Life had been cheap on the bloody battlefields of the Eastern Front in the First World War. Yet it had been even cheaper during the years of the Russian Civil War from 1917 to 1922, when a staggering 8–10 million people died. In the decade that followed Lenin's death in 1924, the power struggle from which Stalin emerged victorious and the subsequent modernization programme would demand countless more victims in grain requisitions, famines, industrial accidents, gruelling work conditions and further political repression. Stalin lost no sleep over the arrest and murder of tens of thousands of Germans.

Meanwhile, the enormous wave of arrests in 1937 caused panic among the ranks of the exiled communists. Proving you were unswervingly loyal to Stalin was no longer the exclusive domain of careerists and ideological extremists. It had become a matter of life and death. The only way to prove that you were not a 'fascist coated in red' was to denounce those that supposedly were just that. When Stalin suddenly lost his temper in February 1937 and burst out that 'everyone in the Communist International works for the enemy',<sup>15</sup> the German delegation panicked. This led to a frenzy of denunciations. Grete Wilde, a German communist who had been in the KPD since 1921, shortly after its launch, held a job in the Comintern's

cadre department in Moscow when these events unfolded. Without hesitation, she produced over twenty pages of denunciations against fellow German communists. They covered the biographies of forty-four of her colleagues and claimed they were ‘Trotskyists and other hostile elements among the ranks of the KPD’.<sup>16</sup> Yet even this unspeakable betrayal could not save her. The NKVD was convinced that she was shielding the true culprits. Grete herself was arrested on 5 October 1937 and deported to Karaganda labour camp in Kazakhstan where she is thought to have died in 1944. Such patterns of suspicion, denunciations and betrayal left deep scars on those German communists who survived them, scars they would take back to their home country after the war.

### *Communist Children*

**Moscow, 1937.** The waves of arrests during the Great Terror left a large group of German children abandoned or orphaned. If deemed old enough to hold political opinions, they too were sometimes deported. Often they ended up in orphanages or were given new names and put into homes for criminal youths. Even the children of the communist elite, who had previously led privileged lives, began to feel the terror that held the capital in its grip.

Most of the children of the German communist expat community attended the Karl-Liebknecht-Schule, a German-speaking institution in Moscow. Founded in 1924, it was run by German intellectuals who had built the ‘school of their dreams’<sup>17</sup> in the land of socialism as they felt this had become increasingly difficult to do in Germany. Here they would raise a new generation of idealists. Left-leaning German teachers were attracted by this idea and moved to Moscow to teach. The school was a bubble that shielded its pupils from the Russian world around them and it continued to do so for a surprisingly long time. But this bubble too would burst when the Great Terror became all-encompassing. Wladimir Leonhard described it in his memoirs:

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*Beginning in March 1937, one teacher after another was arrested. The first one was our German teacher, Gerschinski, a German communist who had himself been taught at the Karl-Marx-Schule in Berlin as a pupil and then emigrated to the Soviet Union in 1933. There followed the history and geography teacher, Lüschen, also an alumnus of the Karl-Marx-Schule. Eventually our maths and chemistry teacher, Kaufmann, too was arrested. . . . The teachers who were left were not only completely over-worked but also scared for their lives. Every one of them knew that it could be his turn tomorrow. They lost all confidence and were often hardly able to finish a lesson, which of course we as pupils noticed.<sup>18</sup>*

There was little resistance from the German children and teenagers as the adults in their lives began to vanish one by one. They had been taught to endure suffering. The ideology imprinted on them said that factionalism is the worst enemy of the world revolution and internal doubters and dissidents must be silenced and carved out of the movement before their cancerous lies split the unity of communism and allowed its enemies to defeat it.<sup>19</sup> Leonhard describes how a ten-year-old girl in his children's home in Moscow reacted to the arrest and deportation of her father. As they sat together in a group in the evening, her words betrayed her desperate desire to uphold the pillars of her world and explain why Stalin had taken her father:

*I believe these things are best explained with an example. Imagine one of us has an apple, which is very precious to him, as it is his only one. In this apple there is a rotten, or perhaps even poisonous bit. If you want to save the apple, you will have to cut out this poisonous or rotten bit to save the rest. As you cut it out, perhaps so as not to poison yourself, you might cut out more than you need to, so that there is definitely only healthy matter left. Perhaps this is what these purges are about.<sup>20</sup>*

The Karl-Liebknecht-Schule produced a cadre of child communists who had never known a different ideology. Their parents were without fail part of the hardcore of the German communist group

and had decided to bring them to Soviet Russia just as Stalinism had begun to transform the country. In their school, all of their teachers were of a similar mould and perhaps even more so once the purges began. It made ideological sense to these children that their parents should be sacrificed.

Those among the German communist children who were older, like Wladimir, also understood that they were barred from their fatherland. It was a terrible situation that had a deep psychological impact. As the pupils of the Karl-Liebknecht-Schule were young enough to fall through Stalin's murderous sieve, many graduates would later form the core of those who returned to Germany after the Second World War to help build socialism in their country. Wolfgang Leonhard, as Wladimir later called himself, could therefore claim with some justification in an interview in 1997 that 'the history of the GDR probably began in the Karl-Liebknecht-Schule'.<sup>21</sup>

### *Self-Censorship*

**Soviet Union, 1938–1939.** Like the ten-year-old girl in Wladimir Leonhard's children's home, many adult German communists too had been able to convince themselves that the purges might be necessary. An even more powerful and enduring idea was that 'wise father Stalin' did not know anything about the excessive violence his underlings committed in his name. Helmut Damerius, a German communist who was arrested under false accusations as part of the German Operation on 17 March 1938, is a typical example. He had gone through hell, first at Lubyanka prison in Moscow and then at Solikamsk gulag where he spent his sentence of seven years' hard labour. During this time he wrote a total of seventeen letters to Stalin. He would later explain that he did so because 'I was full of hope to find justice in this way. I would write to Stalin, all would be explained and justice would be restored. In the meantime, I would behave like a communist and work hard for the good of Soviet power.'<sup>22</sup> His letters never received an answer.

This powerful idea also gripped Hedwig Remmele, the daughter of Hermann and Anna Remmele. Despite the fact that her father, brother and husband had all been murdered by the NKVD while she had been ordered to stay in Siberia with her daughters long after the war had finished, she still clung to the notion that Stalin would help. She too kept writing letters to the authorities in the hope that they would allow her to return to Germany from her exile in Siberia where she had been moved after her parents had been arrested. She was still there when she heard of Stalin's death in 1953. Upon receiving the news, she suffered a nervous breakdown. In her mind, her last hope to be released had evaporated. She would eventually return to Germany in 1956, twenty years after she had left.

For those who survived the Great Purges of 1936–1938 and who were not completely disillusioned with Soviet-style communism, a new test of loyalty to Stalin lay in store: the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. When on the night between 23 and 24 August 1939 Hitler's Germany and Stalin's USSR signed a nonaggression treaty, it changed everything for German communists in the Soviet Union. As horrifying as the purges had been, those who wanted a psychological and ideological way to deal with them found one. No matter how many comrades died at the hands of the NKVD, it was all for a greater good: to defeat 'Hitlerism' and fascism at home. The anti-fascist agenda which the KPD in Moscow still trumpeted was the single-most powerful tool in their ideological repertoire. The Hitler–Stalin pact destroyed this illusion.

Still, the KPD leadership in exile led by Wilhelm Pieck and Walter Ulbricht were willing to bend their propaganda to fit around the unlikely agreement of friend and foe. They immediately promoted a new narrative: the war that was about to begin was provoked by the imperialist nations of France and England. The Soviet Union supported the 'peaceful' ambitions of Germany. The communist resistance cells in London, Paris and Prague were naturally outraged that they were now being asked to accept Hitler's government. Kurt Hager, a German communist in exile in Britain, wrote under

the pseudonym Felix Albin that ‘We German anti-fascists will under no circumstances give up the fight against the Nazi regime.’<sup>23</sup>

Even in Moscow itself, the KPD had a tough time convincing the remnants of the communist enclave, now terrified and fatigued after two years of brutal purges. Walter Ulbricht was ordered to present ideas as to how this could be achieved to the executive committee of the party, the politburo, on 9 September 1939, mere days after the German attack on Poland. Ulbricht’s notes for the session give an interesting insight into just how much argumentative creativity was required: ‘The pact of the Soviet Union with Germany supports the international working class as it forces German fascism under the heel of the Soviet Union, thereby contradicting its lies about the Soviet Union.’<sup>24</sup> This was the line to be taken. The use of such words as ‘fascist’ and ‘Hitlerite’ was banned from KPD material; the party offices elsewhere were to be closed, particularly the one in Paris which had proved to be too independent from the Comintern puppeteers in Moscow.

After the purges, KPD internal cleansing and the ludicrous ideological U-turn following the Hitler–Stalin pact, the inner circle of the communist enclave in Moscow had boiled down to a fanatical core. This small group was to show unquestioning obedience to Stalin and cut all ties to their former German comrades. At the heart of this select clique sat Walter Ulbricht and Wilhelm Pieck, who would later be tasked to build socialism in Germany in Stalin’s image.

## *Leaders*

Neither Pieck nor Ulbricht were marked out for leadership through a particularly charismatic personality or oratory skill. Both had shown unconditional loyalty to Moscow since the revolution in 1917 and could count on protection and support from the Soviet Union as far as anyone could. Wilhelm Pieck was a communist of the old order. Born in 1876, he had joined the Social Democratic Party

(SPD) in 1895 and found a natural ideological home in its radical left wing. He spent much of the First World War in prison as he continued to work with the leaders of opposition to the war – Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. When the KPD was created in the winter of 1918/19, he was one of its founding members and immediately pushed for voluntary subjugation to Moscow. He even met Lenin personally, in autumn 1921, to receive instructions at a meeting of the leadership of the Comintern. With such a long track record of ideological purity and loyalty to Soviet Russia, Pieck made it through the purges in Moscow unscathed. His friendly, open face betrayed his ruthless mind. Nobody could rely on reputation alone to see them through Stalin's wave of terror, and so Pieck busied himself denouncing former comrades and aiding the cleansing of his party to reassure the regime in Moscow of his continued service. He stood ready to help his adopted motherland when Hitler invaded it in June 1941 and Operation Barbarossa began.

Pieck's comrade Walter Ulbricht also shows that it was not charisma or leadership qualities but rather obedience and usefulness that decided the careers – and survival – of German communists in the 1930s and 1940s. A plain-looking, stocky man, around 1.65 metres tall, Ulbricht spoke with the provincial accent of his native Saxony, sounding slightly comical to his predominantly urban audiences. His voice had an unusually high pitch and did not carry well when addressing large crowds of people. His writing too was full of empty phrases and repetition – not exactly the stuff that inspires revolutions. As a KPD deputy in the Reichstag, his rhetorical duels with the Nazis' propaganda chief in Berlin, Joseph Goebbels, highlighted Ulbricht's lack of eloquence in a particularly stark manner. Nevertheless, their verbal stand-offs often provoked violent clashes between their respective supporters. So too, when the two ideologues spoke at the Saalbau in Berlin-Friedrichshain on 22 January 1931 in front of 4,000 people – the result was a mass brawl with 100 injured. But the heat always came from the situation itself rather than Ulbricht's words. The stiff apparatchik was no match for the verbal fireworks of Joseph Goebbels. After one of their debates in