

INTRODUCTION

The Dynamics of Soviet–East German Relations in the Early Cold War

THE TWO STATES that emerged from the defeated Germany were central to the development of the cold war. Rapidly evolving from defeated objects of Four Power policy, the two Germanys became important actors in their own right on the front line of the cold war. Both superpowers initially treated their part of Germany as war booty to be plundered and kept weak, but as the cold war developed, they would each come to see their part of Germany as an essential ally whose needs were intertwined with their own. For political, military, economic, and ideological reasons, the superpowers engaged in a competition for allies to show that their side of the cold war was the stronger, more popular, more vibrant one. They also wanted to ensure that their German ally would not unite with the other against them. Beginning in the 1950s, the superpowers invested themselves, and their reputations, increasingly in their German allies, who were adept at taking advantage of this situation.

While there have been a variety of in-depth studies of the U.S.–West German alliance,¹ there has been much less investigation of the Soviet–East German alliance.² This book will take advantage of the opening of former communist archives to examine the Soviet–East German side of the cold war from Josef Stalin’s death in 1953 through the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961. After the profound Soviet losses of World War II, the Kremlin leaders’ prime motive initially was to make sure Germany could not rise up and threaten them again. It took longer for the Soviets than for the Western Powers to shift their policy from destruction and retribution in Germany to construction and support of an ally. It was a big leap from Stalin’s sanction of the raping and pillaging of the Soviet Zone of Germany³ in the mid- to late 1940s to Soviet leader Nikita S. Khrushchev’s declaration to the East Germans that “your needs are our needs” in the 1950s.⁴ This book tells the story of Khrushchev’s increasing commitment to a strong, socialist state in East Germany and the ways the persistent East German leader Walter Ulbricht was able to use this commitment to his advantage. It is the story of East Germany transforming its weakness into strength in its relations with the Soviet Union and the story of the East Germans’ capacity to resist Soviet directives. This book will demonstrate that Soviet–East German relations from 1953–1961, particularly concerning the divided city of

2 · Introduction

Berlin, cannot be understood without studying the actions and aims of both the Kremlin and East Berlin.

An appreciation of the importance of nonsuperpower actors in the cold war is one of the primary lessons scholars have gleaned from the former Soviet bloc's new archival evidence. In response, the political scientist Tony Smith has called for a pericentric study of the cold war,⁵ and the historian James G. Hershberg has urged a "retroactive debipolarization" of cold war history.⁶ Both scholars point to the opportunity and need to supplement previous studies focusing on the role of the superpowers with studies that examine the contributions of other states to the dynamics and key events of the cold war. Allies mattered in the cold war both because of the importance vested in them by the superpowers and because of actions they took at times independent of their superpower patrons, especially actions that exacerbated superpower relations or dragged more powerful superpower patrons into situations and commitments they otherwise would not have chosen.⁷ Only by including the actions and perceptions of key allies, such as England, France, the two Germanys, the two Koreas, the two Chinas, and the two Vietnams, in the history of the cold war can we arrive at a more nuanced and comprehensive analysis of some of the pivotal events and dynamics of that period. The roles of the two superpowers must be combined with those of important allies.

The present book is an effort to do this. This book will illustrate that the Soviet–East German relationship was more two-sided than previously understood, that in some important ways a mutual dependency existed that mattered for the evolution of the cold war. As Abraham Ben-Zvi postulates in studying U.S.–Israeli relations, "the core of numerous patron-client [relationships] is seldom characterized by pure dependence, but rather by what [Klaus] Knorr calls 'asymmetrical interdependence.'"⁸ The concept of interdependence in superpower-ally relations has been well developed on the Western side of the cold war, revealing the influence of America's allies on the cold war—as persuasive allies and independent actors whose views and actions mattered to the United States for a variety of reasons. This body of literature demonstrates that it was not just U.S. preferences that were expressed in relations with its allies; the perceptions and aims of the allies were also important factors influencing U.S. policy. For example, the British played a crucial role in prodding the Americans to respond to the Soviet threat by establishing the Marshall Plan, a West German state, and NATO;⁹ and the West European "invitation" for a postwar American presence was an essential part of U.S. decision making.¹⁰ Outside of Europe, Pakistan, Taiwan, and Israel all pulled the Americans in as much as possible to assist them against their regional rivals.¹¹ The United States often found that its ac-

tions in these regions were guided more by the concerns of its local ally than by U.S. global strategy.¹²

American allies did not exert their influence just by being persuasive in interactions with the United States; they also at times went outside of those interactions to act independently. Thus, President Truman found that he could not control the actions of South Korean President Syngman Rhee in the armistice talks ending the Korean War;¹³ and the British and French launched the Suez Crisis of 1956 without consulting with the United States.¹⁴ Similarly, try though he did to persuade West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer to be more flexible in handling the Berlin Crisis in the late 1950s, President Eisenhower frequently complained that Adenauer's differing views seriously constrained American options in the crisis.¹⁵

Scholars of the Western side of the cold war have assumed that their findings of complicated, two-sided alliance relations only applied to the West.¹⁶ This is partly because they believed that the openness of the American democratic system to lobbying was a significant part of the reason allies were able to gain influence over American policy.¹⁷ Thomas Risse-Kappen has argued that democratic norms and institutions enabled and even promoted "the European influence on U.S. foreign policy."¹⁸ Given the lack of democracy in the Soviet Union and Soviet bloc, combined with the Western cold war image of the Kremlin as an autocratic master of the Warsaw Pact, most scholars have concluded that, with the exception of China, Moscow did not have to deal with troublesome allies who complicated its foreign policy making.

The treasure trove of documents made accessible since 1991, however, makes it clear that Moscow also had alliance concerns and that Soviet alliances were not as one-sided as previously surmised. This book will show that there was an important degree of mutual dependency between the Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The same basic phenomenon accounts for both U.S. and Soviet vulnerabilities to alliance pressures during the cold war: the competition for allies.

As the cold war burgeoned in the 1950s, Moscow and Washington felt they needed allies not only for practical military and economic reasons, but also for reasons more connected with their reputation as leader of one of two opposing blocs. Both sides believed in the domino theory: that gaining or losing an ally would have a multiplier effect. On the Soviet side, this concern was exacerbated starting in the late 1950s when they had to worry not only about the challenge to their allies from the United States, but also from Mao's China. In Germany, Korea, Cuba, and elsewhere, the superpowers believed that if they did not defend their interests strongly, they would have no credibility as a reliable ally. As John Lewis Gaddis observes, however, "Credibility is . . . a state of mind,

4 • Introduction

not an objective, independently measurable reality. [C]redibility can hardly be on the line until one has chosen to put it there. For whatever reason, the Cold War encouraged a curious fecklessness on the part of the superpowers when it came to how and where they risked their reputations. Berlin was the most dramatic example, but hardly the only one.”¹⁹

Just as John F. Kennedy told the West Berliners in 1963, “*Ich bin ein Berliner*,” so Khrushchev equated Soviet needs with those of his German ally. This book sets out to investigate both sides of the Soviet–East German relationship: how and why the Soviets saw the GDR as a crucial domino and how the East Germans responded to this. We will examine both the constraints on Soviet policy in affecting events in the GDR and the ways in which the East Germans resisted or influenced Soviet policies.²⁰

Regarding relations between the Soviets and their allies, Kathryn Weathersby has argued that it is only by examining “the intersection of Moscow’s and Pyongyang’s aims” that one can understand what “produced the [Korean] war in June 1950”;²¹ and Norman Naimark has asserted that “[t]he GDR . . . was created primarily out of the interaction of Russians and Germans in the Soviet occupied zone.”²² Similarly, I will demonstrate that it is only by taking into account both the actions, urgings, and proddings of Ulbricht, and the calculations of Khrushchev, as well as the broader East-West interactions, that one can understand the climactic event of this book, the building of the Berlin Wall and the crisis surrounding it.

There are a variety of factors that can explain the influence of a smaller ally on a great power, the influence of the Kremlin’s German ally on Soviet policy and on conditions in the GDR. As in any relationship between an empire’s core and its periphery, the geographic distance yields significant control over local conditions to the local power. This can create a gap between the superpower’s policy preferences and the actual local implementation of policy. The capacity of the local power to affect local conditions, and the implementation or nonimplementation of the superpower’s declared policies, gives it the capacity to constrain these policies.²³ In spite of all the Soviet troops and advisors in the GDR, Moscow was still not able always to enforce its policies and prevent the East Germans from acting independently. The roughly 500,000 Soviet troops in the GDR may have deterred the population from repeating the uprising of 1953, but they were not able to control the actions of the East German leaders.²⁴ The Soviet forces could determine or protect the ultimate “fate” of the socialist regime in the GDR but could not regulate its daily “behavior.”²⁵ Thus, through its impact on day-to-day local conditions, the smaller ally may limit the superpower’s real long-term policy options.

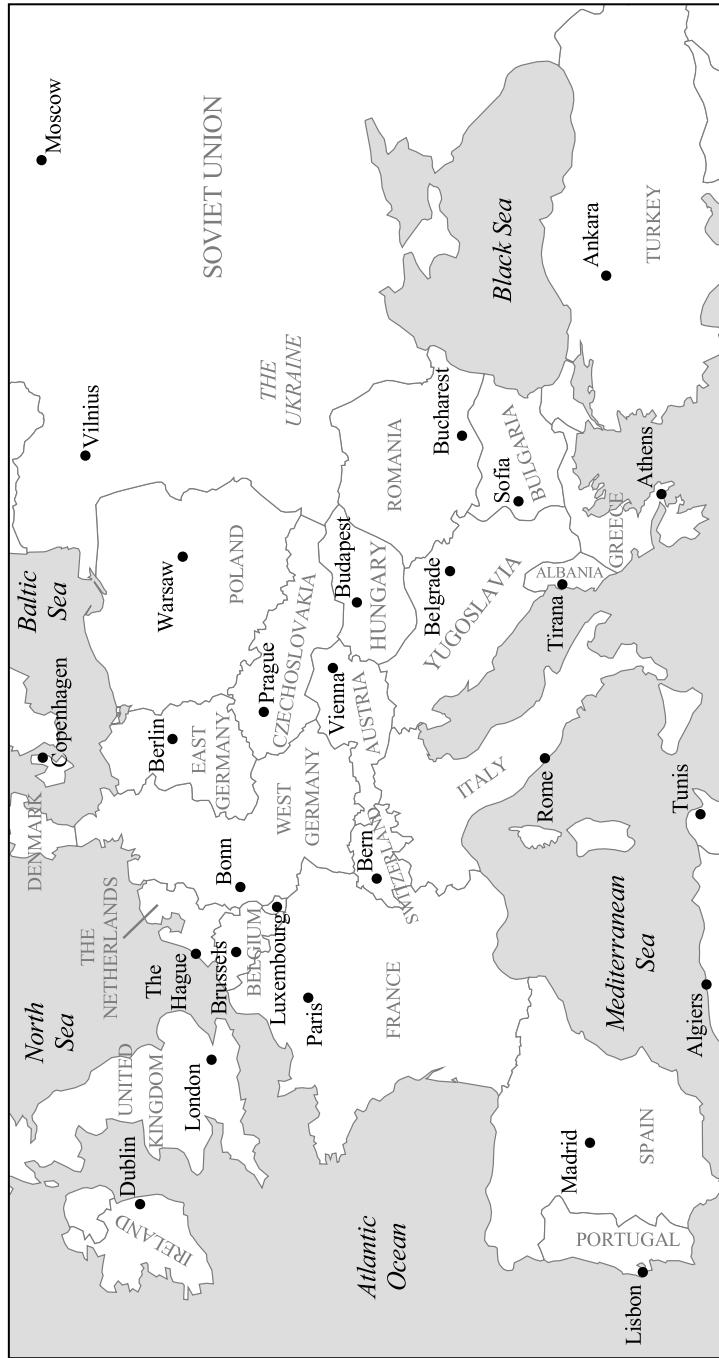
Strategic location is central to the influence of an ally. If the country is located, for example, at the border between two military alliances, as

was the case with the GDR, this gives the superpower a great stake in protecting and strengthening the ally, because the ally is a crucial part of the superpower's buffer zone. The ally is of course perfectly well aware of this situation and may be able to use it to its own advantage. It can do this by persuading the superpower that the local ally needs certain things like increased economic and military aid (or a border closure) if it is going to be able to maintain its position as a bulwark against the other bloc. Thus, while the ally is clearly dependent on the superpower for its protection in its vulnerable location on the edge of the bloc, the superpower also feels some dependence on the ally to preserve this position as bulwark or buffer.²⁶

The ally may play more than just a military-strategic role for the superpower; it may have a more symbolic function, such as serving as a model for the system of its superpower patron. As Khrushchev recounted in his memoirs, he sought to use their front-line location to make the GDR and East Berlin into a “showcase of the moral, political and material achievement” of socialism for capitalists to see and so be persuaded of the superiority of socialism.²⁷ Khrushchev’s energetic faith in the pre-eminence of the communist system and his determination to demonstrate this in Germany gave the GDR a means to pressure him for increased support.²⁸ Khrushchev testified to the importance of a strong, socialist East Germany for the Soviet Union by telling Ulbricht, “your needs are our needs.” Ulbricht treated this as an invitation to elicit a Soviet response to East German “needs” even if they sometimes conflicted with broader Soviet “needs.” As John Lewis Gaddis points out, the two superpowers “attached their own reputations to their respective clients . . . [and] fell into the habit of letting their German allies determine their German interests, and hence their German policies.”²⁹

This situation provided the GDR with opportunities to convert its weaknesses into strength in bargaining with or manipulating the Soviet Union. The lack of popular support for the East German socialist government was manifested in the hundreds of thousands of refugees who fled to the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) each year. The leaders of East Germany’s Socialist Unity Party (SED) could, with justification, use the threat of the regime’s collapse to obtain more aid from Moscow.³⁰ In addition, as the weaker power, East Germany had more to lose, more at stake if it collapsed than the Soviet Union did and thus was more motivated and persistent in the pursuit of its narrow goals. This translated into increased bargaining strength.³¹

Glenn Snyder’s concept of the “alliance security dilemma” offers a useful lens through which to view the Soviet–East German relationship, although he does not apply the concept to the Soviet side of the cold war and focuses primarily on periods of multipolarity instead of bipolar-



Map 1. Europe during the Cold War

ity. Snyder postulates that in an alliance, each side must find the right balance between two tendencies toward more or less active support of the other ally. On the one hand, if one ally strongly supports the other, it can risk being manipulated, or “entrapped” in Snyder’s words, by that ally into adopting policies the first ally does not really support. On the other hand, if the first ally is stinting in backing the other ally, it can risk “abandonment” by the latter for a stronger supporter.³² This entrapment-abandonment dilemma also exists in the complicated dynamics of alliance politics between a superpower and a key ally.

In the Soviet–East German case, the SED’s abandonment and entrapment concerns were very similar. On the one hand, they feared the Soviets would abandon the GDR to German unification on Western terms. On the other hand, they feared being forced or entrapped by the Soviets into more liberal policies than they favored domestically and in foreign policy, which in turn might facilitate German unification on Western terms or at least the SED hard-liners’ own overthrow by domestic opponents. The East German side, their fears, and their dependence on the alliance, however, have long been taken for granted and identified. It is the Soviet side that makes the story more interesting and that in fact opened up the opportunity for the East Germans to wag their tail as an ally.

The Soviets had two worries concerning East German abandonment, fears that the East Germans manipulated to serve their own interests. On the one hand, the Soviets worried that the East German regime would involuntarily abandon the alliance by collapsing and being absorbed into West Germany. This concern was made realistic by the East German popular uprising of 1953 and by the refugee exodus throughout the 1950s, which was stopped only by the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961. The other more subtle, yet mounting worry after the beginning of the Sino-Soviet rift in the mid-1950s was that the GDR regime would move closer to the Chinese. Given that the Soviets had strong security and reputational reasons for their tight connection with the East Germans, they needed to find ways to guard against the chances of these two kinds of East German abandonment. Just as Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy perceived West Berlin and West Germany as a “superdomino,” so I would like to suggest that Khrushchev treated East Germany as a “super-ally,” an ally of the greatest importance to Soviet security and prestige, the loss of which was to be avoided at all costs.³³

The extent of a small ally’s bargaining power is revealed when there are policy disagreements with the superpower. There was growing discord between Ulbricht and Khrushchev from 1953 through 1961 and particularly during the Berlin Crisis. While they shared many goals, they had important differences over the relative importance of different goals

8 · Introduction

and what they were willing to risk to achieve them. As this book will illustrate, Ulbricht and Khrushchev disagreed over their favored domestic and foreign policies for the GDR, how to handle the refugee exodus, the future of West Berlin, whether or not to sign a separate peace treaty, the importance of Western recognition of the GDR, the level of economic aid the Soviet Union and other socialist countries should give to the GDR, the degree of sovereignty the GDR should have, including over the access routes between the FRG and West Berlin, and the level of risk regarding confrontation with the West each was willing to adopt to achieve their ends. Differences over goals, and methods to achieve these goals, were accentuated during the Berlin Crisis, which developed into a crisis in East German–Soviet relations as much as an East-West crisis.

A superpower necessarily has broader interests and concerns than its smaller ally, especially during a crisis surrounding the status of the ally. As the crisis of the GDR regime’s legitimacy mushroomed from 1953 through 1961, the East German leaders operated from an increasingly narrow and urgent frame of reference and accordingly were willing to risk more to resolve the crisis than the Soviets were.

The Soviets were under mounting pressure of their own in this period as their rift with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) deepened in the late 1950s.³⁴ The new archival evidence indicates that the role of China and the Sino-Soviet split influenced the cold war much more than previously thought. It was a significant factor in Soviet policy in the Korean War,³⁵ the Berlin Crisis,³⁶ the Cuban Missile Crisis,³⁷ and the Vietnam War.³⁸ The Cubans, the East Germans, and the North Vietnamese, among others, sought to use the Sino-Soviet rift to their advantage, and in each case, doing so intensified the cold war.

This book examines three crucial periods in Soviet–East German relations: the six months after Stalin’s death in 1953, the two years following Khrushchev’s pathbreaking address to the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), and the three years of the Berlin Crisis. In each period, the Soviets consciously sought to pull Ulbricht back from his hard-line domestic and foreign policies to stem the refugee exodus, stabilize the country, and improve relations with the West. To their frustration and sometimes great concern, the Soviets were not able to impose their will on the East Germans. Khrushchev wanted the GDR regime to achieve stability by virtue of its viability and legitimacy as opposed solely to the control exercised by the Soviet military presence there or by Ulbricht’s “administrative measures.” Yet Ulbricht’s method of rule was by control, unassailable control, which he maintained was the only way given the existence of the “aggressive, revisionist, imperialistic” FRG next door. Ulbricht feared that any loosening of his tight grip on power would lead to the GDR’s collapse as

well as to the collapse of his own personal power, perhaps his primary concern.

To a large degree, the policies carried out in the GDR and East Berlin were formulated by the East Germans, not the Soviets, and were often implemented against Soviet wishes. The effect of these GDR hard-line policies was to deepen the division of Germany and thus intensify the cold war in Europe. Ulbricht finally put the Kremlin leaders in a position where their only realistic option to preserve a stable socialist regime in the GDR was to agree to his request to close off access to West Berlin. This outcome can only be understood by studying developments in Soviet–East German relations and in GDR policies, together with Western policies, in the years leading up to the building of the Berlin Wall.

We shall see in the portrayal of Ulbricht’s background, personality, and policies, presented in chapter 1, that his tenacious, arrogant, and opportunistic personality contributed significantly to the GDR’s capacity to sway the Soviets. He had the skill and audacity to convert the environmental factors conducive to the GDR’s status as a key Soviet ally into influence over Soviet policy. The first two chapters of this book highlight Ulbricht’s capacity to resist Soviet calls for moderation of his domestic and foreign policies and Soviet incapacity or unwillingness to insist. By the fourth chapter, the focus shifts to Ulbricht’s more active efforts to change Soviet policies regarding Berlin.

After Stalin’s death, his successors sought to lessen cold war tensions and alleviate the effects of Stalinism in Eastern Europe and at home. In early June 1953, the new Soviet leaders instructed the East Germans to introduce the *New Course* of liberalization of domestic and foreign policies. The combination of Ulbricht’s resistance to the *New Course*, the 17 June uprising in the GDR, and the aftermath of secret police chief Lavrenty Beria’s ouster led Stalin’s successors to backtrack on the *New Course* in the GDR and to reverse their support for Ulbricht’s more open-minded opponents. This is the subject of chapter 1.

Again in 1956, Khrushchev made efforts to diminish cold war tensions and dismantle Stalinism. Following his de-Stalinization speech at the Twentieth Congress and his support for “peaceful coexistence” and “separate paths to socialism,” Khrushchev also sided with the opposition to Ulbricht that favored Khrushchev’s more liberal approach in both domestic and foreign policy. Yet Ulbricht again prevailed in preventing more liberal policies from being carried out consistently and thoroughly in the GDR against the backdrop of the Soviet invasion of Hungary and was ultimately able to get Soviet support for ousting his more liberal opponents. Chapter 2 examines these developments.

In the 1958–61 Berlin Crisis, Khrushchev attempted to persuade (or coerce) the West to sign a German peace treaty and transform West

10 • Introduction

Berlin into a demilitarized “free city” in order to relieve pressure on the GDR. Although he threatened unilateral action, his goal was to achieve the stabilization of the GDR by international agreement and not by unilateral action. Ulbricht, however, favored unilateral, as opposed to multilateral means of resolving the GDR’s problems, especially the refugee exodus. He doubted the West would make sufficient concessions and did not trust Khrushchev in negotiations with the West. Ulbricht’s actions, combined with Western unwillingness to give in to Khrushchev’s demands and Chinese pressure on Khrushchev to adopt a harder stance with the West, led to Khrushchev’s reluctant agreement to build the Berlin Wall, something the Soviets had been trying to avoid since 1952. This is the subject of chapters 3 and 4.

I will not argue that East German influence was the only important influence on Soviet *Deutschlandpolitik* (policy concerning Germany) between 1953 and 1961. Based on my earlier writings, some readers have come to the erroneous conclusion that this is my belief. Of course, Soviet domestic politics, Western policy, and Chinese policy were also important in influencing Soviet foreign policy in this period. What I will argue is that the East German factor was much more important than previously recognized and indeed is an essential part of the story. The East Germans, through their own policies, narrowed Soviet options and also took advantage of tensions in U.S.-Soviet and Sino-Soviet relations, as well as tensions within the Soviet leadership. But the process of Khrushchev moving toward a decision to close the Berlin border concerned Soviet goals, East German goals and actions, as well as the policies of the West and of China. It was a complicated story with many actors, not just Ulbricht, as this book will illustrate. Nonetheless, Ulbricht was a central actor.

The opportunity to conduct research for this book was revolutionized with the end of the cold war by the opening of archives in the former communist bloc. After years of being forced to rely almost solely on Western sources and published communist sources such as newspapers,³⁹ since 1989–91, cold war historians have been able to examine stacks and stacks of documents from former communist regimes, including the Soviet Union and the GDR. Access to these documents, as well as the opportunity to interview former communist officials, is allowing a whole new generation of cold war historians to expand on and rewrite the history of the cold war from a broader, international, multi-archival, interdisciplinary perspective.⁴⁰ This book is part of what is called “the new cold war history.”⁴¹ The “Note on Sources” describes the East German and Russian archival and other sources that constitute the evidentiary foundation of the book.

By drawing on an extensive archival base as well as interviews, memoirs, journal articles, and other primary and secondary sources, I hope to present the reader with the most comprehensive account to date on the nature of Soviet–East German relations in this period, including the process leading to the building of the Berlin Wall. My aim is to fill in much of the missing historical detail on this period, presenting sharper portrayals of both Nikita Khrushchev and Walter Ulbricht, and to provide the reader with a new lens through which to interpret these details. I will also address the broader implications for cold war history of the dynamics of Soviet–East German relations described in this book. In addition to the traditional focus on security issues, this book will illustrate the importance of personality, ideology, reputation, and economics during the cold war.