

## Driving the Soviets up the Wall. Soviet-East German Relations, 1953–1961

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**Reviewer:**

Jeanette Madarász

This book was first published in 2003. Two years later, it was reissued in paperback without any changes as far as the reviewer is aware. This decision of the publisher can be taken as a reflection of the book's well deserved success. In this specific case, the quality of research and writing has overcome many hurdles still faced by historians of the Cold War, such as particular inaccessibility of, or gaps in, archival evidence. Harrison has written a tremendous book based on meticulous research of primary sources in Moscow and Berlin which has allowed her to present readers with some exciting and original findings. Harrison's discussion of Soviet-East German relations following Stalin's death and leading up to the building of the Berlin Wall in August 1961 profits from a clear structure, the display of an abundance of original source material and its lucid interpretation. Harrison writes in exciting and fluent prose which succeeds in grabbing the reader's attention from start to finish.

The book's main points of argument focus on the influence of the East German leadership, particularly the head of the East German Communist Party Walter Ulbricht, on Soviet policy from 1953 onwards. Specifically, Ulbricht's relationship with Stalin's successor Nikita Khrushchev is described in detail, whereby Harrison stresses the East German leader's tendency to take advantage of his country's weakness to pressure the Soviets into supporting his economic and political interests. Harrison traces relevant developments through three major events.

Firstly, she describes Ulbricht's strong reluctance to follow the more liberal approach of the New Course (1953) in spite of Soviet pressure to apply appropriate policies in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Harrison argues that the Soviets would have preferred to develop the GDR into a showcase of communism in order to stabilise East Germany and make it more attractive to both its population and the West Germans.

This, however, would have required a more liberal political approach and greater economic achievements than Ulbricht was either willing or able to provide.

Second, Ulbricht's successful resistance to the consequences of Khrushchev's Secret Speech (1956/57) is shown. At a time when the Eastern bloc shook from Khrushchev's revelations at the Twentieth Party Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, which led to upheavals in Hungary and Poland, Ulbricht stoically refused to change his style of government in the GDR. He did so in spite of opposition from within the East German leadership. Following a change of course in Moscow, however, he was able to further strengthen his own position by ousting his opponents from the Politburo.

Third, Khrushchev's political manoeuvring vis-à-vis the United States during the Berlin Crisis (1958 to 1961) is compared with Ulbricht's aggressive behaviour regarding the rights of the Allied Forces stationed in West Berlin. Here, the differences between East German and Soviet interests are pinpointed and the consequences of this situation in relation to the Berlin question shown. While the Soviets as a world power were forced to take a wider perspective, East German considerations focused primarily on more limited aims, specifically international recognition of the GDR and closing the open border in West Berlin thereby stemming the mass exodus and stabilising the East German economy.

Furthermore, developments and tensions within the East German and Soviet leaderships are highlighted, as well as their relevance to contemporary policy-making. In addition, Harrison pays close attention to the personalities of both the East German and Soviet leaders, maintaining that Khrushchev's spontaneity, hot temper and insecurity complex clashed not only with Ulbricht's cold professionalism but also had a dramatic effect on the Cold War scenario of the 1950s. In summary, Harrison argues the crucial contribution – formerly overlooked – factors such as the influence of minor powers on Soviet policy, economic issues and personality made to High Politics during the Cold War (p. 231).

Finally, the impact of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its increasingly tense relationship with the Soviet Union are mentioned at various points, adding another dimension to Soviet-East German relations and Ulbricht's political strategy. Very early in the book, Harrison disclaims any intention to overstate the impact of the East German leadership on Soviet Deutschlandpolitik in the 1950s (p. 10). Accordingly, she repeatedly refers to the crisis in the relationship between the Soviets and the PRC in order to highlight resulting chances for Ulbricht in the big game of Cold War politics – and rightly so. Tensions within the Communist bloc are often overlooked when describing the Soviet Union's sphere of influence, although they certainly shaped Soviet actions throughout the Cold War, as shown convincingly by Harrison with regard to the 1950s. However, it may have been equally important to consider, for example, the British interest when discussing Western policy. This may be overstressing the scope of this book, and Harrison points out repeatedly that the West was by no means united in its stance towards East Germany and the Soviet Union, but it is to be regretted that the interests and activities of the West seem in this book to boil down primarily to the activities of the USA.

For example, the question of the building of the Berlin Wall is discussed almost entirely with regard to US actors and sources. Did this act of aggression, primarily directed towards the East German population but also dramatically affecting the population of West Berlin and, to some extent, the Allied Forces stationed in the city, really take the West by surprise as Harrison describes it (p. 207)? According to Marilyn Thomas, there is some circumstantial evidence in British and East German archives suggesting that the British at least knew of East German plans to build the Berlin Wall before 13 August 1961, and had indicated to the East German leadership their tacit acceptance of such unilateral action well in advance. (1) Nevertheless, Thomas agrees with Harrison regarding the appraisal of Western sentiments after being confronted with the fait accompli: the closing of the border was greeted with relief by the West, which hoped for international stability. Concerning the situation in West Berlin at the time, Willy Brandt, in his memoirs, recalled a contemporary feeling that the Americans must have had intelligence on preparations for the Wall, although this has always been denied. (2) However, Harrison herself has rightly pointed out that, so far, no conclusive evidence has surfaced to support these suspicions. (3) These are important questions, which perhaps will never be answered in their entirety, partly because of restricted access to Western archival sources such as

those of the British MI5 and MI6. In any case, Harrison's book certainly succeeds in establishing in detail the Eastern perspective on events surrounding the building of the Berlin Wall.

Equally important to Harrison's line of argument, at least in the opinion of the reviewer, is her depiction of Soviet intentions in comparison with Ulbricht's main aims. Her description of the Soviets' early attempts to liberate and reform East Germany against Ulbricht's wishes may serve as one example of this. Throughout the book, the East German leader is shown to have been much more aggressive and authoritarian both towards the East German population and the West than apparently intended by Soviet policies (see for example pp. 47ff and p. 213). But does this depiction of Soviet-East German relations hold up to the reality?

To claim that Khrushchev was a true believer in communism while Ulbricht was just interested in maintaining and expanding his power (p. 68ff), and linking some crucial aspects of political decision-making to this differentiation, does not do justice to Harrison's otherwise well-balanced discussion of Cold War politics. Ulbricht, the reviewer would maintain, was not less committed to communism than Khrushchev but, as Harrison herself points out repeatedly, found himself and his country in an entirely different situation to that of the Soviets. Accordingly, the behaviour of the two leaders differed hugely without, however, undermining their common goal of ideological triumph over the capitalist West. Although this may be a question of fine interpretational nuance, it would be too narrow a perspective to follow altogether Harrison's discussion of the difficult situation in the GDR (and especially the East German leadership's harsh domestic policies during the 1950s) which, in Harrison's analysis, is shown to have resulted almost entirely from Ulbricht's greed for power (p. 93).

Furthermore, in the reviewer's opinion, the appraisal that 'the tail wagged the dog' (p. 139) seems, at least slightly, to overstate the facts. Ulbricht was outspoken and not reluctant to put pressure on the Soviets in the interest of East German needs. However, he never openly opposed Soviet policy; this would have been suicidal. In the end, even according to Harrison's presentation of evidence, the Soviets always had the ultimate veto power over East German policy and it was always Khrushchev's assessment that prevailed over Ulbricht's wishes – and so it turned out, for example, in the question of the building of the Berlin Wall. Although Ulbricht had pushed the Soviets towards this decision for some years before Khrushchev gave his permission, he did not dare go ahead without Soviet support (p. 186). He was well aware that the GDR entirely depended on the Soviet Union for its economic and political survival. Nevertheless, Harrison's point that East German interests had some bearing on Soviet policy is well made and puts a new perspective on the Cold War.

Furthermore, Harrison repeatedly declares that Soviet economic support of East Germany continued and was even increased during the late 1950s and up to the building of the Berlin Wall. However, it could also be claimed that by the late 1950s the Soviets grew increasingly reluctant or, more to the point, unable to pump more resources into this barrel without an apparent bottom, which the GDR was throughout its existence. André Steiner has argued that, during the late 1950s, resources supplied by the Soviet Union and other states of the Eastern bloc had become insufficient both in quality and quantity to uphold the East German economy (4) – thus Ulbricht's constant pressure on Khrushchev to deliver more much needed materials, and even asking for a labour force (p. 203), becomes more understandable. To put it crudely, perhaps Ulbricht was closer to East German realities, and therefore perceived more clearly that it would be impossible to turn the socialist part of Germany and its planned economy into a viable and attractive alternative to democratic and consumerist West Germany. Nevertheless, to take consideration of the impact of personalities and economic needs on high politics is commendable and unfortunately still too often missing from current research.

In spite of these very limited criticisms, which in any case are mostly owned to nuance rather than major differences in interpretation, there is no question that *Driving the Soviets up the Wall* is an excellent book. By showing the role of minor powers within the Cold War, giving attention to the impact of personality on policies, drawing attention to previously underestimated issues such as economics and personal relations, Harrison has accomplished something crucial to historical research. She has used original, formerly inaccessible sources from Moscow and East German archives and presented her findings in the context of a convincing and excitingly written analysis. The advantages of advancing chronologically, moving between

the various actors, events and places of activity are clear: her analysis is complex but easy to follow. In addition, Harrison's extensive endnotes are extremely helpful to fellow researchers. This is how historical research should ideally be presented. Every serious student of the Cold War should be reading this book.

## Notes

1. Merrilyn Thomas, *Communing with the Enemy: Covert Operations, Christianity and Cold War Politics in Britain and the GDR* (Bern, 2005), pp. 182–4. [Back to \(1\)](#).
2. Willy Brandt, *People and Politics: the Years 1960 to 1975* (1978), pp. 17–20. [Back to \(2\)](#).
3. Hope Harrison, 'The Berlin Wall, Ostpolitik, and détente', in *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute*, supplement 1 (34), 'American détente and German Ostpolitik, 1969 to 1972' (2004), 7. [Back to \(3\)](#).
4. André Steiner, *Die Wirtschaftstreform der sechziger Jahre. Konflikt zwischen Effizienz- und Machtkalkül* (Berlin, 1999), p. 41. [Back to \(4\)](#).

The author would like to thank Dr Madarász for her review and does not wish to comment further.

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