Stalinism Revisited
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The German Democratic Republic (GDR) figured as one of the world’s most orthodox Communist states. This was especially apparent against the background of the Soviet Bloc. As one author has stated of the post-1961 period: “Close Party control over all aspects of national life was more systematically elaborated in the GDR than in any other eastern European state...”  

While Poland or Hungary gradually liberalized, the East German leadership resisted reform so tirelessly that western commentators have called it “neo-Stalinist.”  

“Neo-Stalinist,” when applied to Brezhnev’s Soviet Union, referred to a repressive, strictly centralized political regime that had been created in the 1920s, and persisted despite the de-Stalinization of the 1950s. East Germany, however, supposedly never had Stalinism to begin with. At best, most scholars agree, it experienced a mild form of Stalinism. It lagged behind neighboring states in the severity of inner-Party purges, and in the socialization of the economy. In some scholars’ views, these anomalies even placed East Germany outside the context of Eastern Europe. The challenge in telling GDR history is to bridge this gap between that country’s supposed failure to fully institutionalize Stalinism during its

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formative years, and the apparent neo-Stalinism of its mature years. How could East Germany become neo-Stalinist if it had never been Stalinist in the first place?

Ironically, the most famous popularizer of East German non-Stalinism was the Socialist Unity Party of Germany’s (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, SED) foremost Stalinist: Walter Ulbricht. In 1956, in perhaps the most sudden and brazen break with the Cult of Personality, Ulbricht proclaimed that “Stalin cannot be regarded as one of the all-time greats (Klassiker) of Marxism-Leninism.”[^3] The GDR required no de-Stalinization because it had been non-Stalinist. This “fact” became dogma.[^4] Ulbricht took credit for sparing East Germans the excesses known in other East Bloc countries, especially bloody inner-Party purges.

Ulbricht’s reasoning gained broad acceptance among East German scholars—when they dared address the issue. Best known are the formulations of the economic historian Jürgen Kuczynski. In the early 1980s, self-described dissident, Kuczynski published a book of letters answering questions which he imagined his great-grandson might someday ask—when he became old enough to talk. In one famous letter Kuczynski asked himself through his great-grandson: “Don’t be angry, great-grandfather, and don’t answer if you don’t want to, but I would like to know what you would say about yourself in the ‘time of Stalin’.” Kuczynski wrote:

If you would ask me if I was happy as a comrade and scholar in the “time of Stalin” I can only answer: Yes!

Yes! For I was convinced of the greatness and intelligence of Stalin, and did not feel oppressed in my scholarly work, let alone repressed. But don’t forget that the effects of “Stalinism” were slighter in our Party than in the Soviet Union. Our conditions—think of the multi-party system—made the worst crimes impossible, as did the
