Koestler. At the beginning of Seeing Red, Koestler is a left-leaning journalist writing for the German press who in 1932, on a trip sponsored by the Soviet Union, finds himself sharing a room and debating the merits of Communism with Langston Hughes in Ashkhabad. At the end of the book Koestler is portrayed as a seeker without a mission, a man of the left whose inability to believe in any political reality has driven him to leave the external world of society for the inner world of metaphysical speculation.

The sacrifice of depth for breadth, or vice versa, is a tradeoff faced by many authors. Congdon stubbornly refuses to make this concession, weaving macrohistory, personal narrative, and intellectual responses to the challenge of Communism into a dissonant fabric. Although such an approach works chapter by chapter, it inevitably will leave some readers of the book dissatisfied. Some will be drawn to the history of Communism in Hungary and will find their narrative interrupted by ruminations on the tenets of Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge or a minute exegesis of Kolnai’s orthodox Christian philosophy. Other readers will be drawn to the marvelous personalities explored therein, will not readily allow a well-etched vignette of the Polanyi brothers and a richly and lovingly drawn portrait of Koestler to be followed by a chronicle of the mundane reality of émigré political squabbles. Congdon might have been better off writing two separate books, one on Hungarian émigré politics and the other on the metaphysical challenge posed by Communism to some of the century’s finest minds. This, however, is too much to ask. Seeing Red is a wonderful if ultimately frustrating combination of two fascinating stories, from which readers with a preference for one line of narrative will come away enriched by exposure to the other.


Reviewed by Ruud van Dijk, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee

Access to archives in formerly Communist countries has moved Cold War historiography forward in important ways, but “new” biographical studies thus far have been lagging behind other formats. One reason might be that one cannot immediately produce a serious, academic biography of a figure whose career spanned decades. Instead, this sort of project requires a long scholarly involvement with both the life and the times of the subject, as well as a thorough knowledge of the scholarship in relevant fields. It frequently takes the researcher to many different archives, often in more than one country. The results can be extremely valuable, as William Taubman has shown with his new biography of Nikita Khrushchev. However, Taubman’s book—more than twenty years in the making—also amply confirms that the most worthy biographical projects often are the culmination of many years of professional research and writing.
Mario Frank’s new biography of the first Communist leader of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), Walter Ulbricht, is not in the same league as Taubman’s work, but it is valuable nonetheless. According to the book’s dust jacket, Frank was born in the GDR (Rostock) but grew up in Switzerland and studied law in West Germany. At the time his book was published, he was business manager at two newspapers in the state of Saxony.

Frank’s book is actually the second Ulbricht biography that has come out since the collapse of the GDR, the state Ulbricht worked so relentlessly to create and maintain. Because Frank draws on much more extensive archival evidence and more recent (virtually all German) Cold War scholarship, his book improves considerably on Norbert Podehn’s 1995 volume, Walter Ulbricht: eine neue Biographie (Berlin: Dietz, 1995).

In spite of the considerable research that Frank has put into his book, it is not quite the study that a scholar might wish for. Although he has used genuinely new Russian archival materials on Ulbricht’s career in the 1920s and 1930s as an official in the German Communist Party (KPD) and the Comintern, Frank’s research barely scratches the surface of the vast holdings of the archives of the former GDR and its ruling party, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED). His use of selected new scholarship on the GDR makes up for some but not all of these missed opportunities. Finally, although the book is more than a plain, straightforward description of Ulbricht’s life and career, it is something less than a relentlessly analytical treatment of its subject and his times.

What we get from Frank is not so much a genuinely new perspective (although we do learn some interesting new details) as a fuller picture of the Ulbricht already known to specialists. For example, Frank does an excellent job showing how Ulbricht, from the beginning of his career as a professional revolutionary in 1920 until the Khrushchev era, was an anxious and slavish follower of the Moscow line, wherever it led. This orientation stood Ulbricht in good stead vis-à-vis what were more independent-minded competitors for power in the KPD/SED, especially at moments when his aggressiveness and rudeness—his greatest liability as a leader—threatened to (and sometimes did) reduce his influence.

Ulbricht, Frank also shows, was not well-liked in the party (or by anyone, really—Frank says Ulbricht had no personal friends), and he did not distinguish himself as a man of ideas, contrary to his later self-aggrandizing claims. But he did have a sharp sense and ruthless appetite for power. Furthermore, he worked harder than anyone else and was generally better informed and better connected than his colleagues. In short, Ulbricht was well suited to survive in the increasingly Stalinized KPD. By World War II, after his own brush with the Moscow purge machinery in the late 1930s, he was at the head of his party, second only to Wilhelm Pieck.

After the war, working under the Soviet occupation authorities, Ulbricht quickly became the KPD/SED’s de facto leader, again because he was the most determined and capable among his peers. Frank does not agree with scholars such as Wilfried Loth who have argued that Ulbricht increasingly charted his own course in eastern Germany, in contradiction to Josif Stalin’s policies. Power realities under Stalin simply did
not allow for that kind of independence, Frank argues. In light of this it is a bit odd that Frank also calls the Walter Ulbricht of 1950 not just the most powerful man in the GDR but “the most powerful German of his time” (p. 217). Here, as in a few other places in the book, the generally balanced Frank overidentifies with his subject. Being a dictator on behalf of a foreign power and answering to that power’s representatives on the spot (the Soviet Control Commission) does not make one a very powerful man. Instead, Ulbricht was something closer to a puppet, all the more so because both he and his state depended on the Soviet Union for survival.

After Stalin’s death and the calamity of the mass anti-Communist uprising in the GDR in June 1953, Ulbricht did gradually gain more independent decision-making authority. Frank starts the book with a chapter on the 1953 crisis, plausibly suggesting that in many respects—Ulbricht’s policy blunders, his dependence on the Soviet Union, and the way he survived the crisis and subsequently ousted his detractors in the party leadership—the uprising was both a pivotal event in Ulbricht’s political career and a representative case study of what was at the heart of Ulbricht’s political identity.

Ulbricht’s colleagues in the SED leadership unsuccessfully challenged him once more during the 1950s, and by the mid-1960s a new generation was preparing to try again. Frank makes a compelling case, however, that it was Ulbricht himself who finally became the main cause of his replacement by Erich Honecker in 1971.

Following the work of scholars such as Jochen Staadt and particularly Monika Kaiser, Frank argues that after August 1961, with the relative stabilization of the GDR behind the Berlin Wall, Ulbricht began to act ever more imperiously. The East German leader even seemed to forget that Moscow’s support is what enabled him to rise to the top of his party and his “own” German state, and that the Soviet Union ultimately would determine whether he would stay there. Instead Ulbricht began to chart his own economic and cultural course (sidelining and angering the SED apparatus, which, led by Honecker, responded by building its own ties to Moscow behind Ulbricht’s back); to lecture Soviet representatives, including Leonid Brezhnev, by invoking his seniority in the Communist movement (Frank repeats the dubious claim that Ulbricht had “known” Lenin); and even to develop his own German policy (which he hoped to conduct himself, directly with the West Germans, and largely independent from Moscow).

Frank also readily follows recent scholarly interpretations in arguing that the Ulbricht of the 1960s became somewhat of a progressive reformer, particularly in the economic field. Although Frank hastens to add that Ulbricht never intended to jeopardize the SED’s grip on political power, his depiction of Ulbricht perhaps changes a bit too much after 1961. After all, the Ulbricht of the 1960s also (as Frank relates) expressed unrelenting hostility toward Alexander Dubček’s Prague Spring in 1968.

This is not to say that there is nothing to the argument that Ulbricht was (in the context of German Communism) a competent leader, capable of understanding complex social, economic, and political issues, and also, to some extent, able to adapt to the changing times after World War II. Frank’s account of the intraparty challenges to Ulbricht’s leadership in 1953, 1956–1958, and even 1965–1971 reveals the striking weakness and incompetence of his SED colleagues, many of whom were of Ulbricht’s
generation. It is tempting to see this as exactly the way Ulbricht had planned it: Since the 1930s he had skillfully used the Stalinist system (as well as benefited from Stalin’s own purges of prominent German Communists) to eliminate colleagues who were capable of someday threatening his control. As a result, by the 1950s he had to deal only with fainthearted officials such as Wilhelm Zaisser, Rudolf Herrnstadt, and Karl Schirdewan, who were no match for him.

In this sense Ulbricht was one of Stalin’s clones in the Communist movement. But it is also clear from Frank’s account that Ulbricht became a representative for the Communist leaders who after 1953 acted rather independently, to the point of defying Moscow on certain issues. This defiance Frank calls one of the biggest mistakes of Ulbricht’s career, and he is correct in viewing it as a major cause of the East German leader’s removal from power in 1971. Despite repeated warnings that the GDR would not be allowed to take the lead in responding to West Germany’s new Ostpolitik, Ulbricht persisted in his semi-independent stance, giving Honecker and a growing number of SED Politbüro members the opportunity to present themselves to Moscow as a docile and altogether preferable alternative.

Frank does not try to force his own ideas on the reader. He seeks neither to indict nor to exonerate his subject. One could quibble over whether he gives the ideological and moral issues so central to Communism’s history in the twentieth century enough attention, but it is refreshing to read an account that does not try to fight old battles as if they were still with us today.

In light of what Frank’s book tries to be, it succeeds very well and is also eminently readable. Given sufficient time, resources, and archival access, some future scholar may be able to go beyond this book’s achievements, but until then Frank’s biography will stand as the most complete and up-to-date study of Walter Ulbricht.

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Reviewed by Peter C. Caldwell, Rice University

The East German revolution of 1989 began with the mass flight of East German citizens to West Germany and escalated when vast numbers of other East Germans poured into the streets in open protest against the regime of the Socialist Unity Party (SED). Jonathan Grix’s study successfully places the East German masses at the center of the revolutionary story. Most important, he argues that the attempt by many East Germans to leave their country for the West was itself a political act and part of the revolution.

The first two chapters of Grix’s volume explore the way the options of “exit” and “voice,” taken from Albert Hirschman’s well-known model, were distorted in a period when neither option could be exercised without adverse consequences. “Loyalty” was only conditional, and lasted only as long as the state suppressed criticism and provided