

DOCUMENT No. 67: Otto Grotewohl's Handwritten Notes of a SED CC Politburo Meeting, 8 July 1953

Grotewohl's notes of this dramatic Politburo meeting reveal how precarious SED leader Ulbricht's position was as late as the beginning of July. Every Politburo member except Hermann Matern, chairman of the Party Control Commission, and FDJ Chairman Erich Honecker spoke out against Ulbricht's continued leadership. Playing for time, Ulbricht promised to clarify his position at the next Central Committee meeting later that month. Following this session, however, Grotewohl and Ulbricht flew to Moscow for consultations, whereupon they learned about Beria's arrest. Ulbricht probably sensed that the balance of forces in Moscow was shifting away from a policy of reforms and in his favor. Upon returning, he felt confident enough to begin to retaliate against his opponents in the leadership.

Politburo 7/8/53

Grotewohl: reports on 2 commission sessions of the reorganization commission

Herrnstadt: refuses to take office of first secretary

Honecker: one cannot blame Ulbricht alone. It would damage the Party if U[lbricht] would resign as Gen[eral] Sec[retary] and as First Secretary. Proposal for supplementing Wandel-Winzer.

Zaisser: my suggestion [is] Herrnstadt since he was more in tune with the people than we [were]. Proposal is not an ideal solution. My argument is: W.U. is no more responsible for the wrong course (2nd Party conference) than we all are. His fault is the cold-blooded administering—wrong education of the cadres etc. That has spoiled the Party, the New Course cannot be implemented with this attitude. He therefore has to be kept at a distance from the party apparatus. [To leave] the apparatus in the hands of W.U. would be catastrophic for the New Course.

Ulbricht: The proposal by Herrnstadt + Zaisser for the elimination of the secretariat is dangerous. The proposal by Zaisser to name Herrnstadt as First Sec[retary] is the logical consequence.

Zaisser: protests against [this]. U. had agreed on the elimination of the Secretariat.

Herrnstadt: likewise

Rau: U.'s work methods inhibit the Party. Does U. have the will to change this? The past weeks have not shown this. If somebody other than Walter takes over the party organization and becomes first secretary, this would be better.

Ackermann: one also has to change the cabinet. Gr[otewohl] has to be obligated to express in Moscow that no decisions had yet been made.

The Party has to recover but not with W.U.

Ebert: for secretaries. It would be a gain for the Party if Cde. W.U. would state himself that somebody else had to be first secretary.

E. Schmidt: I was completely frightened, welcome the free and serious presentation by Zaisser. You [Ulbricht] cannot remain any longer at the top of the party.

Matern: U. must be first secretary.

Oelssner: H[errnstadt]'s and Zaisser's appearance signifies the existence of factions. U. has considered all of us as stupid. W. has not learned his lessons. One has to work as a collective. There is no need for a first secretary. Instead collective decision-[making].

Jendretzky: W. has learned nothing.

Mückenberger: there was no central leadership for the districts. Everybody is overworked.

Gr[otewohl]: I cannot make a final statement in Moscow.

W.U.: To acknowledge the criticism was correct. My behavior [regarding the ostentatious celebration of my] birthday [was] mistaken.

I will take the stand in the C[entral] C[ommittee].

I am not of the opinion that I have to be first secr[etary]. This takes confidence which has to be renewed again.

U.: Proposals by H[errnstadt] and Zai[sser] i[n] [the] committee were an experiment.

I will make a statement before the CC.

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