

Stalin's Death: Sea of Flowers on Stalinallee in East Berlin (March 9, 1953)

Abstract

The Stalinization of the GDR was made manifest by party purges. One such purge was directed against Communists who had spent time living in exile in the West, such as Paul Merker, and led to many arrests and long prison sentences. These purges were modeled on measures taken in the Soviet Union but also on the trials of László Rajk in Hungary, Traitsko Kostov in Bulgaria, and Rudolf Slánský in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, all of which ended – as we now know – in coerced confessions and the execution of the accused. Similar show trials were also planned in the GDR and were only prevented by Stalin's death on March 5, 1953.

Another central component of the Stalinist system was the cult of personality. On Stalin's 71st birthday (1949), Große Frankfurter Straße and Frankfurter Allee in East Berlin were renamed "Stalinallee" and slated for an enormously labor-intensive remodeling. On August 3, 1951, the first Stalin memorial in Germany was unveiled in East Berlin; on the occasion of Stalin's death, the SED central committee held a session to mourn him, the Council of Ministers ordered a period of national mourning in the GDR, and Johannes R. Becher, the minister of culture, wrote a poem in honor of the deceased Soviet leader.

The GDR was de-Stalinized following the Communist Party of the Soviet Union's Twentieth Party Congress in February 1956, where Khrushchev openly condemned Stalin's crimes – but mainly rhetorically and symbolically, not politically. Thus, on March 4, 1956, SED leader Walter Ulbricht wrote in *Neues Deutschland* that Stalin was not among the classic Marxist thinkers; on April 29, 1956, the East German Politburo even went so far as to assert in *Neues Deutschland*, the SED party organ, that there had never actually been a cult of personality in the GDR and that Stalinism had never affected the country. Such statements, however, are hard to reconcile with the photograph shown below. Taken four days after Stalin's death, it shows a sea of flowers and a crowd of mourners on Stalinallee.

Source



Source: Rally and wreath-laying ceremony at the Stalin Memorial in Berlin's Stalinallee. Photo: Gerhard Kiesling.

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