Reviews in History

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Constructing Socialism at the Grass-Roots: the Transformation of East Germany, 1945-65

Review Number:
147
Publish date:
Wednesday, 1 November, 2000
Author:
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ISBN:
9780333789806
Date of Publication:
2000
Pages:
274pp.
Publisher:
Macmillan
Place of Publication:
London
Reviewer:
Patrick Major

For some time we have been waiting for an accessibly written, archivally rich, and theoretically informed social history of East Germany. Corey Ross's first book scores very highly on all counts, presenting an invigorating bottom-up history of the GDR in its two formative decades. Much of previous work emanating from Germany has been either institutional political history or structural sociology, in which the populace appears as either victims or statistics. Ross, however, is a firm believer in the historical agency of the anonymous individual-'creative accommodation' as he calls it (p. 206)-even if this only manifests itself to the state as an aggregate of pinpricks. The main thesis, supported by much graphic supporting evidence, is that the real cleavage in East German society was not between 'party' and 'society', but between the centre and the periphery-the grass roots. Indeed, anyone researching the implementation, rather than mere proclamation, of communist policy, soon realises that rank-and-file party and state officials must be considered as part of GDR society, not simply Soviet imports. Functionaries were sometimes in danger of 'going native' when facing their local clientèle. This was a phenomenon to which Kopstein alerted us in his *Politics of Economic Decline*, but is explored here far more systematically by Ross. Theoreticians of dictatorship often talk about the complex local negotiation of power between rulers and ruled, but rarely is this demonstrated so clearly as here.

The structure of the book works well. Three social groups-workers, farmers and youth-are revisited at various points in the development of the GDR. Although this is essentially a case study of East Berlin and

Brandenburg, there is enough evidence from other areas to make it feel representative of the country at large. Nonetheless, it would have been useful to know whether there *were* any noticeable regional differences. For instance, in terms of work stoppages and petitions to the state leadership, Saxony proved more 'difficult' than other areas, but in terms of non-voting East Berlin was usually in the lead. Since, until 1961, the chosen region had far greater access to West Berlin; did this proximity act as a safety valve or an incitement? There were also one or two episodes a study focused on Berlin might perhaps have been expected to address, such as the blockade of West Berlin in 1948-49. There is some evidence, from Stivers and Koop for instance, that East Germans were prepared to subvert the blockade in their own economic interests, reinforcing Ross's thesis.

The conventional account of the land reform of 1945 was that a new class of smallholders was empowered at the expense of the old landed interests, while integrating expellees from the former eastern territories. Ross demonstrates that the influence of estate-owners often persisted informally, and that new farmers were unwilling to seize the initiative, fearful of a restoration. The redistribution was characterised by corruption and nepotism, with 'resettlers' from the East often derided as 'Polacks'. As Bauerkämper has also recently argued in J*unkerland in Bauernhand?*, the real beneficiaries of land reform were existing farmers who added to their land. The first serious challenge to the *Großbauern* came with the beginnings of collectivisation in 1952, but the backlash against the 'construction of socialism' in the June 1953 uprising temporarily resurrected their position. As one jubilant farmer, who rode his horse right into the village pub, exclaimed: 'Now we're the bosses again!' (p. 67). This was, of course, short-lived, but even in the wake of enforced collectivisation in 1960 there were still 'invitation-only' collectives for the stronger farmers. This guerrilla warfare in the countryside could only gradually be allayed by the infusion of university-trained cadres into the local administration.

The factories were supposed to be the real power-base of the SED. Economic functionaries on the shop floor failed, nevertheless, to overcome anti-capitalist habits and create a new socialist voluntarism. In the 1940s absenteeism reached 20 per cent and attempts to introduce incentive schemes and productivist movements were greeted with passive resistance. Indeed, Ross has unearthed some fascinating anonymous letters to the GDR's Stakhanov, Hennecke, including one calling him 'you pimp of Soviet exploitation of German workers' (p. 45). The trade unions, although at national level loyal party executors, at factory level were either impotent or colluded with workers' demands. The author breaks new ground by drawing attention to the interests of middle management in the factories, often inherited from capitalism, but desperate to preserve the shop floor peace, especially after the strikes of June 1953. The importance of this event, however, was not so much the insurrection's actual disruption as the symbolic threat of a repeat. Subsequently, workers deployed the 'weapons of the weak', to borrow Scott's phrase. Individual works, such as the Schwarze Pumpe opencast mining complex, had to tolerate job shifting of ten per cent a month. By 1961 workers were overfulfilling 'slack' norms by an average 160 per cent, reliant on bonuses. Nevertheless, Ross is also wise enough to acknowledge that such local social autonomy was not an immediate threat to the regime, and in some senses acted as a safety valve.

Youth's experience is measured largely against the state's attempts to recruit young men into the Cold War defence of the GDR. Ross highlights the difficulties on the ground of enacting the SED's policy of persuasion. To preserve the fiction of volunteering, local officials badgered young men, using many underhand tactics to ensure their enlistment. Not all too successfully in the 1950s, it might be added. Youths held the SED's pacifist rhetoric against the party, asking 'What about the national hymn, that a mother will never again mourn her son?' (p. 77). Interestingly, the author also reveals the conflicts of interest between mustering boards and factory managers, both competing for the same manpower. Local economic officials could thus conspire with local youths in the interests of fulfilling the plan against the recruitment quota. The analysis also takes in the battle with the churches for young hearts and minds, which takes on a new dimension when one realises that a third of members of the Protestant youth group, Junge Gemeinde, were simultaneously members of the state youth organisation in the 1950s. Likewise, in 1956-57 12,000 SED members still had their children confirmed, an affinity only weakened by threats to career prospects. Another 'unacceptable' influence was western popular culture, as imbibed over the airwaves or at West Berlin

cinemas before the Wall. Despite top-level condemnations, local party officials understood how to get bums on seats, advertising in one instance: 'Tonight another mervellous West-film!' Only in the mid-1960s did the leadership learn to live with these manifestations, after counter-productive attempts to correct such behaviour.

The book also explores the state's attempts to deal with *Republikflucht*, the 'flight from the Republic' which witnessed one GDR citizen in six leaving. East Berlin and Brandenburg were, of course directly adjacent to West Berlin and particularly prone to losses. Ross highlights the buck-passing that went on among local state officials, against the background of an official line, which dismissed the exodus as militarist and capitalist recruitment by Bonn. Like many policies, the Communists' centrally-dictated solutions were in danger of exacerbating the problem and were not always gratefully received on the ground. Yet, it is difficult to know what the police could have done. When travel restrictions were relaxed in the mid 1950s during destalinisation-one of the few factors Ross does not fully explore-the numbers of those taking advantage soared. Borrowing from Hirschman's work on 'exit' and 'voice', the author also examines the ways in which citizens could exploit the open border to improve jobs or housing. There are also unusual insights into the reactions of those left behind, with resentment when returning absconders were allowed to jump the housing queue or *Schadenfreude* when they were not.

Given the importance of the border in the 1950s, it is perhaps surprising that its closure in August 1961 should be greeted with such a low level of protest. Apart from some youths, most citizens maintained a sullen silence, conscious of their powerlessness. Despite concerted attempts by the regime to improve work discipline on the shop floor and in the collectives, workers managed to fend off too drastic an upward revision of norms. Youths, too, could not be forced into enlisting, prompting the government to introduce conscription. Ross even claims that 'for many East Germans, it seems that the construction of the Wall was soon *remembered* as more of a caesura than it was actually *experienced* at the time' (p. 163). He is probably correct that there was no overnight transformation of social and political relations, but instead a subtle long-term shift from the reluctance of the 1950s to a new pragmatism in the 1960s. This occurred on the part of the central authorities, too, who recognised that the economy, not ideology, was the main yardstick of stability.

In conclusion, the author suggests that the evidence of grass-roots politics throw top-down totalitarian models into question. This may seem a battle of yesteryear for Third Reich historians, but is a debate with some currency for the GDR. There are also implications for political science approaches based on political culture, such as Meuschel's 'un-differentiation' model of a steadily homogenising socialist society. The evidence from the 1950s and 1960s points towards the persistence of town and country divisions, as well as provincial versus central antagonisms. One group that Ross deliberately excludes, the intelligentsia, were also the objects of much popular resentment as the regime privileged them to secure their loyalty. This was, of course, in some ways *the* crucial group in East German society. From research elsewhere it seems clear that the educated were far less prone than workers, farmers and youths to shoot their mouths off in the presence of the party's eyes and ears. At the same time, local functionaries became demonstrably more hostile to the perceived pampering of the intelligentsia than Politbüro representatives such as Kurt Hager. Any sequel to Ross's work will have to test to what extent upward mobility, as he hints, did become blocked in the 1960s, squandering the goodwill of the new functional élites.

Ross's great gift is the ability to express complex ideas simply, and to keep the argument moving along at a brisk pace. The content will be fascinating and novel to fellow specialists, but the text is accessible enough to undergraduates too. The reader unfamiliar with developments is given sufficient background information to understand the essentials of policy, but then is treated to a wealth of case studies and recorded utterances, which add a wonderful three-dimensionality to the account. In fact, not for a long time have I enjoyed reading a monograph so much. The author has taken the trouble not only to look in the Bundesarchiv Berlin at Central Committee documents, but also in the two *Landesarchive*, down to the level of individual factories. This does raise the question of why he did not choose to take advantage of the Stasi files, also held in Berlin. If researchers are being put off by the prohibitively long waiting lists at the Gauck Authority, this should at least be known. If it is more to do with fear of association with the sensationalist exposé literature

of the mole-hunters, then much valuable material on the general population is perhaps being overlooked.

Ideally, this book should be read in conjunction with Mark Allinson's equally fascinating concurrent study on popular opinion in Erfurt (see my other online review). Both scholars have emerged from the Mary Fulbrook stable at UCL. Yet, unlike Allinson, who stresses the apathetic majority, Ross has focused on discontent and what the party labelled 'special occurrences'. However diffuse and disparate these may have been, and however subtle the author's reading, in some senses this approach is 'looking for trouble' and so is likely to find it. Allinson, on the other hand, takes the silent majority as more representative of general attitudes. In a regime that persistently refused to quantify levels of support and opposition, it is difficult to know where the balance lies. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to know what each thinks of the other's emphases and conclusions. Clearly some of the impetus for this recent interest in 'ordinary Germans' comes from research on the Third Reich and will make for interesting comparisons as well as contrasts. Indeed, some 1930s apathy has been explained by the very anti-communism which later troubled the East German communists, although Nazism had also engendered habits of passive resistance. It also strikes chords with discussions of popular opinion in the inter-war Soviet Union by authors such as Davies and Fitzpatrick. For Cold War historians, however, the challenge is to offer something besides high-level diplomatic and military history. This account shows that this is not only possible, but highly desirable. Ross is to be congratulated on producing this immensely rich book which is exactly what GDR studies needs at this time.

The author wishes to express his thanks and to state that he is delighted with Dr. Patrick Major's very balanced review. In addition, he agrees with some of the criticisms raised.

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