

## Politics and Popular Opinion in East Germany, 1945-68

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Despite over ten years of research on the German Democratic Republic since the fall of the Wall, there has been remarkably little work on 'ordinary East Germans', and so Mark Allinson of Bristol University is to be congratulated on his pioneering contribution. Only Mitter and Wollé's 1993 study, *Untergang auf Raten*, has made popular opinion a focus to the same extent. Yet Allinson comes to radically different conclusions through a more judicious reading of party and state public opinion reports, choosing to explore the reasons behind pro-regime statements rather than dismiss them out of hand. Rather than Mitter and Wollé's terminal decline, we are presented here with 'stable instability' (p. 164), a repressive and economically deprived, but viable polity in the medium term. His picture is more complex and contradictory, but all the more convincing for it. The author is indeed at pains to break away from Cold War stereotypes, stressing his outsider credentials, and claiming, controversially, that the GDR 'had as much (or as little) right to exist as the FRG' (p. 8). It will be interesting to see how the book is received in certain quarters of the German academic community, which will no doubt see it as dangerously apologetic. Much recent Anglo-American work, however, is reaching similar conclusions, that there was an everyday normality to East German lives which is obscured by high-level, *Politbüro*-driven accounts.

The price of such detail is, however, geographic localisation: despite the title, this is a case-study of Erfurt in Thuringia, selected as a microcosm for its mix of industry and agriculture, but also for its border to West Germany and the Catholic enclave of the Eichsfeld in an otherwise Protestant heartland. The avalanche of small place-names can be somewhat disorientating, but there are helpful maps at the front. The opening chapter deals specifically with local politics. There was little local evidence of concerted resistance to the KPD-SPD merger to form the Socialist Unity Party (SED) in Thuringia in 1946, perhaps fostered by pre-war workers' traditions of co-operation and the prominence of former Buchenwald inmates in the reconstruction.

Considerable space is devoted to the creation of the bloc system at both regional and district level, as Christian and Liberal Democrats, followed by National Democrats and farmers' representatives, were incorporated into a common front. Allinson argues that this process neutralised rather than converted a potential opposition (p. 24), since there was still considerable Communist intimidation of individual leaders in the early years, including the (nonfatal) defenestration of one local Eichsfeld politician! There was also persistent non-communist resistance, generating a certain pragmatism in the SED. Sensitive issues were simply kept off the agenda of the regional bloc committee and throughout the 1950s local committees were not pliant extensions of SED will, with Christian Democrats prepared to stick their necks out over church policy, often to the consternation of their own leadership.

For the non-affiliated majority, in the following chapter, Allinson reaches the familiar conclusion that the existential crisis of the late 1940s precluded much active interest in politics. For instance, the founding of the GDR in October 1949 was overshadowed by a potato shortage, and as one local official recognised: 'Political clarity among the masses is extremely bad, the "stomach question" controls everything' (p. 52). Nevertheless, the reasons for shortages were often construed to the detriment of the SED and the Soviets. Similarly, the general public appeared more impressed by the price of jam and public transport in the wake of the June 1953 crisis, than in political reforms. Only a small minority of the Erfurt population actively demonstrated on 17 June: seven factories went on strike and the security forces were generally effective at quelling disturbances. Indeed, Allinson concludes that the SED's weathering of the crisis was a sign of underlying strength (p. 61). Some of the more intriguing conclusions reached-and ones which I share from my own research-are the witting or unwitting complicity of a war-weary population in seeking stability at times of crisis. Ordinary East Germans, especially older citizens, learned to 'behave' during 1956, 1961 and 1968, not so much out of sympathy for Communism, but out of fear of a new world war. The SED also learned to play on such fears and present itself as the guarantor of order.

The group least susceptible to this caution was the younger generation. Chapter four includes a discussion of youth responses to recruitment into the armed forces, which were often hostile, and the stilted attempts at destalinisation in the provinces, where local functionaries buried themselves in organisational rather than ideological reforms. The Polish and Hungarian upheavals in the autumn of 1956 did cause disorientation within the local party hierarchy, as well as some passive resistance from farmers, always viewed as one of the more 'difficult' elements of the populace to handle. Farmers again engaged in foot-dragging tactics at the culmination of collectivisation in 1960-Allinson's account highlights how hard it was at local level for the regime to coerce recalcitrant farmers, especially when local officials were concerned not to alienate local communities. The Thuringian countryside, as elsewhere, had been heavily Nazified. Collectivisation was thus an administrative, but not a political success.

Given the importance of the Catholic community in the Eichsfeld, but of religion generally in the 1950s, a chapter is devoted to church-state relations at episcopal and parish level. Occasionally the rivalry could reach farcical levels, as when the Eisenach municipal administration used its public address system to try to drown out the church choir (p. 89). The Catholic Church generally showed itself more compliant than the Protestants, perhaps because of its minority position. It was also skilled at extracting concessions from the authorities for public shows of support, such as voting. At the grass roots, local clergy and the state youth organisation, the FDJ, had to compete for the same clientèle by offering superior sporting or entertainment facilities. Allinson also innovatively shows how the SED allowed the churches to take most of the initiatives in church-state disputes. In the 1950s priests were still prepared to exclude transgressors from church rites for participating in state ceremonies such as the *Jugendweihe*; the SED could then paint such behaviour as intolerant and 'totalitarian', while gradually eroding confessional affiliation by keeping a firm hold of the career ladder.

One key finding, surprising to some, but which I find hard to disagree with, is the relative unimportance in 1961 of the building of the Berlin Wall for the Erfurt population, who lived some distance from the divided city. Initially, citizens were not aware of the true scale of the measures, thinking they were merely temporary travel restrictions, but even the shock of full realisation quickly receded, according to Allinson (although, as he later points out, travel restrictions were still a cause for complaint at the end of the decade). The party

apparatus, despite poor morale on the eve of the Wall, rallied round, and the SED took the opportunity to purge itself of waverers, including 24 mayors and 38 National Front officials. Although few were in favour of the border closures, life soon settled back into a familiar routine. This is a repeated theme: that a basic pattern of public compliance and private dissent had been reached by the early 1950s and continued throughout. The building of the Wall was just one more milestone in this process. Despite eruptions later in the 1960s, such as the condemnation by many younger citizens of GDR support for the Soviet intervention against the Prague Spring in 1968, the SED was successfully able to flood the public space and effectively choke off any genuine debate. By the time of the new socialist constitution of 1968, the populace had grudgingly come to accept the status quo and went through the motions of public debate, although the party had given up on the mass mobilisations it had craved in the 1940s.

The very nuanced nature of the findings makes this a difficult book from which to draw many cut-and-dried conclusions from the evidence itself. One local finding is immediately contradicted by another view expressed in the neighbouring village; one factory goes on strike, another remains quiet. This variety is, of course, in the nature of the evidence itself, and Allinson glosses individual utterances with perspicacity and occasional flashes of understated humour. There were some interesting passing insights into the way that, for instance, children could reflect parental views expressed behind closed doors (p. 76). Yet, the mechanisms of the dissemination of popular opinion in a restricted society are never systematically addressed. Some of the blind-spots of reporting were inherent in the SED's world view, but it would have been helpful to have had some discussion of how the party's information network operated: who compiled the reports and for what purpose; whether critics ever got into trouble for voicing negative views; what the difference was between the artificial 'people's will' touted in the press and 'popular opinion', a term coined by Kershaw for the Third Reich. Although using an impressive array of non-SED reports, from the other bloc parties and Volkspolizei, Allinson chose not to use the Stasi's reports, but the reasons for this omission remain unclear (pp. 9-10). And while obliquely using some of the findings of the Central Committee's Institute of Demoscopy, set up in 1964, there might have been some explicit discussion of public opinion gathering—a tool for capitalist hegemony in the eyes of many SED hard-liners—in a Communist society. Similarly, the Ideological Commissions of the local parties did prepare so-called 'consciousness analyses' of the population in the 1960s where one can gain a slightly more integrated picture of the SED's view of social progress among the populace.

Allinson's message that opinion remained remarkably consistent over these two decades is delivered by dint of repetition in an essentially chronological approach. There is one thematic chapter, on religious disputes, which works very well, and one wonders, given the sociological outline in the introduction, whether it might have been analytically more helpful to have worked around social groups, such as workers, farmers and youth. Despite the author's claim that popular consciousness is not primarily determined by high politics (and there is much in this view), the structure of the book still takes its cue from events such as the 1953 uprising, 1956 in Hungary, the Berlin Wall in 1961, and the Prague Spring of 1968. This is, of course, a reflection of the SED's own reporting priorities and is only avoidable, perhaps, through oral history. Since the author had engaged 'in conversation with a large number of Thuringians' (p. 10), it seemed a pity that this source had not been tapped more systematically. For the social historian, therefore, Allinson may not appear to have gone far enough; but for political historians—and for undergraduate students trained in the high politics of the Cold War—he provides enough reassuring landmarks, while still taking the reader into much unfamiliar territory.

Allinson concludes that the GDR was 'quite a normal country': 'As the Cold War division of Europe persisted, so Thuringians grew as accustomed to their lot as Bavarians, South Tyroleans or Britons, and led their lives within this new, post-war framework' (p. 159). This may be true insofar as citizens devoted their time to the mundanity of eking out an existence. Yet much of this everyday reality was rather 'abnormal' by western standards, as surely even Allinson's account attests? The obsession with food even into the 1960s did not occur in West Germany or Britain. As the recent petrol crisis in Britain suggests, capitalist societies soon become dependent on abundance. The comparison with the post-war West works perhaps for 1948, but surely not for 1968? He is perhaps on firmer ground in trying to explain the tolerance of the Erfurt

population to change by reference to their immediate past, although he does ascribe this to the very high politics which he dismisses for the post-war world (for instance, the deposal of the Thuringian workers' government in 1923 is suggested as having sown the seeds of popular apathy, followed by presidential rule and National Socialist centralisation). Perhaps the reasons are to be sought in more sociological notions of *Herrschaft*, as praxis acted out in the local community? This is not to argue that politics should be left out, but merely that much conflict was displaced into everyday concerns, which acted as pretexts for not addressing more contentious issues head-on. Since this is implicit in many of the author's findings, it would be instructive to know how he sees his work fitting into current historiographical debates on *Alltagsgeschichte* as applied to the GDR.

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[2]

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