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EAST GERMANY

Conflict and stability in the German Democratic Republic. By Andrew Port. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. xix + 303. ISBN 0-521-86651-0. $75.00.

The East German leadership and the division of Germany: patriotism and propaganda, 1945–1953. By Dirk Spilker. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. xi + 296. ISBN 0-19-928412-1. $99.00.

The currency of socialism: money and political culture in East Germany. By Jonathan Zatlin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. 377. ISBN 978-0-521-86956-0. $80.00.

In 2006 something remarkable happened. Contrary to every media expectation, contrary to every desire of the re-vamped Communist Party of East Germany (formerly the *Partei des demokratischen Sozialismus*, now subsumed in *die Linke*), contrary to every budgetary calculation of the German government, indeed contrary to every reasonable intuition, the number of applications by individuals to view files that the former East German Ministry for State Security (colloquially known as the Stasi) kept on them shot up. Some fifteen years after the Stasi archive had made the files accessible to the German public, having already dealt with over 5 million applications, 20 per cent *more* East Germans applied to see their files than had in 2005.[1] Marianne Birthler, the Federal Commissioner for the Stasi Files, was at a loss to explain the surge in interest, speculating that the questions of a younger generation of East Germans about their parents' era had prompted parents to view their files. This fact of the GDR as very recent 'lived' history may explain in part why the GDR has not become the 'footnote to world history' of Stefan Heym's fears.[2] As Ulrich Plenzdorf so poignantly observed: 'That the GDR is dead is a myth. The people who were the GDR are still alive.'[3]

That many who came of age in the GDR are still alive is one of the chief factors – along with the fact that one Germany now exists where two sovereign German nations once did – for its highly politicized history. One of the leading historians of 'everyday life' in the GDR, for example, criticized the elephantine multi-volume history of East Germany produced by the controversial parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (*Enquete-Commission*) for its stark 'hero or victim' approach to GDR history not on methodological or empirical grounds, but on the grounds that most East Germans did not see themselves as heros or victims – underscoring the 'presence' of East Germans in today's historical

[1] *Achter Tätigkeitsbericht der BStU* (Berlin, 2007), p. 9.
[2] Stefan Heym and Werner Heiduczek, eds., *Die Sanfte Revolution* (Leipzig, 1990), pp. 421–3.
[3] As quoted in Hubertus Knabe, *Die Täter sind unter uns* (Berlin, 2007), p. 15.

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debates.[4] That East Germans continue to 'live' the writing of their history was also evident in the provocative conduct of former Stasi officers at a gathering of former Stasi inmates at the Hohenschönhausen memorial site outside Berlin in March 2006. It is this kind of incident that gives wind to the sails of the memorial's director Hubertus Knabe, whose most recent work recalls that the East German past is not yet history in its confrontational title *The perpetrators are among us*. One can assume that the interest in the history of East Germany will only increase as we approach the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 2009.

The works under review are, then, part of the 'boom' in East German history that has been sustained since the fall of the Wall although, to be sure, the number of English works is still far lower than the number of works on the GDR in German – a lamentable condition given the limited textbook choices for undergraduate courses on post-war German history at Anglo-American universities. (And, it should be said, none of the works here are particularly well suited to undergraduate course adoption.) All three works grew out of doctoral research undertaken in the 1990s, that era when students of German history could scarcely believe their good fortune of having millions of previously unviewed documents land in their lap, and all demonstrate the merits of diligent archival research in the new records. Lutz Niethammer's claim that an understanding of the GDR will now depend on evaluation of what is already known rather than on new empirical evidence,[5] rings hollow given the wealth of relevant information uncovered by these historians and their corresponding theses, particularly in the case of Andrew Port and Jonathan Zatlin. Although these works are varied in approach – a micro-study of the town of Saalfeld during the Ulbricht years (Port), an investigation of currency as a source of the GDR's demise during the Honecker years (Zatlin), and a study of the East German Communist Party's views on German unity in the immediate post-war period (Spilker) – they all nonetheless seek in some fashion to understand the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (and its predecessor, the Communist Party of Germany) – the ideology on which it was based, its personalities, and how its ideals were implemented.

Dirk Spilker investigates the views on German unity in the decision-making bodies of the Communist Party of Germany and the (after 1946) ruling East German Socialist Unity Party (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* – SED) between 1944 and 1953. These bodies were, initially, the Central Secretariat and *Parteivorstand* and after 1949/50 the Politburo and Central Committee. Spilker concludes that claims by the Communist leadership in East Germany to support a 'parliamentary democratic republic', as notably outlined in the KPD *Aufruf* of June 1945, were mere rhetoric designed to win over the German populace and did not represent a genuine political shift toward a western democratic form of government. Although the SED supported German unity in principle, it was not

[4] Thomas Lindenberger, 'Everyday history: new approaches to the history of the post-war Germanies', in Christoph Kleßmann, ed., *The divided past* (Oxford, 2001), p. 53.

[5] Jürgen Kocka and Martin Sabrow, eds., *Die DDR als Geschichte* (Berlin, 1994), p. 66.

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willing to sacrifice socialism on the altar of German unity. In essence, Spilker transplants the long-standing debate about whether the Soviet Union would have accepted a neutral, non-communist Germany to whether the Soviet Union's political ally in Germany would have also.

The exuberance of the German communists on the prospect of German unity as the war came to an end and in the turbulent months that followed gave way in late 1946 to a reluctant acceptance that Allied tensions had caused the prospects of immediate unity to fade. By the December 1947 foreign ministers' conference, the SED had accepted that Germany would be governed as two states (p. 247). The SED acknowledged the new reality but nevertheless harboured hope that an imminent West German economic collapse would revive prospects for the West German Communist Party, and ultimately for a united Germany dominated by the SED. The final period of the study covers 1950–53, an era highlighted by the Stalin notes of 1952 and the revolutionary uprising of June 1953 that surely would have toppled the regime if not for the intervention of the Red Army (whose professional and restrained conduct prevented wide-scale bloodshed and even more anger on the streets). Spilker echoes Gerhard Wettig's conclusions that the Stalin notes on German unification did not represent a genuine opportunity to solve the 'German question', but were rather a desperate attempt to stall the integration of western defence alliances and perhaps gain some popular western good-will, neither of which had serious prospects of success. Still, Spilker suggests, this period is revelatory in that the SED never entirely abandoned its hopes for German unity, even when the prospect was at its bleakest.

To a large extent, Spilker's work amounts to a sustained attack, one is tempted to say a polemic, against Wilfried Loth's controversial *Stalins ungeliebtes Kind: Warum Moskau die DDR nicht wollte* (Berlin, 1994), published in English as *Stalin's Unwanted child: the Soviet Union, the German question and the founding of the GDR* (New York, NY, 1998), in which Loth argues (not unlike he did in his 1980 book *Die Teilung der Welt*) that the Soviet Union was willing to accept a unified non-communist Germany, thereby laying the blame for Germany's division at the feet of the western Allies. Spilker takes issue with this position as well as the corollary that the SED was willing to accept a democratic parliamentary system in Germany. Spilker singles Loth out as an opponent with great frequency – on three separate issues in the course of eighteen pages in chapter 5, for example. There is, of course, nothing wrong in challenging the conclusions of other scholars, but in this case Spilker is flogging a dead horse. No scholar in the field accepts Loth's exaggerated thesis of a benign Soviet policy toward Germany in the immediate post-war period.[6] Gerhard Wettig in particular has closed the door, once and for all, on Loth's interpretation of the Stalin notes of 1952, in which Loth confrontationally claims that it is 'obvious' the Stalin notes of 1952 were a genuine

[6] See Mark Kramer's outstanding review of Loth: 'The Soviet Union and the founding of the German Democratic Republic: 50 years later – a review article', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 51 (1999), pp. 1093–124.

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opportunity for German unity if not for western intransigence.[7] The manner in which Spilker has phrased his central question as a response to Loth is unfortunate as it leaves him no room to move beyond the rigid confines of responding to another scholar's agenda. Spilker's conclusions that 'Communists did not want (and would not have accepted) a liberal western-style regime' (p. 5) or that 'a united Germany based on western-style bourgeois democracy was not envisaged by the leading Communists' (p. 9), amount to truisms that do not require elaborate empirical investigation. At one level, then, Spilker has set up a straw man.

Because so much of what Spilker investigates is related to communist terminology, it is unfortunate that he does not define what the SED itself believed 'parliamentary democracy' to be. Even this phrase in the KPD *Aufruf* had a different meaning to communists than it did to other politicians at the time. After all, East Germany's official name of the 'German Democratic Republic' suggests that, to the communist leadership of that country, a 'democracy' entailed unity lists and regular 99 per cent endorsements of the slate of candidates. This fundamentally different 'democratic' system was illustrated nowhere better than by the wonderfully Orwellian statement by Ernst Wollweber, East German minister of state security, who in 1955 responded to the idea put forward at the Geneva Conference of holding free, all-German elections: 'We are democrats, but not idiots. We support free elections, if at these elections the working class and its leading Party play the decisive role. We support free elections, where those who do not deserve freedom do not have freedom.'[8]

As Wollweber's pronouncements illustrate, concepts such as freedom and democracy are relative. That the SED employed the term 'parliamentary democracy' need not have been a ruse.

Spilker also misses opportunities to conceptualize the topic beyond proving Loth wrong. He cites Walter Ulbricht, who in 1953 lamented that there was 'no 3rd way between East and West' (p. 245) and for emphasis Spilker uses this wording in the final sentence of the monograph. Yet there is still some mystery at the heart of the 'third way' concept. Spilker spends a great deal of time saying what the SED did *not* want (western-style bourgeois democracy), far less, however, on what the Party *did* want. Could an SED 'pro-Soviet' stance on the German question (as Otto Grotewohl phrased it) be compatible with some form of non-alignment? The fact that the SED rejected Jakob Kaiser's concept of Germany as a 'bridge' between East and West (p. 145) suggests that the SED opposed non-alignment, but would 'neutral', or 'independent' have been more palatable? These concepts are often used interchangeably but are subtly, and importantly, different.[9] Finland and Austria provide examples of neutral,

[7] Ibid., p. 1097. For Wettig's stance, see in particular Gerhard Wettig, *Bereitschaft zu Einheit in Freiheit? Die sowjetische Deutschland-Politik, 1945–1955* (Munich, 1999); and most recently *Stalin and the Cold War in Europe: the emergence and development of east–west conflict, 1939–1953* (Lanham, MD, 2007).

[8] Gary Bruce, *Resistance with the people* (Lanham, MD, 2003), p. 242.

[9] Anthony Nicholls, 'Der Dritte Weg im Zeitalter des Kalten Krieges – einführende Überlegungen', in Dominik Geppert and Udo Wengst, eds., *Neutalität – Chance oder Chimäre* (Munich, 2005), p. 19.

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independent countries that were nevertheless clearly aligned to their Cold War blocs. In sum, an exploration of the SED's 'third way' would likely have provided Spilker with a more nuanced argument than that imposed by the Lothian straight jacket.

Much of the fascinating material uncovered by Spilker will be of interest to historians of Soviet–East German relations. One sees foreshadowing of Hope Harrison's controversial thesis that the East German 'tail' wagged the Soviet 'dog' during the crisis that led to the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961.[10] Spilker notes, for example, that 'the SED's bid for a communist-dominated security apparatus was reinforced – with full backing of the [Soviet Military Administration in Germany]' (p. 178) and that the Kremlin was not 'the driving force' behind the GDR's 'construction of Socialism' (*Aufbau des Sozialismus*) in 1952 (p. 236), both of which suggest the Soviets were *responding* to East German initiatives (which, incidentally, is one of Loth's central tenets). Spilker seems to be of the school of thought of historians like Jan Foitzik who highlight the tumultuous relationship between the SED and Soviet authorities in Germany. Of course, it would be an exaggeration to claim that the SED resisted its Soviet masters, but the SED clearly exerted a certain degree of independence on major issues, as demonstrated by its opposition to the removal of German factories to the Soviet Union.[11] Spilker's evidence suggests an SED occasionally at odds with the Soviet authorities in Germany, but not one that manipulated its patron to do its bidding in the manner that Hope Harrison might argue.

Spilker's endpoint for this study is an event that still struggles to assert its place in German history. The flurry of works in 2003 on the 50th anniversary of the 17 June 1953 revolutionary uprising illustrated the German-wide (perhaps even European-wide) significance of this colossal event involving 1 million East Germans in over 700 towns,[12] but the event is only slowly shaking its moniker as the Berlin workers' uprising.[13] Given its vastness, both in terms of scale and ambition, it is indeed an appropriate terminus for Spilker's work. Be it as it may that the SED refused to abandon socialism after the devastating 17 June pronouncement on the SED's project (and no one would really expect the *alte Kämpfer* (old fighters) to give in), 1953 must surely have sounded the death-knell for winning West Germans to the cause of socialism. Following the mass rape of East German

[10] Hope Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the wall* (Princeton, NJ, 2005).

[11] See Jan Foitzik, 'Zum Verhältnis zwischen SED und Besatzungsmacht: Konkordanz und Dissens', in Dierk Hoffmann and Hermann Wentker, eds., *Das letzte Jahr: Politische Weichenstellungen und Kontinuitäten im Prozeß der Gründung der DDR* (Munich, 2001).

[12] Gerhard Ritter, 'Der 17. Juni 1953', in Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk and Roger Engelmann, eds., *Volkserhebung gegen den SED-Staat* (Göttingen, 2005), p. 27. Other notable works from 2003 are Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk, *17.6.1953: Volksaufstand in der DDR* (Berlin, 2003); Thomas Flemming, *Der 17. Juni 1953* (Berlin, 2003); Rolf Steininger, *17. Juni 1953* (Munich, 2003); on the historical significance of 17 June, see Bernd Eisenfeld, Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk and Erhart Neubert, *Die verdrängte Revolution: Der Platz des 17. Juni in der deutschen Geschichte* (Bremen, 2004).

[13] Tony Judt refers to 17 June 1953 as the 'Berlin Uprising' in *Post war: a history of Europe since 1945* (New York, NY, 2005), p. 177.

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women at the hands of the Red Army which began with the Soviet advance on East Prussia, the Berlin Blockade, and now Soviet tanks firing on demonstrators, East German communists had squandered any 'moral' leadership with the western populace (and with many East Germans) they might have had by virtue of being the first inmates in Dachau. Although West Germany declared 17 June to be the Day of German Unity (and it remained so until 3 October 1990), the uprising signalled more than any post-war event up to that point the permanence of the German division. Quashing the uprising was a Pyrhhic victory, saving Ulbricht while discrediting communism.

Spilker is right that, even on the question of the origins of the division of Germany, a question that would seem to demand answers from the immediate post-war period if not before, historians have tended to focus on the 1950s and the build-up to the Berlin Wall (p. 2). In this sense, it is refreshing to read a work that deals with the Soviet Occupied Zone and the early years of the Ulbricht era. Although one might have expected from Norman Naimark's landmark *The Russians in Germany* (1995) a renewed interest in the history of the Soviet Occupied Zone, very few monographs have been published (particularly in English) on the 1945–9 period compared to the later years of the East German regime,[14] yet this period was crucial for the long-term development of the GDR. It was in those first years of occupation – in some instances, months – that the stage was set for the future; it was then that the Red Army's sexually predatory behaviour occurred, causing a rash of female suicides and alienating women from communism – in some cases permanently; it was then that the Soviets established 'special camps' for both former Nazis as well as potential democratic opponents of socialism that caused deep-seated hostility to the Russian occupier; it was then that German factories were carted off to the Soviet Union, oftentimes rusting on a sideline without ever reaching their final destination; it was then that the embryonic Stasi began in the form of the K-5 department in the regular police force; and it was then that major reforms took place, including the dispossession of large land holders and a reform of education that favoured workers' and farmers' children. Accompanying the sweeping societal changes taking place in the East was the establishment of regime instruments to carry out the changes – a limited and disciplined Party with control over key government ministries like the German Administration of the Interior, and a reliable police, secret police, and judiciary – and individual and group resistance to these changes.

Many of the historical debates about East Germany that dominate the historiography centre on the characterization of the dictatorship – whether it was 'totalitarian', a 'consensual dictatorship', a 'participatory dictatorship', or a 'welfare dictatorship', to name the most frequently cited – yet, although unstated,

[14] Some notable exceptions are Peter Grieder, *The East German leadership, 1946–1973* (Manchester, 1999); Gareth Pritchard, *The making of the GDR, 1945–1953: from antifascism to Stalinism* (Manchester, 2000); Alan McDougall, *Youth politics in East Germany: the Free German Youth Movement, 1946–1968* (Oxford, 2004); Mark Allinson, *Politics and popular opinion in East Germany, 1945–1966* (Manchester, 2000).

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this debate focuses more on the Honecker years than on the founding decades of the GDR.[15] It is difficult to imagine a sustained argument, for example, that East Germany was a consensual dictatorship in 1953 given the widespread unrest that nearly toppled the regime. One wonders how different the debates might look if there were greater attention paid to the Soviet Occupied Zone and to the Ulbricht era, to the Dessau show trials of 1950 held in (appropriately) Germany's largest theatre, to the sweeping arrests of SPD, CDU, and LDP members in the early 1950s (over 5,000 SPD members were arrested, 400 of whom died in prison), to the torturous conduct of the nascent Stasi at whose hands the mayor of Brandenburg died in 1950, to resisters like the Investigative Committee of Free Jurists, and the students in the group headed by Arno Esch at the University of Rostock whose resistance activities led to execution at the hands of the Soviets. Hermann Brill, Hermann Kreutzer, Alfred Schmidt, Manfred Klein, and Wolfgang Natonek were also important resistance figures from the founding decade of the GDR, yet I imagine that even experts in the field would be hard-pressed to identify one of them.[16] Increased attention to the 1950s and 1960s is a necessary component to the ongoing search for an appropriate regime characterization. It could be that such an investigation will lead to a periodization of the GDR into a totalitarian and post-totalitarian phase and if so, the central questions will be at what point the regime shifted and for what reasons.

Andrew Port's study of the southern industrial town of Saalfeld in the Ulbricht era, based on research in fifteen German archives, holds some of these answers and provides a framework in which others might be answered.[17] Port is concerned primarily with explaining the relative stability of the regime. As he asks: 'What … despite overwhelming evidence of widespread discontent held East Germany together and accounted for so many years of domestic stability?' (p. 2). Port finds an explanation that relies exclusively on repression to be insufficient. The Stasi, the rightly infamous East German secret police, takes backstage in this book to the myriad interactions between state and society in which repression did not play a role. Time and again, Port contends, communist officials offered an olive branch to the population through conciliation and compromise.

Port's work is divided into two sections, the first dealing with the turbulent era from 1945 to 1953, which witnessed two major upheavals in Saalfeld,

[15] These regime descriptors are discussed in Konrad Jarausch, 'Care and coercion: the GDR as welfare dictatorship', in Konrad Jarausch, ed., *Dictatorship as experience: towards a socio-cultural history of the GDR* (New York, NY, 2000); Ralf Dahrendorf, *Der Moderne Soziale Konflikt* (Munich, 1994); Klaus Schröder, *Der SED-Staat: Partei, Staat und Gesellschaft, 1949–1990* (Munich, 1998); Alf Lüdtke, 'Helden der Arbeit-Mühen beim Arbeitem', in Hartmut Kaelble, et al., eds., *Sozialgeschichte der DDR* (Stuttgart, 1994). See also Mary Fulbrook, 'Jenseits der Totalitarismustheorie?', in Peter Baker, ed., *German monitor: the GDR and its history: Rückblick und Revision* (Amsterdam, 2000), pp. 36–42. Klaus Schroeder's criticisms of many of the recent terms is found in Klaus Schroeder, *Die veränderte Republik: Deutschland nach der Wiedervereinegung* (Berlin and Munich, 2006), pp. 348–50.

[16] Biographies of prominent resisters are found in Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk and Tom Sello, eds., *Für ein freies Land mit freien Menschen: Opposition und Widerstand in Biographien und Fotos* (Berlin, 2006).

[17] Portions of this section of the review appeared on H-German in October 2007.

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the June 1953 uprising, and the lesser-known disturbances initiated by Wismut workers in 1951, an event that Port first explored in 1997 in a path-breaking article in *Social History*. In the second section, Port discusses the history of Saalfeld from 1953 to 1971 with an emphasis on the various ways that the regime accommodated, in particular, workers' and farmers' demands. Port's concern that a focus on the demise of the regime in 1989 leads to a teleological approach causes him to end his study in 1971, when the regime was still decades away from collapse. Characteristically, to Port the end is not necessarily in the beginning.

Port rejects the image of a cowering East German society fearful of speaking out against the all-powerful SED and its lurking Stasi. Rather, he finds that East Germany was a 'grumble society', one where workers and farmers regularly made known to authorities their discontent and one where – perhaps surprisingly for proponents of the 'civil war' model of East German history – the regime sought to placate discontented elements of society.[18] In Port's words, '[r]epression was not the only – or even the principal – way in which socialist functionaries responded to protest or open conflict' (p. 69). Port in many ways echoes Mary Fulbrook, who has recently argued by examination of *Eingaben*, petitions which East Germans sent by the hundreds of thousands to the authorities, that East Germans were far from a complacent lot.[19] If, then, East Germany was seething for the twenty or so years after the shocking June uprising, why did it not explode? Port argues that any answer must take into account the regime's attempts to appease the working classes (vertical relationships), the fact that the East German working class itself was divided (horizontal relationships), and, to a far lesser extent, repression. In short, Port emphasizes that East Germans were actors with agency, not SED puppets. He thus fundamentally supports Alf Lüdtke's concept of *Eigen-Sinn*, or self-awareness, which suggests that society is comprised of individuals who make decisions about how they participate in that society (including in the regime's apparatus), and as such it can never be completely malleable.[20] Unlike proponents of the totalitarian concept like Peter Graf Kielmansegg, Klaus-Dietmar Henke, or Klaus Schroeder, Port discusses the *limitations* of SED-rule, siding with 'those who reject sweeping assertions about the unlimited power of the party and state' (p. 10). For Port, the SED implementation of its programme was limited by the conduct of the East German population, a sentiment echoed by Jonathan Zatlin in his analysis of the black market, as we shall see below.

Port's main concern with this work is to demonstrate that the East German regime did try to accommodate worker and farmer interests, and that this strategy accounted in large part for regime stability. In particular, SED policies of

[18] Armin Mitter and Stefan Wolle, *Untergang auf Raten* (Munich, 1993), was the first account to suggest East Germany was characterized by a continuous latent civil war.

[19] Mary Fulbrook, *The people's state: East German society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven, CT, 2005).

[20] Thomas Lindenberger's excellent work on the history of the GDR has largely been informed by the concept of *Eigen-Sinn*. See his *Herrschaft und Eigen-Sinn in der Diktatur: Studien zur Gesellschaftsgeschichte der DDR* (Cologne, 1999).

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appeasement toward certain social groups over others at different times led to a fractured society that was never able to mount united, effective resistance to SED rule. The intelligentsia did not always see common cause with workers (p. 244); some workers benefited from bonuses, others did not (p. 205); men tended to have better training opportunities than women (pp. 210–11); and Adolf Hennecke – the first East German 'Stakhanovite' – and his kind were universally despised (p. 201). As Port summarizes, the SED created 'frictions that promoted domestic stability by seriously undercutting solidarity' (p. 216). The author is, however, cognisant of the fact that this precarious stability rested on other factors too, not the least of which was the exodus of one in six East Germans through porous Berlin, and with them, their resistance potential (pp. 137–8).

Port's sophisticated argument raises a number of key points about East German history that historians are likely to debate at length. One underlying issue in this work is the supposed longevity of the East German regime – but was it really that long? Outside observers to this debate would be forgiven for thinking that the East German regime lasted several hundreds of years given the laudatory vocabulary used to describe the regime's longevity. True, it lasted longer than Nazi Germany, but it was shorter lived than Wilhelmine Germany, and both of those states were involved in cataclysmic wars that led directly to their demise. The GDR, which lasted but forty years, barely survived the mass unrest of 1953 and collapsed within months of the appearance of the first fissures in the communist bloc in Poland and Hungary in 1989. Clearly, whatever explanations historians offer for regime stability must also take into account the reality that the East German regime was swept aside with haste by its own people less than two generations after its birth. In other words, is East Germany's brevity not the more pressing historical issue?

Given that Port argues for the primacy of compromise and horizontal divisions over repression as the source of regime stability, it is regrettable that the Stasi fades so far into the background of his account. Granted, the Stasi was a very small outfit when it was first established, but its founding in 1950 nevertheless merits mention. Although he discusses SED programmes adopted to respond to popular anger in the aftermath of June 1953 as a 'stabilizing' factor, he does not discuss the enormous expansion of the Stasi in those years. (The Stasi grew 10·6 per cent from 1953 to 1954, and 17 per cent from 1954 to 1955.)[21] In emphasizing the secondary role of repression, Port states that 'only a handful of Stasi personnel [were present] in the district through the 1960s' (p. 107). Apart from the fact that Port does not cite a source for this statement, the number of official secret police personnel certainly cannot be a criterion for whether or not the regime acted repressively in Saalfeld. As Robert Gellately's works on the Gestapo have demonstrated, a small secret police apparatus can carry out widespread repression with the help of informers. Statistics on, for example, the number of index cards,

[21] Jens Gieseke, *Die hauptamtlichen Mitarbeiter der Staatssicherheit: Personalstruktur und Lebenswelt 1950–1989/90* (Berlin, 2000), p. 553.

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surveillance operations, conspiratorial dwellings, and informer recruitment would have rounded out this picture. Port cites a mere five arrests as a result of Stasi operations in Saalfeld between 1963 and 1965 (p. 106), yet there were many desirable outcomes for the Stasi apart from arrest –including recruiting the target as an informer, intimidating the target into ending oppositional activity, or an orchestrated demotion at work. Port also takes issue with the notion that Saalfeld was crawling with Stasi informers (*inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*, or IMs) stating categorically that East Germany under Ulbricht was 'not a nation of spies' (p. 108). It is true that the number of informers rose significantly from 1971 onward, but it is nonetheless noteworthy that there were still 100,000 informers in Ulbricht's East Germany, a higher number per capita than anywhere else in eastern Europe. In contrast, Czechoslovakia at the time had a paltry 11,300 informers, and Bulgaria, Poland, and Czechoslovakia *never* reached the number of informers East Germany had in 1971. Similarly, the number of full-time Stasi employees rose from 10,700 in 1952 to 45,580 by the time Ulbricht left office – an increase of over 300 per cent.

Whereas Andrew Port seeks to explain the stability of the regime in the Ulbricht years, Jonathan Zatlin traces the regime's collapse under Honecker. *The currency of socialism* is at once an illuminating account of East Germany's failed attempt to create a moneyless society, a scathing review of the SED, and one of the best accounts of the demise of East Germany available. In one sense, it is a mournful account of a utopian ideal that is destroyed by a poorly planned centrally directed economy, palace intrigue, and a fact unique to East Germany of the Soviet Bloc lands – a competing and more materially successful economic system in the same national space.

Although East Germany fared better with its debt to the west than its east European counterparts – Poland and Romania defaulted on their debts, East Germany did not – Zatlin's detailed account of the East German economy under Honecker illustrates in shocking fashion just how burdensome the debt had become. Most historians will be familiar with the odious East German practice of selling its prisoners to the West (*Freikauf*) to raise hard currency to service the debt – in 1988 alone, East Germany earned over 230 million Deutschmarks from its trade in prisoners[22] – but the Honecker regime also sold off works of art, cobblestones from Weimar, weapons, even donated blood (p. 93). Still, in spite of what was clearly impending doom, Erich Honecker and much of the leadership held an unwavering belief in the ultimate triumph of socialism. We see here echoes of Dirk Spilker's work, which noted a similar bold confidence in communists of the earlier era that socialism would triumph throughout Germany despite every indication to the contrary. That much of the explanation for this heady optimism relates to the feeling of superiority earned by being under the boot of the Nazis, and a profound belief in the 'scientifically proven' rightness of their cause, makes it plain that individual biographies remain an important tool to

[22] Wolfgang Welsch, *Widerstand und MfS im SED-Staat* (Schwerin, 1999), p. 95.

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understanding this era. [23] Erich Honecker, as Zatlin reminds, had a great deal of 'revolutionary authority' by virtue of his long prison sentence under the Nazis (p. 83). It is for this reason as well that so many in his leadership circle eschewed criticism of their general secretary. For many of that generation, it seemed unwise, unseemly, impolitic, perhaps even heretical, to oppose one whose belief in the cause of socialism led him to confront fascism at a time when, it must be said, few dared to.

Revolutions are, however, difficult to sustain in the long run. The zeal of the first wave of flag-bearers on the barricades rarely passes to subsequent generations. Although several *alte Kämpfer*, notably Erich Honecker and Minister for State Security Erich Mielke, continued to play important roles until the end of the GDR, the transition to the post-revolutionary generation had already been under way. This fact was brought home in 1982 when Bruno Beater, a deputy director in the central Stasi office in Berlin, died, leaving in the Stasi only Erich Mielke as the last of the founding fathers.[24] The next generation of mid- and senior-level management were drawn to positions in government, including in the secret police, the vanguard of the Cause, for salary and benefits as much as a belief in socialism. Even in the Soviet Union, home of the communist revolution, the typical functionary in the post-war period was 'no longer the communist believer and enthusiast of the 1930s, but the careerist who might not believe in the Party or its goals but carried out its orders nonetheless'.[25] By the 1980s bureaucrats had replaced ideologues.

Zatlin's work serves as a reminder that the *dictatorship* aspect of the GDR is crucial in any historical explanation of that country. Given that recent polling has suggested some confusion in East German schools around the dictatorial nature of the GDR, it seems that Zatlin's emphasis is even more relevant. Only 49 per cent of Berlin school children answered 'yes' in a recent survey conducted by the *Forschungsverbund SED-Staat* of the Free Unversity in Berlin to the question: 'Was the GDR a dictatorship?'[26] Even among teachers, there does not exist universal consensus that the GDR was a dictatorship.[27] In a report on sixty-three history textbooks from ten different publishing houses used in German secondary schools, the authors expressed great concern that the dictatorship aspect of the GDR was underestimated in favour of concepts like 'socialist democracy' or 'democratic centralism'.[28] Overall, nearly one in three East Germans believe East Germany should not be described as a 'dictatorship'.[29] The confusion over the political system in East Germany is also prevalent in the academy, as evidenced by a recent handbook of German history published in Germany which

[23] Catherine Epstein, *The last revolutionaries: German communists and their century* (Cambridge, MA, 2003). [24] Gieseke, *Die hauptamtlichen Mitarbeiter*, p. 348.
[25] Orlando Figes, *The whisperers* (New York, NY, 2007), p. 472.
[26] Editorial, *DA*, 40 (2007), p. 960.
[27] See the contribution by Nancy Aris in *Im Visier der Geheimpolizei* (Bonn, 2007), p. 87.
[28] Ulrich Arnswald et al., eds., *DDR-Geschichte im Unterricht: Schulbuchanalyse-Schülerbefragung-Modellcurriculum* (Berlin, 2006), p. 80. [29] Knabe, *Die Täter*, p. 14.

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eschews the term 'dictatorship' for East Germany in favour of 'democracy deficient.'[30] As Zatlin demonstrates, however, it was the fact of the GDR as dictatorship that contributed to sclerosis of government policy; it explains how people like Erich Honecker could adopt ruinous policies without consequence. In addition, since there was no real accountability to the population through elections or any other suitable substitute, there was little sense of urgency by central SED decision-makers to deal with local situations until, as frequently occurred, the situation had reached a crisis point. Local party officials resented the straightjacket imposed on them, what Zatlin refers to as a 'recurring by-product of dictatorial rule' (p. 133). An oft-cited theme around the fall of the GDR is the utter paralysis of the Party – its lack of innovation, of direction, of any kind of reasonable solution to such major issues as the environment or the exodus movement during the mounting crisis of the late 1980s. Although the ageing leadership is no doubt part of the explanation for this inertia, so too, it must be remembered, was the system of government which by its very nature was rigid.

Zatlin's delightful chapter on East German cars (the now cultish Trabant and the less-well-known Wartburg) bolsters his argument around East Germany's attempts to eliminate money and 'false needs' in favour of a 'currency of socialism'. The lengthy wait for a Trabant and its exorbitant price (12,000 Marks, or the equivalent of nearly a year and a half's salary in 1989) was a direct result of the SED's underproduction of cars, which it deemed an unnecessary status-symbol (p. 215). There was, as Zatlin eloquently summarizes, an 'ideological distaste' for producing cars (p. 219), a position that led the SED to consider halting car production altogether. It was a fatal flaw of the SED to believe the party could decide for the population what its consumer desires should be, and it was repeatedly frustrated when the populace expressed a desire for 'superficial' goods. As Bertolt Brecht wrote in his cheeky poem 'The solution' about the revolutionary uprising of June 1953 when the Party complained that it had lost confidence in the population and it would require renewed efforts by the German people to win back the trust of the party, perhaps it would have been easier too in the 1980s, given the population's penchant for 'false needs', for Honecker to dissolve the German people and elect another. ('Wäre es da/Nicht doch einfacher, die Regierung/Löste das Volk auf/ und Wählte ein anderes?')

Ironically, it was the SED itself that contributed to consumer desire by creating shortages in non-essential goods (p. 242), the result of which was a burgeoning black market that defied the standard laws of economics, a place where second-hand goods like Trabants fetched higher prices than new ones. As Zatlin illustrates, this thorn in the SED's side was an alternate economy beyond the planning mechanisms that were at the heart of the SED's raison d'être, and one that supplanted the East German mark for more convertible currency – the West German Mark, barterable goods, labour (p. 324). East Germans often referred to

[30] Wilfriede Otto, 'Die politischen Systeme', in Clemens Burrichter et al., eds., *Deutsche Zeitgeschichte von 1945 bis 2000: Ein Handbuch* (Berlin, 2006), pp. 292–3.

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their participation in the black market at the end of their regular working day as their 'second shift' (*Feierabendbrigade*). Since the black market provided a release valve for pent-up consumer frustration, the SED allowed it to continue. The important role that the black market played in sustaining Germans during lean years, and the manifold ways that authorities dealt with its presence – from utter helplessness, to tacit approval, to far-reaching attempts to control it (a reason behind even the Berlin Blockade) – is emerging as an important area of study.[31]

The most obvious contradiction in East Germany's 'real-existing socialism' was the presence of Intershops, stores established throughout the country stocked with high-quality western goods that required western currency to purchase. Intershops may have been an economic necessity for the East German regime to service a debt that was spiralling out of control, but every West German Mark earned at an intershop was an admission of defeat. Intershops not only created a two-tier society that caused those without access to western currency (often through relatives in West Germany) to resent those with such access, it was an open admission that money was indeed of value. Zatlin summarizes this point with a clarity characteristic of the entire book: 'The circulation of Western money and merchandise, caused by … shortages and expanded by Honecker's policies, contributed to the ideological and material delegitimation of the socialist economy' (p. 3).

Although it was not his intention per se, Zatlin has provided an important counterpoint to current debates about the nature of the East German dictatorship, in particular whether the GDR was a 'consensual' or even 'participatory dictatorship'. A historian who champions the latter approach observes:

> A very small ruling elite, with a linked apparatus of repression and injustice, was supported and sustained by a very much larger number of people who played key roles in trying, under exceedingly difficult circumstances, to build a better society … through engaging in such communal activities as attempting to beautify their village, construct a new swimming pool, or organize a youth sports festival.[32]

One key element in the notion that East Germans willingly participated in the regime is *Eingaben*, petitions that East Germans filed with local authorities. In her analysis of the East German dictatorship, Mary Fulbrook places great importance on the 'ownership' of East Germany by East Germans revealed through the petitions, highlighting that East Germans felt comfortable approaching government bureaucrats regarding a range of issues on which they desired improvement. Far from helpless, or worse, hopeless, East Germans appear as a result of the petitions to be actively engaged in the betterment of society. Zatlin's view of petitions differs markedly from Fulbrook's. Rather than representing the 'voice' of Albert Hirschman's concept, Zatlin considers *Eingaben* a method of disenfranchising the population as absolutist rulers of a previous era had done (p. 295).

[31] See for example Paul Steege, *Black market, Cold War: everyday life in Berlin, 1946–1949* (New York, NY, 2007).

[32] Fulbrook, *The people's state*, p. 13.

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The SED did not encourage dialogue and 'participation', but repressed it by a petition system that prevented like-minded individuals from organizing their discontent (p. 318). Andrew Port, too, identified the 'therapeutic safety valve' that were the *Eingaben* (p. 103). Zatlin highlights how many of them were lost, misplaced, or responded to with party platitudes. In some cases, the petitioner was brow beaten into 'admitting' that his complaint was shallow and ill thought-out. *Eingaben* could also take the form of personal vendettas against disloyal spouses or work colleagues who had been promoted, and, on occasion, *Eingaben* were referred to the Stasi – suggesting that a more nuanced approach to petitions as evidence of East German 'participation' in the regime is in order.[33]

The manner in which Zatlin contrasts developments in East Germany with those of other Soviet satellites presents historians with a model for future research. Placing East Germany in the context of its Soviet bloc allies brings certain questions regarding the nature of the GDR into focus. Are the reasons for the GDR's stability put forward by Port for example (regime accommodation and societal division rather than repression), unique to East Germany? Was the GDR less repressive than Bulgaria or Poland, and, if so, what accounts for this discrepancy? Comparing East Germany to other Soviet satellites may well provide historians with a way to move beyond current debates regarding the most appropriate way to characterize the regime toward an understanding of East Germany in relative terms. Perhaps what is of greater importance for historical understanding is not whether East Germany was 'thoroughly ruled', or 'participatory', or 'totalitarian', but the degree to which it was any of these compared to its ideological and geo-political contemporaries.

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[33] See for example the *Eingaben* of 28 Feb. 1966, 1 Apr. 1967, 21 July 1967, and letter of 20 Sept. 1963, from Tilse to Glienke, first secretary of the *Kreisleitung*. Landeshauptarchiv Schwerin IV/A/4/08/69.

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