



Jeffrey Kopstein. *The Politics of Economic Decline in East Germany, 1945-1989.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. xii + 246 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2303-3.



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The search for explanations for the collapse of communism often involves concepts of structure and agency, but ultimately may reveal the interaction of both. There is hardly disagreement that the demise of what once seemed such a powerful ideological enemy was to a large extent a consequence of economic malaise. What remains puzzling is that the communist elite allowed this malaise to progress to a point where the state itself failed. But the failure was not predetermined. Whether the GDR's demise was, as Jeffrey Kopstein suggests, path-dependent, i.e., the logical outcome of political and economic decisions, is open to debate. Yet one of the strengths of his book is that it covers the whole history of the GDR. Thus he paints a picture that relies on different building blocks while providing a coherent whole.

It is Kopstein's goal to explain the appearance of political stability amidst growing economic decay and ultimately the failure to reverse the latter. Central to his argument is the assertion that the former GDR was indeed a weak state as far as its political economy was concerned. This challenges

the conventional thinking that depicts most if not all authoritarian regimes as strong states, i.e., as states with the power to direct, implement, and control policies largely unimpeded by domestic forces. On the contrary, Kopstein argues that the East German regime was severely hampered by three factors: "its political and economic dependence on the Soviet Union, the logic and interests (material and ideal) of its bureaucracy, and, perhaps most ironically, the 'veto power' of its own working class" (p. 2). While the first two arguments are not new, their interaction and linkage with the third factor are.

Kopstein's analysis adds credence to the role of economics in the collapse of communism. He links economic failure with the inability or even unwillingness of the elite and the administrative culture that surrounded it to adjust to changing economic and political circumstances. The author sees the events of 1953 as having had important implications for the future economic course of the GDR. In the aftermath of the crisis, the workers maintained an important veto role. This factor, which deserves further investigation, can help ex-

plain why the communist regime was able to maintain its power without being confronted with major labor disturbances. In addition, it questions stereotypical black-and-white pictures that portray East German citizens almost exclusively as subjects without a voice of their own.

But at the center of Kopstein's book is the question of how the political elite responded to the economic challenges posed by an ailing command economy. The author explores the reasons for the failed reform efforts in the 1960s and the implications of the debt crisis in the 1970s and 1980s. However, a major part of his book concentrates on much less traveled territory--the role of SED district and county secretaries in addressing economic problems at the regional and local level. Kopstein uses the concept of the *campaign economy*, one in which policy actions are more ritualistic than a rational response aimed at problem solving. The author confirms the now-commonly accepted wisdom that the technocratic trend of the 1960s has been overemphasized by Western scholars, but he also points to a "swing back in the direction of ideological orientation in the 1970s and 1980s" (p. 127).

It should at least be noted that the archival records that the author puts to good use are located in the SAPMO (Stiftung Archiv der Parteien der Massenorganisationen der DDR), not the SAMPO as cited throughout the book. Based on these newly available sources and a thorough understanding of the theoretical literature, he adds depth to some old findings and argues convincingly why in communist states, as in others, "politics was ultimately a local affair" (p. 194). It is in the latter realm that Kopstein's contribution is most interesting and innovative.

The book is important not just for the questions it raises and the answers it provides, but also--at least in the eyes of this reviewer--because of the discussion that a thorough reading of the book provokes. Are the prefects of the Soviet Union really the best model with which the re-

gional first secretaries of the GDR should be compared? If the regional first secretaries are examined in detail, should we not be provided with more information regarding the complex nature of center-periphery relations in communist states in general and the GDR in particular? Was the ritual of the campaign economy the only possible response to the constraints imposed by the central government and was it the only one attempted? Which strategies were used by regional and local functionaries to influence the central government to secure scarce resources?

Kopstein's book is logically coherent even if some of his findings invite further questioning and more empirical evidence. He does not pretend to give an explanation for the demise of the GDR: he is well aware of the complexities that accompany regime change. It is an important contribution to our understanding why the communist elite in East Germany could not reverse the course of the economy--a shortcoming that would ultimately contribute to its own demise.

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