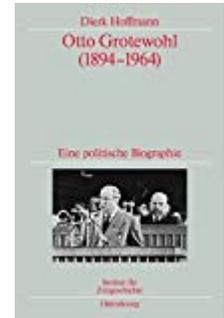


Dierk Hoffmann. *Otto Grotewohl (1894-1964): Eine politische Biographie.* Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2009. viii + 721 pp. Pictures, notes, list of abbreviations, bibliography, name index. EUR 69.80, cloth, ISBN 978-3-486-59032-6.



Reviewed by Gary Roth

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Commissioned by Benita Blessing (Oregon State University)

Otto Grotewohl, the first president of the German Democratic Republic, was one of the few socialists to embrace the Soviet system in the post-World War II era. Grotewohl was an anomaly, and he has puzzled observers ever since. A prominent and committed Social Democrat over many decades, he nonetheless supported the drive for a combined Social Democratic-Communist Party, pushed through this unification despite considerable opposition in the Soviet and Allied zones of occupation, and then, to the renewed shock of his colleagues, helped purge the new party of members who equivocated at Soviet dominance and the replacement of the electoral system by an elite political cadre. During an era when Stalinist politics were characterized by unceasing defections, Grotewohl moved in the opposite direction. Discerning his motives has not been easy. Grotewohl discussed his political trajectory neither in letters, nor in memoirs. From Dierk Hoffmann's biography emerges an understanding in which Grotewohl's belated embrace of Stalinism was quite consistent with the social democratic practices he

had followed previously. No great divide existed between these two worlds. To explain this requires a close examination of Grotewohl's personal and political trajectory, to which Dierk Hoffmann's excessive, yet extremely informative, biography is dedicated.

Politics was Grotewohl's life calling, but it was also a profession into which he stumbled quite unexpectedly. Prior to demobilization in 1918, he had been entirely apolitical. He did not abandon the church until the following year, when he was twenty-six years old, an indication of just how far removed he had been from socialistic concerns. By the time he arrived home in Braunschweig (Brunswick) in December 1918, the political world had already begun to settle into new patterns. Grotewohl returned to his employment as an insurance benefits clerk. In Braunschweig, the anti-war party—the Independent Social Democratic Party—dominated the scene. Hoffmann's depiction of this situation forms one of the high points of his book. The Independents were equally important as a regional and as a national force, a factor

often overlooked in interpretations of the party. The Independents lacked trained experts to serve in the local and state governments, within which they were suddenly major partners. Grotewohl, with his background in insurance and a genuine talent for public speaking, was the ideal recruit. Three years after his return from the war, he catapulted into important positions, serving as a representative in the state parliament and a minister in the state government. For Grotewohl, politics were magic. Virtually overnight he had been transformed from a lowly clerk into one of the most powerful officials in that part of the country.

The postwar Social Democratic Party, with which the Independents quickly reunited, was an altogether different entity from its prewar predecessor. It too required statesmen and technical experts, whereas in the earlier era, political spokespeople were sufficient to cover all the party's needs. No single political party was able to dominate the Weimar system, and Grotewohl learned that governing involved constant compromises within an ever-changing array of coalition-wide agreements. The excitement and hum of activity also meant a high degree of uncertainty for the politicians themselves. Swings within the electorate meant that independent sources of income were imperative. Grotewohl served as a part-time newspaper editor and contributor, and he accepted appointments to various civil service boards to supplement his income as an elected official and counteract the uncertainty of his tenure.

Grotewohl was not active in the opposition to the National Socialists either before or after their assumption of power. He was nonetheless prominent enough to get caught in the purge of the civil service that also encompassed the insurance industry and cost 10 percent of its employees their positions because of their political or ethnic backgrounds. Hoffmann's descriptions of the lengths to which Grotewohl was driven in order to support his family is another special feature of this book. While most accounts of survival by socialists and

communists under the fascist regime focus on political resistance, Hoffmann is particularly attuned to the effects on Grotewohl's material status and the desperate lengths to which he resorted to support his family. Grotewohl earned money wherever possible: selling nose drops, crafting hand-painted postcards, and working on commission as he sold kitchen appliances. He often pursued several ventures simultaneously, but always without much success. The Nazis also pursued Grotewohl for corruption: while an elected official, he had provided assistance to the insurance industry. The court costs weighed heavily on him throughout the Nazi era.

In the immediate post-World War II period, Grotewohl emerged as a key social democratic liaison to the Soviet occupation force and its heavily subsidized counterpart, the German Communist Party. Grotewohl, who had relocated to Berlin during the war, thought that social democratic survival was only possible by accommodating itself to this new reality. With no political support outside the Soviet zone, Grotewohl had no choice but to come to terms with the Communists. Siding with them was the means to avoid his own political marginalization, whereas flight to the West most likely would have ended his political career. In the rest of Germany, the Social Democrats rejected Grotewohl's analysis. Kurt Schumacher in particular was quite aggressive in his own quest for leadership.

Twenty-five years earlier, Grotewohl had witnessed the merger of the Independent and Majority Social Democratic parties, and was aware that the latter quickly absorbed the former. He seems to have had few illusions about the fate of the Social Democrats in a merger with the Communists in territories occupied exclusively by the Soviets. The new unity party, the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, or SED, did not function all that differently from the Social Democratic Party, beset as it was with its own factions and infighting. Grotewohl was a master at these situa-

tions and thrived amidst the intermingling of politics and bureaucracy. This was his world. The need to form coalitions was soon replaced by a one-party system, but this new situation only secured Grotewohl's existence. As long as he did not fall out of favor, never again would he need to supplement his income. As East Germany's president, he was guaranteed both esteem and an upper-middle-class existence. This was all he ever aspired to. The idea that politics was a means to self-enrichment was kept within modest bounds. It was the lever that once again allowed him to cast aside a working-class existence for something more comfortable.

Hoffmann details the domains in which Grotewohl asserted himself during the 1950s. At all critical junctures, like the mass demonstrations of 1953, he retreated from active involvement, never taking sides in the intense internal powerplays that unfolded within the East German elite. He was a figurehead who led various economic commissions, lobbied the Soviets for increased aid, and conducted foreign policy tours in the attempt to break the country's diplomatic isolation. Grotewohl was the perfect organizational man, pushing forward one agenda or another, even when these were not his preferred causes. Talented, energetic, and charismatic, he proceeded cautiously and retreated whenever his projects and ideas met opposition.

Hoffman follows a trend in German biographies, whereby extravagant scene-setting overwhelms the biographical endeavor. In many episodes, we learn more about East Germany's ruling elite and the GDR's governing structures and mechanisms than about Grotewohl himself. A sharper sense of Grotewohl might have emerged earlier in the book if he had been the exclusive focus. Many of the interesting digressions suffer from Grotewohl serving as the ever-present reference point, even when he is not the center of attention. This duality--as biography and as a succession of short research monographs--ultimately

detracts from the readability of the book, although the significance of Hoffmann's achievement is always clear.

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