H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Christian F. Ostermann. *Uprising in East Germany 1953: The Cold War, the German Question, and the First Major Upheaval Behind the Iron Curtain.* Budapest: Central European University Press, 2001. 451 S. $63.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-963-9241-17-6.

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Published on H-German (March, 2002)

A Cold War Crisis

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The East German crisis of 1953, climaxing in the June uprising, was first and foremost an existential crisis for the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and its regime headed by the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED). As such, it threatened the Soviet Union's influence inside Germany–one of Moscow's major gains from the Second World War. But the crisis was also one of several manifestations of severe economic and political strain in Stalin's East and Central European empire in the wake of the dictator's death. Its aftermath signified an important stage in the evolution of United States policy toward Soviet-dominated Europe. Finally, there is the eternal German "question"–the East-West struggle over Germany's future: could the East German crisis have been a catalyst for East-West agreement? This unique collection of documents, skillfully edited and interpreted, throws new light on all four of these major aspects, while also providing new evidence on a number of other issues connected with "1953" [1].

Christian Ostermann has been at the forefront of new research on the East German crisis. He has published innovative work on the United States response; in 1996 he was the driving force behind a pathbreaking international conference on "1953"; and in the aftermath of this gathering he wrote an analysis of the events of June 1953 that is among the very best new Cold War scholarship on the issue [2]. His work in the volume under review builds on this experience, but it also goes beyond it to create the most complete and reliable account to date.

Much of the documentation printed (all in English) should be new for all but a small group of genuine experts on "1953". Ostermann has drawn from collections where documents released by archives in formerly communist countries, but also Western archives, have been gathered, often in English translation. The most significant of these are holdings at the Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) and the National Security Archive (NSA) "Soviet Flashpoints" collection. But he has also used his own research in United States archives, often acquired through Freedom of Information releases. Finally, Ostermann has benefited in his search for new documents from the international network of individual scholars and institutions created during the ten-year existence of the CWIHP (of which he currently serves as director). The result is a work that belongs on every Cold War scholar's shelf and in every academic library. In no other place can one find such a wealth of recently released documents from so many different sources, all translated into English.

Given the vast amount of potential material for a volume such as this, Ostermann has had to make choices. Comprehensiveness is simply impossible for a one-volume documentary history of an event with as many national and international angles as the East German crisis. As a result, the Western side is represented almost exclusively through United States documents. Similarly, while we do get to read some documents from Bulgarian, Hungarian, Czechoslovak, and Polish archives that confirm that "1953" was a bloc-wide crisis, the bulk of the material on the communist side stems from the archives of the former Soviet Union and the former GDR.

The book is divided into three sections, each led off with one of Ostermann's solid introductions (together with the general introduction and epilogue these run

over sixty densely packed, well-footnoted pages). The first section covers the origins of the crisis, from April 1952 to mid-June 1953. Section two covers the uprising itself as it continued into July. The final section, on the uprising's aftermath, has the somewhat surprising subtitle "implications for U.S. policy". While also touching on certain other topics, the emphasis here is heavily on the American response, especially the food aid program for East Germany as it ran in July and August. But given the compelling nature of this story in the context of a work that treats the East German crisis as a crisis in the Cold War, the choice to highlight the United States side here is a good one.

What are some of the things we learn from this volume?

First, perhaps, we learn more about the role of Stalin in the coming of the East German crisis. On the basis of the papers of German communist Wilhelm Pieck it has long appeared that meetings between Stalin and the SED leadership in early April 1952 were an occasion where Stalin brusquely ordered the SED to militarize the GDR and to set it firmly on a road to socialism. Historians have differed as to whether this marked a turning point, and whether it came in response to the failure of Stalin's March 10 initiative for German unification–the "Stalin note"–to elicit a positive response in the West. But there is little debate that the subsequent SED campaign for the construction of socialism in the GDR was a major cause of the 1953 crisis. The full Soviet minutes of these meetings printed here will most likely cause the debate to continue. The minutes make the meetings appear less hectic and some of Stalin's orders less urgent. At the same time, they do confirm the basic accuracy of Pieck's notes (also printed here, though only in part). One could argue that Pieck distilled the meeting's procedures down to their essentials. A new look at the April meetings, therefore, could lead to the conclusion that Stalin indeed ordered an important change in emphasis for SED policy–rapid militarization, and a new move toward the collectivization of East German agriculture. But as to the way this should be done, the dictator's "orders" left much up to the SED. Most important, Stalin failed to provide the East Germans with the means fully to militarize and socialize the GDR. The Soviet minutes do show Stalin responding favorably to specific SED requests for raw materials and industrial half-products, but there is nothing on the much needed relief from reparation obligations, or on the return of confiscated industrial enterprises to German ownership. In other words, Stalin's directives put the GDR on the road to the economic, social, and ultimately political crunch that manifested itself fully in the spring of 1953.

The responsibility for that crunch has often been placed squarely on the shoulders of SED leader Walter Ulbricht. He certainly bore the brunt of popular East German, internal SED, and Soviet criticism in the spring of 1953, to the point where, in early July, his demotion only seemed a matter of time. But Ulbricht survived the crisis, and weeks later was back on the offensive, expelling his antagonists from the party leadership. Speculation as to how and why Ulbricht survived in office has often centered on the arrest of Lavrenti Beria in late June. The leadership crisis in Moscow may have caused Stalin's remaining heirs to prefer the known quantity of Ulbricht over the uncertainties connected with promoting his unimpressive detractors to top leadership positions. Unfortunately, the new documents do not resolve this question. We need much more documentation from Kremlin sources to explain the reversal of Ulbricht's political fortunes in July. However, indirectly Ostermann's documents can lend support to interpretations that emphasize the relativity of Ulbricht's responsibility for the June uprising. After all, the GDR was Stalin's Germany, and its 1952 militarization/socialization program derived from Stalin's directives. Most important, after having issued his new orders, Stalin basically left Ulbricht to fend for himself. This, the German did not do very well, but he did not have much to work with. When Stalin's successors brought the SED leadership to Moscow in early June 1953 to receive a new set of marching orders for a more moderate line–the so-called "New Course"–Beria acknowledged this by saying "we all have made mistakes; no accusations" (p. 137). Also, as other documents printed here make abundantly clear, internally Soviet officials argued as early as April 1953 for a lessening of Soviet-imposed burdens on the GDR and for measures that would give the GDR moreautonomy and prestige. The Soviet leadership adopted many of these suggestions in the wake of the uprising, thereby implicitly confirming that Stalin had put Ulbricht and the SED in a miserable position.

Nor had the militarization/socialization program exactly improved the Soviet position in the East-West struggle over Germany's future. This mid-level officials apparently also recognized some time before Stalin's successors were in a position to take note. Ostermann provides a string of Soviet foreign ministry documents from April and May that show the development of what the authors believed ought to be a new Soviet initiative for German unification. For anyone who has studied–also with

the help of new evidence from the communist side–the genesis of the Stalin note of March 1952, there is much here that looks familiar [3]. In 1953, the rationale for the proposed initiative remained the need for the Soviet Union to regain the initiative in the struggle over Germany's future with the West; the real audience was still to be the (West) German population; and the determination to hold on to postwar Soviet gains in Germany was as strong as ever, as illustrated by the fact that this drafting process went hand-in-hand with the development of ideas for the strengthening of the GDR, often in one and the same document. On another Soviet "plan" for Germany's future, Beria's alleged proposal to his colleagues simply to sacrifice the GDR in favor of a united, neutral, bourgeois Germany, credible evidence, Ostermann agrees, remains in very short supply.

When in early June the Kremlin imposed the moderate New Course on the SED (Ostermann has included the full version of this important document), it did make a reference to the importance of the struggle for German unification. If one views the New Course as a policy of liberalization–instead of the attempt to consolidate the GDR it was–it becomes possible to see it as part of a wider Soviet "peace policy" that could have led to an East-West compromise over Germany. But that would be a grave misunderstanding of how the new Kremlin leadership viewed the situation in 1953. More than anything else, Soviet moderation at this time stemmed from the need to correct some of Stalin's worst excesses and to take some outside pressure off a communist empire mired in a deep crisis, all with the objective to preserve that empire and enable it to persevere in the Cold War. If Moscow or the SED spoke of German unification in 1953, it was because of what Stalin had told Ulbricht and friends at the end of their final meeting in 1952: "You should continue propaganda for German unity in the future. It has a great importance for the education of the people in West Germany. Now it is a weapon in your hands, and you should always hold it in your hands" (p. 40). That Stalin was correct about the potential strength of this weapon is confirmed by several United States documents in this volume in which American officials fear the political havoc a new Soviet initiative could wreak on the still fragile Western integration of the Federal Republic. Of course, the Soviet suppression of the June uprising changed everything. As Ostermann's documents demonstrate, June 1953 led to the development of Khrushchev's "two Germanies" doctrine, according to which progress on the German question could not go at the expense of the GDR.

Next, there is the uprising itself. Much new evidence on its scope, duration, and intensity has emerged since the early 1990s, but this volume does a nice job of pulling much of this–and more–together. There are numerous reports by Soviet officials in the GDR that reflect the staggering number of strikers and protesters that participated in the uprising all over the GDR. One can only imagine what must have gone through the minds of Nikolai Bulganin and Viacheslav Molotov when they received a report on June 17 stating that in the city of Goertliz "a mob of 30,000 destroyed SED offices, the prison, and the buildings of the security service and district committee" (p. 186). In addition, there are detailed reports and analyses written by foreign observers. Interestingly, in both East and West government analysts believed the other side to have been behind the uprising: initially, United States analysts thought it possible that the disturbances were incited by the Soviets, so as to create a pretext to implement drastic political and economic changes in the GDR; in their internal (!) analyses, Soviet officials, who must have known better, consistently held a well-prepared Western conspiracy responsible for the entire uprising.

Finally, Ostermann does an excellent job of demonstrating the limits of the Eisenhower desire for "rollback" of communist influence in Central and Eastern Europe. These limits, judging from the documents printed, the Americans came to recognize only slowly and imperfectly. The United States evidence printed ranges from insightful, analysis of the growing East German crisis in early 1953; to evidence on the search by surprised American officials for a response to the June uprising that would both support the East German population and avoid the danger of armed conflict with the Soviets; to the food aid program that became the most visible and successful Western response. But while successful, the food program also quickly demonstrated the dangers connected with any active Western challenge to communist authority in Soviet-controlled Europe: at best, it would remind the population of how much better people West of the Iron Curtain lived; at worst, it could cause the communist authorities to increase their repression or encourage new popular uprisings that were bound to fail because the West would not risk major war to help.

For the Cold War as a whole, this is one of the major conclusions one can draw from this important book. The crisis of 1953 was a serious one for the Soviet bloc, but it also showed how firm the dividing lines in Europe and Germany had become since the end of World War II. In its wake, East and West would need new policies to manage–and perhaps eventually overcome–the division of the continent.

Notes

[1]. The reviewer appears in this volume as a translator of one the documents. This translation was done years ago, on the occasion of an international conference on "1953". The reviewer has had no involvement whatsoever with the preparation of the work under review.

[2]. "The United States, The East German Uprising of 1953, And The Limits of Rollback". Cold War International History Project Working Paper # 11, December 1994. " 'Keeping the Pot Simmering': The United States and the East German Uprising," German Studies Review, Vol. XIX, No. 1 (February 1996). "This Is Not A Politburo, But A Madhouse," Cold War International History Project Bulletin, # 11 (March 1998). But see also, Mark Kramer's three-part article "The Early Post-Stalin Succession Struggle and Upheavals in East-Central Europe: Internal-External Linkages in Soviet Policy Making" Journal of Cold War Studies, Vol. 1, No 1-3 (1999), especially parts 1 and 2.

[3]. Stein Bjornstad, *The Soviet Union and German unification during Stalin's last years* (Oslo: Defence Studies, 1998); Gerhard Wettig, "Die Deutschland-Note vom 10. Maerz 1952 auf der Basis diplomatischer Akten des russischen Aussenministeriums," Deutschland Archiv, Vol. 26, No. 7 (July 1993); Wettig, Bereitschaft zu Einheit in Freiheit? Die sowjetische Deutschland-Politik 1945-1955 (Muenchen: Olzog, 1999).

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Citation: Ruud van Dijk. Review of Ostermann, Christian F., *Uprising in East Germany 1953: The Cold War, the German Question, and the First Major Upheaval Behind the Iron Curtain.* H-German, H-Net Reviews. March, 2002.

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