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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Childs. *The Fall of the GDR: Germany's Road to Unity*. London: Longman, 2001. xvii + 188 pp. \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-31569-3.

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Published on H-Diplo (December, 2002)



## The German Revolution as Party Politics

### The German Revolution as Party Politics

David Childs may not have been “present at the creation,” but he has spent the better part of a lifetime observing and reporting on developments in Germany. His first book-length analysis of conditions in East Germany appeared in 1969; his 1983 work *The GDR: Moscow's German Ally*, revised in 1988, remains useful as a guide to the pageantry and party congresses of the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED). In 1996 he co-authored a volume on East Germany's security organ, the Stasi.[1] Now professor emeritus of German politics at the University of Nottingham, Childs offers us his account of the precipitous demise of the regime he studied for so long.

The result is a densely packed narrative of the events of 1989-90. Childs assumes familiarity with the European scene since 1945 on the part of his readers, opening with a chapter entitled “The GDR in 1988—A Stable State?” He offers capsule biographies of the country's geriatric leaders and describes how the SED had secured a “leading role” in all facets of East Germany's bureaucratic existence. Erich Honecker held the party, and thus the GDR, firmly in his grip; “the real threat to him came from Moscow” (p. 9). The twenty-two members of the Politburo in 1988 were “men of limited experience and limited intellectual horizons” (p. 9). This represents a fair judgment, no doubt, yet is a sad commentary on a group that included six survivors of Nazi prison camps and three veterans of the Spanish Civil War (alongside six veterans of Hitler's Wehrmacht).

The following chapter provides background on “The

GDR's Flawed Development.” Here, with precision, Childs runs through the standard list of social and economic difficulties faced by the regime: the strains caused by higher oil prices, the misplaced effort to develop a microchip industry, the inadequacy and poor quality of housing, and popular resentment over travel restrictions. He observes that in the eyes of East German citizens, “virtually every aspect of the GDR and its allies seemed drab, dreary and provincial compared with the Federal Republic” (p. 32) Even the GDR's currency, with its lightweight coins, looked and felt shabby in comparison with Western currencies. That will probably do as an evocation of the ghastly ordinariness of everyday life in East Germany, but historians may wish their students to have a deeper exposure to the concepts (such as *niche society* and *Eigen-Sinn*) that scholars have used in the past decade in exploring how East Germans came to terms with their fate.[2]

As might be expected, Childs has much of interest to report on “The Stasi and Internal Security in the GDR.” He reminds us that Erich Mielke's Stasi wielded not only an “army of informers,” but also more traditional means of firepower. “Those in charge of dismantling the MfS in 1990 found 124,593 revolvers, 76,592 sub-machineguns, 3,611 sniper rifles, 449 light machine guns, 766 heavy machine guns, 3,357 anti-tank weapons, 342 anti-aircraft machine guns, and 3,303 flare pistols” (pp. 37-8). Here, as in many other passages, Childs presents lists that charm with their exaggerated level of detail. Several well-chosen examples demonstrate the extent of the Stasi's penetration of the schools, academia, and the

literary world. The agency's success in stage-managing crowds—the “Potemkin village” effect—is illustrated with two significant cases: the 1973 World Festival of Youth and Students in East Berlin, and the 1981 visit by Honecker and Helmut Schmidt to Gnstrow. Finally, Childs makes plain how grim life could become for dissidents and those who filed official requests to emigrate.

One of the author's less satisfactory chapters concerns the sudden emergence of the crowd as a force for change in East Germany. He emphasizes that in the early months of 1989, business was running as usual. Prominent West German visitors came a-courting, yet border guards were still gunning down escapees at the Berlin Wall. What follows next is a tumble of remarkable events: accusations of blatant fraud (echoed by Gorbachev himself) in the May 1989 elections; the opening of the Hungarian-Austrian border, which offered East German vacationers an immediate escape route; the pathetic ritual of the GDR's fortieth anniversary celebrations; and the “miracle of Leipzig,” when party officials, security forces, and civic representatives agreed on the principle of non-violence. How did there suddenly come to be 70,000 marchers circling Leipzig on October 9, 1989? Childs' rapid-fire coverage of events does not stop to reflect on broader explanations. Tellingly, none of the chapters in this book have concluding sections.

Childs returns to his *metier*, party politics, in the next chapter. With near-encyclopedic attention, he follows the emergence of oppositional groupings: New Forum, Democracy Now, the Social Democratic Party, Democratic Awakening, and more. All save one “seemed to be vaguely ecological and vaguely social democratic. Abolition of the GDR did not seem to be part of their aims” (p. 81). Childs' unromantic attitude toward these groups allows him to stay focused on another, perhaps more dramatic development, the reform of the ruling SED itself. Party membership plummeted in October and November, but those who remained insisted on a thorough purge of the corrupt Politburo and later the Central Committee as well. In the midst of all this upheaval, the party leadership dropped the ball on travel reform, unintentionally prompting a dramatic breach in the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989.

After a quick survey of international responses, ranging from Margaret Thatcher's apprehension to Francois Mitterrand's ambiguity to Helmut Kohl's surprise announcement of a ten-point plan for German unity (as a confederation, not necessarily as a centralized political entity), Childs explores how reform communist Hans

Modrow attempted to keep the GDR from dissolving. Modrow restored the singing of the GDR's national anthem, which Honecker had suppressed for its nationalist implications. Modrow also moved to restructure the Stasi as an Office for National Security, only to press for an outright abolition of the secret police soon thereafter. Curiously, Childs makes no mention of a key moment in popular memories of the revolution: the storming of the Stasi headquarters in Berlin's Normannenstrasse on January 15, 1990.

From here, the story is one of West German politicians crowding onto the East German scene. Childs covers the East German Volkskammer elections of March 1990 in loving detail, outlining the various electoral alliances and expounding on the character of the election law before moving on to present the outcome: an overwhelming victory for the “Alliance for Germany” led by Kohl. Without venturing into partisanship, Childs finds it “astonishing” that some, in hindsight, question the validity of the results; after all, 93.4 percent of eligible voters turned out, a higher proportion than in any West German election before or since. Based on his own interviews of voters in March 1990, Childs concludes that East Germans opted “not for the Greens or the SPD, who were ambivalent about re-unification, but for the parties most clearly identified with it and all things Western” (pp. 128, 132-33).

The newly elected Volkskammer had one central mandate: to prepare the ground for a unified German state. It was during these months that the Treuhandanstalt and the Gauck Authority—two principal agents of the GDR's self-dismantling—took shape. Childs notes that the purge of schools and university faculties also began during these months of transition, well before political unification on October 3, 1990. Some promises were quickly betrayed. For example, the People's Army did not retain an independent existence after all, and a strikingly low proportion of former East German officers and NCOs found a welcome place in the unified German army. Unfortunately, Childs does not pursue the problem of dashed illusions in greater detail and the book trails off without much in the way of a general conclusion. Why did unification prove anticlimactic and even downright disappointing to so many Germans? Childs offers few insights into the perplexing post-unity ennui that still bedevils German politics.

On balance, instructors may find this text useful when preparing lectures (this reviewer has), but Childs's matter-of-factness is unsuited to provoking thoughtful

responses from students. Despite the promising series title—Themes in Modern German History—there is nothing thematic about the author’s approach. For this reason, the standard works by Konrad Jarausch (1994) and Charles S. Maier (1997) remain more satisfactory as English-language interpretations of East Germany’s downfall.[3] The best moments in Childs’s text involve personal anecdotes from the months of revolution. In September 1989, Thatcher grumbles to Childs that there is no German Question. Three months later, Childs encounters erstwhile SED reformers at the SED/PDS party conference looking slightly dazed and not quite comprehending that their time had passed. Undoubtedly Childs could produce a lengthy and insightful volume based on individual episodes; such a “unification journal” from the pen of a veteran GDR observer would represent a welcome addition to the growing memoir literature of 1989-90.

#### Notes

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**Citation:** William G. Gray. Review of Childs, David, *The Fall of the GDR: Germany’s Road to Unity*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. December, 2002.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7020>

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[1]. David Childs, *East Germany* (New York: Praeger, 1969); *The GDR: Moscow’s German Ally* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1983); and David Childs and Richard Poplewell, *The Stasi: The East German Intelligence and Security Service* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

[2]. For an undergraduate survey text that does introduce these concepts, see Mike Dennis, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1990* (London: Longman, 2000). This work is rather sketchy on the years 1989-90, due perhaps to the publisher’s interest in not having the Dennis and Childs texts compete with one another.

[3]. Konrad Jarausch, *The Rush to German Unity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Charles S. Maier, *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).