

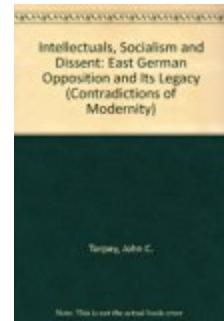
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Torpey. *Intellectuals, Socialism and Dissent: The East German Opposition and Its Legacy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995. xvi + 287 pp. \$60.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-2567-3; \$65.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-2566-6.

Reviewed by Gary Bruce (McGill University)

Published on H-German (January, 1997)



The debate about the role of dissidents in the dying days of the GDR and their subsequent place in the united Germany is a poisonous one. Positions range from those who discredit the dissidents' desire for reformed socialism as at best naive and at worst a disguised support for dictatorship, to those who argue that the dissidents genuinely believed in the possibility of a more humane socialism and that their concepts of civic codetermination leave an important legacy for the future of Germany. There is clearly a need, indeed an urgency, for clarity on the role of East German opposition in the German revolution and unification process. It is thus encouraging to see sound scholarly works emerging from the mass of memoir literature and weak scholarship on the subject. Besides Torpey's work, Christian Joppke's *East German Dissidents and the Revolution of 1989: Social Movement in a Leninist Regime* (New York University Press, 1995), a study with a remarkably similar topic of investigation to Torpey's, and Detlef Pollack, et al.'s *Die Entzauberung des Politischen: was ist aus den politisch alternativen Gruppen der DDR geworden?* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1994) are welcome additions to the literature; they have contributed to our understanding of GDR opposition of the 1980s by placing it in a broad socio-historical context.

Torpey's introduction asks why East German intellectuals, in contrast to their East European counterparts, desired a reformed socialism rather than the replacement of the Communist system with a new system along the lines of liberal democratic capitalism. Torpey answers the question by tracing the unique development of the East German intelligentsia from 1945 until the 1990s. Through this discussion, Torpey provides convincing evidence that the primary features of East Germany's intel-

lectuals in the 1980s—the relatively late demand for civil rights, the lack of interest in German unity, and the desire for a reformed socialism rather than a capitalist system—were results of the dissidents' roots in the anti-fascist, anti-capitalist heritage of the GDR and its peculiar national situation. Torpey correctly states that East German intellectuals of the 1980s "... can only be understood against the background of East German socialism's origins in defeat and the postwar division of Germany" (p. x).

In the initial chapters, the anti-fascist and anti-capitalist aspects in the development of the East German intelligentsia are discussed, along with the important role that national unity played for them. At the time of the 17 June 1953 uprising, prominent intellectuals such as Stefan Heym, Bertolt Brecht, and Johannes Becher remained loyal to the regime, if critical of it, because they fundamentally agreed with the anti-fascist legitimization of the GDR. Yet there was also a desire for German unity, as evidenced by the resolution issued by the *Kulturbund* in the wake of the uprising (pp. 33-34). These features of the intelligentsia were also visible in later cases of intellectual dissent such as Wolfgang Harich in 1956, Robert Havemann in the mid-1960s, and the reaction among East German intellectuals to the Prague Spring. Torpey's discussion of the distinctive characteristics of East German intellectuals provides the necessary foundation for understanding the relatively late emergence of a civil rights opposition similar to the Charter 77 undertaking in Czechoslovakia. In a perceptive analysis, Torpey demonstrates how East German intellectuals delayed such a movement because their anti-capitalist heritage caused them to believe the GDR to be the better German state simply because it had "... abolished (most)

private ownership of the means of production, irrespective of the utter lack of 'bourgeois' freedoms..." (p. 68).

The discussion of the reasons why earlier intellectuals sought to reform socialism is intriguing, but it is hindered by a lack of precision on the type of socialism sought. Harich's interest in "national roads to socialism" (p. 48) or Havemann's desire for "democracy and socialism" (p. 60) are only vaguely defined. A more complete discussion of the socialist ideology of the reform intellectuals would have complemented the author's argument on the role their specific GDR heritage played in their position, while avoiding the argument's vulnerability to assertions that the intellectuals were co-opted into the Communist system and that their reforms were merely cosmetic.

With the background in place, Torpey proceeds to deal with 1980s opposition and the interplay among human rights, the division of Germany, and the emigration issue. The death of Havemann in 1982 is taken as signaling the symbolic end to an opposition motivated primarily by the anti-fascist legitimization of the GDR (p. 79). A new, younger generation of intellectuals emerged whose anti-capitalism was still strong, but whose preoccupation with the anti-fascist legitimization of the GDR was fading, and whose desire for German unity was greatly diminished by having no personal experience of an united Germany (p. 80). With the emergence of human rights as an issue from the peace movement of the early 1980s and the increasing number of would-be emigrants, these younger intellectuals faced an uncomfortable situation: How could they support the human right to choose one's place of residence, when such an act would lead to massive emigration and trigger the collapse of the socialist order that they were trying to preserve?

Torpey presents a succinct analysis of this complex and pained relationship between those who wished to reform the GDR (the "voice" of Albert Hirschmann's 1970 "exit and voice" paradigm) and the would-be emigrants (the "exit") who preferred to abandon the GDR rather than attempt to save it. The degree to which GDR opposition was conditioned by, and intimately linked to, the division of Germany is clearly presented. The final section on the role of intellectuals in the united Germany demonstrates that the intellectuals' legacy has been notable in

certain areas, especially with regard to the interpretation of the GDR's past and the related *Stasi* files debate.

Torpey's work is a thought-provoking and readable analysis of the role of East German dissident intellectuals before and after 1989, but it does have several drawbacks. First, as for the pre-1980 period, there is little comment on what opponents in the 1980s understood by "reformed socialism." Much of this discussion proceeds from the premise that concepts like "democratic socialism" are self-explanatory. This omission prevents the work from significantly furthering our understanding of the *ultimate* goals of the intellectuals and leaves open questions about the substance of the proposed reforms. It is perhaps telling that in the introduction, clear definitions for the terms "intellectuals" and "dissent" are provided, but not for "socialism" as the title would suggest. Second, the author has not made use of archival material, leaving him susceptible on certain points, such as his assertion that Egon Krenz was not responsible for preventing bloodshed in Leipzig in 1989, but rather that this distinction belongs to a group of Leipzig intellectuals (p. 146). It is premature, however, to dismiss the SED hierarchy, if not Krenz himself, so readily. A last point concerns the role of opposition in a dictatorship. The author misses an opportunity to discuss the dynamic relationship between opponents and rulers in a dictatorial system, and to take into account the debate on the nature of the dictatorship in the GDR.[1] Despite these shortcomings, *Intellectuals, Socialism, and Dissent* is an important work.

Note

[1]. For the rekindled debate on whether the GDR was totalitarian, see the Fall 1994 Special Issue of *German Studies Review*.

[All H-German Book and Article Reviews are posted at the H-German WWW Site: <http://h-net2.msu.edu/~{}german/>].

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Gary Bruce. Review of Torpey, John, *Intellectuals, Socialism and Dissent: The East German Opposition and*

Its Legacy. H-German, H-Net Reviews. January, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=764>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.