

Author's Response

Ruud van Dijk and Peter E. Grieder. "Perspectives on Resistance with the People" (Forum on Gary Bruce, *Resistance with the People: Repression and Resistance in Eastern Germany, 1945-1955* (2003)). *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9.3 (Summer 2007): 144-154. doi: 10.1162/jcws.2007.9.3.144. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2007.9.3.144> .

Author's Response by **Gary Bruce**, University of Waterloo, Canada
Published by *H-Diplo* on 20 November 2007

At the outset, I would like to thank Peter Grieder and Ruud van Dijk for their insightful comments on my book. The fact that one's work is worthy of review is in itself a compliment.

Ruud van Dijk provides a comprehensive summary of my book and the central thesis. Indeed, his criticisms are less concerned with my interpretation of the uprising of June 1953 (which I deem a revolution) or my understanding of "resistance" (as opposed to other forms of oppositional behaviour such as dissent, non-participation, etc) but focus rather on further areas that might have been explored. Van Dijk suggests that the broader context of a divided Germany could have played a greater role in the book (a criticism echoed by Peter Grieder) and that greater attention to the fact of a divided Germany would have strengthened my argument. Van Dijk writes: "Bruce's argument would have been strengthened if he had emphasized that East Germany's rulers and their Soviet sponsors increasingly saw themselves in competition with the emerging West German state; that more and more East Germans preferred the Western alternative; and that the availability of a Western alternative profoundly influenced how East Germans viewed their emerging state." There is no doubt that the existence of a democracy on German soil influenced the resisters in East Germany, but there are a number of factors which have to be addressed in leavening this statement. First, historians must be mindful of periodization. Much of the resistance I outline originated in 1945 and 1946 when democracy in West Germany was in its infancy and would by no means be a clear alternative political system. It was of course immediately evident that the occupation of the western zones was far less brutal than that of the eastern zone, but this is different from a "Western alternative" political system, which I believe van Dijk is suggesting. Moreover, I emphasize the role that *domestic* factors played in fomenting resistance in East Germany. As I outline throughout the work, East German resistance developed hand-in-hand with the repression apparatus in the GDR. This aspect seems to have been forgotten in a historiography that emphasizes the exodus of East Germans attracted to the material splendour of the West.

Van Dijk also suggests that I could have accorded more attention to the role the Soviets played in the development of East German policies that led, ultimately, to East German

resistance. I do not disagree. Although I clearly outline the important role that Soviet advisors played in the development of the Stasi, I do not delve into the intricacies of the Soviet-East German relationship that led, for example, to the declaration of the "Building of Socialism" in 1952. As much as this would have rounded out the picture, I preferred to focus the attention on grassroots resisters rather than high politics. As much as one wishes to cover every aspect of a topic, at some point difficult choices must be made as to the boundaries of one's study.

Finally, van Dijk proposes that future studies of resistance in the early years of East Germany might look to sources that I did not tap in this study, such as diaries, literature and oral history. I find this to be a very useful suggestion and one that holds every prospect of bearing fruit.

Let me now turn to Peter Grieder's thoughtful commentary.

In the first instance, Grieder suggests that the book's title – *Resistance with the People* – misleads the reader into thinking that the "majority of Germans in the Soviet Occupied Zone (the GDR after 7 October 1989) were highly politicized and bent on overthrowing the ...dictatorship." Grieder then adds: "This is far from the truth." The title reflects the fact that individual and group resistance out of the "bourgeois" milieu (namely associated with the non-Marxist parties, but also encompassing resistance groups like the Eisenberg Circle) had a basic commonality of motive with the demonstrators in the streets on and around 17 June 1953. Unlike Hitler's would-be assassins, there was a popular element to resistance in East Germany. I admit that I am always puzzled when I encounter the argument that an event is not a mass phenomenon if a majority did not participate. But has any revolution in history been carried by a majority of the population. Or even a significant minority? Historians focus on what happened, not what did not happen. Certainly, the majority of historical events are carried by relatively few historical actors, but this does not diminish their historical significance. The latest research suggests that 1 million East Germans partook in demonstrations in June 1989, in 701 towns (out of 5,585). Of the 190 towns with populations of 10,000-50,000, 157 (or 83%) experienced some type of disturbance (strike, demonstration, work stoppage, etc).¹ It seems to me that it is reasonable to suggest that the events of 1953 were resistance of "the People."

Grieder takes issue with my analysis of 17 June both because of my emphasis on the political nature of the demonstrations and my characterization of the events as a "revolution." I believe that these two points are related, for if one removes the political element then it is difficult to characterize 17 June as a revolution. Much of the debate on this point comes down to one's definition of revolution. In my view, the widespread geography of the demonstrations, the massive mobilization of the population, the

¹ Gerhard Ritter, "Der 17. Juni 1953" in Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, Roger Engelmann ed., *Volkserhebung gegen den SED-Staat* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 27.

political demands of the demonstrators (namely free elections which would have toppled the regime), and the utter collapse of the leadership of Socialist Unity Party in many towns suggests that the term “revolution” is appropriate. Other scholars may define revolution differently. I note, however, that the leading scholars of 17 June in Germany are now using “revolution” to describe the summer of 1953 in East Germany. There is often a qualifier such as “failed revolution” or “suppressed revolution”² but for these historians it is important to emphasize that 17 June was a – ultimately unsuccessful – revolution, not an uprising with revolutionary qualities. Grieder suggests that the term “revolution” is inappropriate because the demonstrators did not succeed in toppling the regime, yet historians regularly talk of the 1848 “revolutions” which for the most part, in some cases after a brief “successful” interlude, did not alter the status quo. Moreover, the evidence I present makes clear that, like 1848, the revolutionaries in East Germany were, even if ever so briefly, successful. After all, the East German leader Walter Ulbricht fled to the Karlshorst Red Army headquarters where he continually muttered “vorbei” (“it’s over”), revolutionaries occupied over a dozen Stasi offices, and in certain towns, the SED effectively resigned. 17 June in my opinion was a revolution put down by the Soviets. At a minimum, I would hope that histories of this period would move beyond the banal, false, yet maddeningly persistent description of 17 June as the “Berlin workers” uprising.³

I hope as well that in the discussion around 17 June, my information about resisters in the Soviet Occupied Zone like Arno Esch (executed in the Soviet Union in 1951 for resistance activities), Hermann Kreutzer (sentenced to 25 years hard labour, amnestied after 7 years) who was one of nearly 5,000 social democrats arrested, 400 of whom died in prison, and Wolfgang Natonek (sentenced to 25 years hard labour, amnestied after 8 years) will not be lost. One of my goals in this book was to make the history of these types of resistance activities available to an English-speaking audience.

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online. 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, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the H-Diplo Editors at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge

² See for example Bernd Eisenfeld, Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, Ehrhart Neubert, ed., *Die verdrängte Revolution: Der Platz des 17. Juni 1953 in der deutschen Geschichte* (Bremen: Temmen, 2004) and Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, “Die innere Staatsgründung. Von der gescheiterten Revolution 1953 zur verhinderten Revolution 1961,” in Torsten Diedrich, Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk ed., *Staatsgründung auf Raten* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2005), 341-378.

³ Tony Judt refers to the “Berlin Uprising” in *Post War: A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 177.