

Bernd Eisenfeld, Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk, Ehrhart Neubert. *Die verdrängte Revolution: Der Platz des 17. Juni 1953 in der deutschen Geschichte.* Bremen: Temmen, 2004. 847 pp. EUR 29.90, cloth, ISBN 978-3-86108-387-0.



Reviewed by Filip Bloem

Published on H-German (July, 2005)

Yet another book on the June 1953 uprising? Not exactly. After the flood of publications that accompanied the fiftieth anniversary of the first major revolt against Communist rule in postwar Europe, Bernd Eisenfeld, Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk, and Ehrhart Neubert have written a massive book on the consequences, perceptions, and instrumentalizations of the "17. Juni". What happened in June 1953, the authors argue, was a full-fledged revolution with broad popular support that would have resulted in a united, democratic Germany, were it not for the interference of Soviet troops. In the following decades, however, the democratic, national, and revolutionary nature of these events was downplayed or denied in both German states. In the German Democratic Republic (GDR) the uprising was portrayed as a fascist, counterrevolutionary coup, organized by western forces, and in West Germany the political and intellectual establishment began to feel uncomfortable with the memory of "1953" when it started to interfere with efforts to improve relations with the GDR. Post-1989 scholarship has done a lot to set the record straight, but Eisenfeld, Kowalczuk, and Neubert feel a continued need to rehabilitate

this "suppressed revolution", which, they argue, as much as the revolution of 1989 could serve as a cornerstone of the national identity of the unified Federal Republic.

Die verdrängte Revolution is thematically divided into eight loosely connected chapters that cover very diverse topics, ranging from resistance groups formed by veterans of the uprising, East and West German historiography on "1953", to literary works on the *Volksaufstand*. The first chapter consists mainly of a discussion of totalitarianism theories, in which Eisenfeld, Kowalczuk, and Neubert try to refute the well-known critique that such theories are too rigid to explain change in totalitarian regimes. Although a lot of recent literature is mentioned, they rely heavily on Hannah Arendt's classic *Origins of Totalitarianism*, which, they claim, offers a far less static account of totalitarianism than is often thought (p. 68). Especially the pre-1989 West German *DDR-Forschung* is taken to task for dismissing the totalitarian framework as Cold War rhetoric and contrasted with Central and East European dissidents who had a much more realistic view of the dictatorial nature

of Communism. Singled out for praise are those few observers who did foresee the coming end of Soviet Empire, like Andrei Amalrik in his *Will the Soviet Union Survive until 1984?* (p. 82). What the authors do not mention is that Amalrik predicted a violent ending of the Soviet empire. That this cataclysm did not take place remains one of the great miracles of modern history. World history offers very few examples of empires that, while armed to the teeth, dissolve in a relatively peaceful manner. When addressing this issue, Eisenfeld, Kowalczyk, and Neubert revert to familiar but unconvincing explanations, stating that Communism was simply "am Ende" (p. 92) and that Communist leaders had no other choice but to give up (p. 109).

In the following chapters various aspects of the repercussions of "17. Juni" are researched. The second chapter describes how the East German authorities reorganized the security apparatus in order to prevent another "17. Juni". It also documents the frantic efforts the East German regime undertook every year around June 17 to make sure no incidents would occur. Chapter 3 shows that the memory of "1953" was an important inspiration for many subversive activities, but played almost no role in the opposition groups of the 1980s or in the mass demonstrations of 1989. Chapter 4 outlines the official East German position and historiography on "17. Juni." The next chapter covers the same subject for West Germany. Chapter 6 documents the activities of resistance groups like the Komitee 17. Juni and the Vereinigung 17. Juni, which operated from West Berlin and were infiltrated by the Stasi, the East German secret police. It is in case studies like these that the authors, all three staff researchers of the Bundesbeauftragte für die Stasi-Unterlagen, can fully profit from their unrestricted access to the Stasi archives. Chapter 7 discusses how the June uprising is depicted in mainly East German literary works. The final chapter covers the scholarship after 1989, when the June uprising was re-

discovered, and the debates on how the uprising should be remembered.

Comparisons between "1953" and "1989" are an important theme of *Die verdrängte Revolution*. Although several differences are mentioned, it is the similarities that are stressed: "Bei aller Verschiedenheit der politischen Konstellationen in den beiden Krisenjahren war die beherrschte Gesellschaft die eigentliche und eigenständige politische Gegenkraft, die zweimal eine Gelegenheit wahrnahm, um dann im zweiten Anlauf zum Ziele zu kommen. Prinzipiell handelt es sich 1953 und 1989 um die gleichen politischen Phänomene" (p. 111). It is, however, problematic to present the demonstrators of 1953 as the spiritual fathers of the unity that came about thirty-six years later. When one considers that many contemporaries referred to the events of June 1953, as an uprising in *Mitteldeutschland* and that some expected a "united Germany" to include territory lost to Poland, it becomes clear how different the mental maps of ordinary Germans in 1953 were from those in 1989. Such nuances are lost when "1953" is viewed exclusively through the prism of "1989", which the authors tend to do. This perspective can lead to curious judgments, as in the case of the memorial speech for the uprising that the German-American historian Fritz Stern delivered in the *Bundestag* on June 17, 1987. Stern made a forceful plea for support to East German opposition movements, but is nonetheless lectured by the authors for not sufficiently appraising "das Menschenrecht auf nationale Selbstbestimmung" (p. 500).

Eisenfeld, Kowalczyk, and Neubert were all born in the GDR and make no secret of their dislike of the East German regime, whose dictatorial nature, they feel, is still not fully recognized—especially by West Germans. Thus, the tone of *Die verdrängte Revolution* is not exactly *sine ira et studio*. At times, this position makes for lively reading, but occasionally the polemics are overdone. In light of the countless books, films and television

programs that have appeared on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the June uprising, it seems exaggerated to say German society suffers from "Ignoranz" concerning Communism (p. 9). Such claims may make sense from the perspective of East German historians who feel the Communist past is still neglected compared to the attention that is devoted to the Nazi regime, but they will seem less plausible to historians from virtually any other former Communist country, who can only dream of the resources available for the study of the GDR. In fact, the German way of dealing with the Communist past, which has resulted in unparalleled wide access to the Stasi archives, is increasingly seen as model.

Eisenfeld, Kowalczyk, and Neubert have written a book that will be of great use to anyone interested in virtually any aspect of the afterlife of the 1953 uprising. Most of their case studies are based upon extensive archival research and the chapters on historiography provide an exhaustive discussion of the state of the art in this field. But in the end, *Die verdrngte Revolution* is both an analysis and an example of how "1953" has been instrumentalized.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Filip Bloem. Review of Eisenfeld, Bernd; Kowalczyk, Ilko-Sascha; Neubert, Ehrhart. *Die verdrngte Revolution: Der Platz des 17. Juni 1953 in der deutschen Geschichte*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. July, 2005.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10717>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.