

Andrew Port. *Conflict and Stability in the German Democratic Republic.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 303 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-86651-4.



Reviewed by Gary Bruce

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Andrew Port's exquisitely written history of the East German southern industrial town of Saalfeld in the Ulbricht era, based on a dizzying array of sources from fifteen German archives, is the latest in a series of books on the German Democratic Republic that seek to explain the relative stability of the regime.[1] As he asks: "What ... despite overwhelming evidence of widespread discontent held East Germany together and accounted for so many years of domestic stability?" (p. 2). Port finds an explanation that relies exclusively on repression to be insufficient. The Stasi, the rightly infamous East German secret police, takes backstage in this book to the myriad interactions between state and society in which repression did not play a role. Time and again, Port contends, communist officials offered an olive branch to the population through conciliation and compromise.

This work is divided into two sections, the first dealing with the turbulent era from 1945 to 1953, which witnessed two major upheavals in Saalfeld, the June 1953 uprising, which swept through East Germany, and the lesser-known dis-

turbances initiated by Wismut workers in 1951, an event that Port first explored in 1997 in a path-breaking article in *Social History*. In the second section, Port discusses the history of Saalfeld from 1953 to 1971 with an emphasis on the various ways that the regime accommodated, in particular, workers' and farmers' demands. Port's concern that a focus on the demise of the regime in 1989 leads to a teleological approach causes him to end his study in 1971, when the regime was still decades away from collapse. The end, so Port would have us believe, is not necessarily in the beginning.

Port rejects the image of a cowering East German society fearful of speaking out against the all-powerful Socialist Unity Party (SED) and its lurking Stasi. Rather, he finds that East Germany was a "grumble society," one where workers and farmers regularly made known to authorities their discontent and one where--perhaps surprisingly for proponents of the "civil war" model of East German history--the regime sought to placate discontented elements of society.[2] In Port's words, "[r]epression was not the only--or even the

principal-way in which socialist functionaries responded to protest or open conflict" (p. 69). Port in many ways echoes Mary Fulbrook, who has recently argued by examination of *Eingaben* that East Germans were far from a complacent lot.[3] If, then, East Germany was seething for the twenty or so years after the shocking June uprising, why did it not explode? Port argues that any answer must take into account the regime's attempts to appease the working classes (vertical relationships), the fact that the East German working class itself was divided (horizontal relationships), and, to a far lesser extent, repression. In short, Port emphasizes that East Germans were actors with agency, not SED puppets. He thus fundamentally supports Alf Lüdtke's concept of *Eigen-Sinn*, or self-awareness, which suggests that society is comprised of individuals who make decisions about how they participate in that society (including in the regime's apparatus), and as such it can never be completely malleable.[4]

Port's main concern with this work is to demonstrate that the East German regime did try to accommodate worker and farmer interests, and that this strategy accounted in large part for regime stability. Such a contention leads directly to the robust discussion on "totalitarianism" that has lurked behind almost every recent work on East German history. Port wisely shies away from applying a descriptor to the regime—terms such as "welfare dictatorship," "thoroughly ruled society," and "forced-through society" are at best cumbersome and at worst pointless—instead providing a balanced account of the merits and pitfalls of the term "totalitarianism" in the East German case. He agrees with the idea that society was "atomized" by the form of rule, but believes that the concept does not sufficiently account for agency on the part of East German society.

Port's sophisticated argument raises a number of key points about East German history that historians are likely to debate at length. One underlying issue in this work as in others of late is

the supposed longevity of the East German regime—but was it really that long? Outside observers to this debate would be forgiven for thinking that the East German regime lasted several hundreds of years given the laudatory vocabulary used to describe the regime's longevity. True, it lasted longer than Nazi Germany, but it was shorter-lived than Wilhelmine Germany, and both of those states were involved in cataclysmic wars that led directly to their demise. The GDR, which lasted but forty years, barely survived the mass unrest of 1953 and collapsed within months of the appearance of the first fissures in the communist bloc in Poland and Hungary in 1989. Clearly, whatever explanations historians offer for regime stability must also take into account the reality that the East German regime was swept aside with haste by its own people less than two generations after its birth. In other words, is East Germany's brevity not the more pressing historical issue?

Given that Port argues for the primacy of compromise and horizontal divisions over repression as the source of regime stability, it is regrettable that the Stasi fades so far into the background of his account. Granted, the Stasi was a very small outfit when it was first established, but its founding in 1950 nevertheless merits mention. In emphasizing the secondary role of repression, Port states that "only a handful of Stasi personnel [were present] in the district through the 1960s" (p. 107). Apart from the fact that Port does not cite a source for this statement, the numbers of official secret police personnel certainly cannot be a criterion for whether or not the regime acted repressively in Saalfeld. As Robert Gellately's works on the Gestapo have demonstrated, a small secret police apparatus can carry out widespread repression with the help of informers. Statistics on, for example, the number of index cards, surveillance operations, conspiratorial dwellings, and informer recruitment would have rounded out this picture. Port cites a mere five arrests as a result of Stasi operations in Saalfeld between 1963 and

1965 (p. 106), yet there were many desirable outcomes for the Stasi apart from arrest—including recruiting the target as an informer, intimidating the target into ending oppositional activity, or an orchestrated demotion at work. Port also takes issue with the notion that Saalfeld was crawling with Stasi informers (*inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*, or IMs) stating categorically that East Germany under Ulbricht was "not a nation of spies" (p. 108). It is true that the number of informers rose significantly from 1971 onward, but it is nonetheless noteworthy that there were still 100,000 informers under Ulbricht, a higher number per capita than anywhere else in Eastern Europe. In contrast, Czechoslovakia at the time had a paltry 11,300 informers, and Bulgaria, Poland, and Czechoslovakia *never* reached the number of informers East Germany had in 1971. Similarly, the number of full-time Stasi employees rose from 10,700 in 1952 to 45,580 by the time Ulbricht left office—an increase of over 300 percent.

Port's work is the most even-handed of recent accounts of state- society relations in the GDR, but nevertheless finds itself part of a trend in the historiography which moves away from the repressive nature of the regime and focuses instead on the more positive aspects of the dictatorship and the fact that the SED did not exercise "totalitarian" control over society. Victims of the Stasi may rightly be insulted by the fact that these works almost always contain a clause like "not discounting the suffering of those affected by the Stasi" before commenting on some other aspect of the regime. In this work, Port writes, "At the same time, and without minimizing the undeniable misfortune of those who suffered at the hands of the Stasi, most Saalfelders clearly had little to fear from security officials (pp. 106-107)."[5]] The underlying argument here is that the East German regime ruled not as much by carrot and stick as it did by carrot and *then* stick. It sought compromise, responded to concerns of its citizens, and yes, also used its instruments of repression—and generally in that order. Ultimately then, a school of thought on East

German history that downplays the role of repression in the regime has now become firmly established. The Stasi has become a topic *non grata*, a lamentable turn of events given that the Stasi was the largest secret police per capita in world history.

Port's nuanced argument on the nature of rule in East Germany presented in this meticulous, elegant work should be taken into account in all future work on the GDR. Still, we must not ignore that the trend of downplaying repressive measures in the GDR has established itself just at the same time as German television variety shows applaud many leisure aspects of the regime (a "Deutschland sucht den Superstar" winner gave an emotional rendition of the hit "Am Fenster" by the East German rock band, City), as Stasi officers mock their former victims at public forums (in particular in March 2006 in the former Stasi prison Hohenschönhausen), and as *Ostalgie* embeds itself in the East. There have been, and continue to be, efforts in the political and cultural fields that range from simply downplaying the negative aspects of the East German dictatorship, to—much more troubling—justifying and legitimating it. Scholars are well aware that to explain is not to exonerate, yet the explanations of the GDR dictatorship in the spate of English-language monographs that have appeared in the last few years nevertheless flirt with exoneration. The pendulum, which has swung far away from the very real, very harmful, very controlling aspects of the regime, must start its swing back.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); and Jeannette Madarasz, *Conflict and Compromise in East Germany, 1971-1989* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003).

[2]. Armin Mitter and Stefan Wolle, *Untergang auf Raten* (Munich: Bertelsmann Verlag, 1993) was the first account to suggest East Ger-

many was characterized by a continuous latent civil war.

[3]. Fulbrook, *People's State*.

[4]. Thomas Lindenberger's excellent work on the history of the GDR has largely been informed by the concept of *Eigen-Sinn*. See his *Herrschaft und Eigen-Sinn in der Diktatur: Studien zur Gesellschaftsgeschichte der DDR* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1999).

[5]. A similar refrain is found in Fulbrook, *People's State* : "For those active opponents of repression who fought and suffered, and for those who lived in fear or whose lives were deformed by the constraints of the system, the repressive aspects of the regime were terrifyingly obvious; but it is important also to notice just how many people never had occasion to hit against these boundaries, and genuinely felt that they were able to lead perfectly ordinary lives" (p. 297).

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