Suicide and the East German Dictatorship

In March 1977, a twenty-two-year-old laboratory technician from the eastern part of Berlin committed suicide. Her request to leave for West Berlin, to which her boyfriend had escaped ten months earlier, was denied in November 1976 by the East German authorities. Her boyfriend informed a West Berlin newspaper that she had terminated her life "because she did not want to continue life under ... [East German] conditions. This state and his its administration have killed my fiancée" (p. 154). Her father, however, confirmed to East German authorities that his daughter had suffered for years from depression and stated that he did not blame the GDR for her death. In a call from West Berlin that was secretly recorded by the Ministry for State Security (MfS), a friend confirmed this view, stating that "the same thing would have happened even ... [if she] had left" (p. 154). In his study of suicide in the Soviet-occupied Zone, East Germany, and the immediate post-unification years, Udo Grashoff has set himself the daunting task of determining the motives that led East Germans to end their lives prematurely. In particular, by distinguishing between medical predisposition and situational factors, the author examines whether a specifically socialist social pathology existed in East Germany. In other words, the basic question the study seeks to ascertain is whether the SED regime’s terror and repression drove East Germans to kill themselves in disproportionate numbers. Grashoff argues that no causal relationship existed between the high number of suicides in the GDR and oppression by the Communist regime. Indirectly, however, in an important qualification to his thesis, the author states that the SED contributed significantly to such fatalities by intensifying and politicizing crisis situations, which under different circumstances might not have led to suicide.

Suicide rates in East Germany (between five thousand and six thousand cases were recorded annually) were consistently higher than those in West Germany. Men were 1.5 times as likely to commit suicide in the East, while the risk for women was 1.7 times higher. Grashoff argues that this discrepancy did not result from political repression. Based on his analysis of statistical material secretly collected in East Germany which, although somewhat lower than the data the author calculated based on his case studies, was not purposely manipulated, Grashoff demonstrates that higher suicide rates in the territories that became East Germany represent a historic continuity. From the Wilhelmine to the National Socialist period, suicide rates of inhabitants of these areas already superseded those in the West by an identical proportion as in East Germany. A comparison of suicide rates in East and West Berlin confirms the rejection of political repression as a major motive. In both halves, rates remained identical for decades before dropping significantly in the 1980s in East Germany. Thus, Grashoff concludes, long-term traditions such as that of Protestantism, which continued despite East Germany’s secularization and to which sociologists have often attributed higher suicide rates, and the blame-internalizing mentality prevalent in Saxony and Thuringia, account for the high numbers of suicide in the East.

To solidify further his rejection of political repression as a motive for suicide, Grashoff then analyzes specific groups in East German society that were particularly
likely to experience repression, such as prisoners or military recruits. Theoretically, the continuation of this long-term trend might overshadow changes among specific groups. While suicide rates among regime sympathizers might have dropped significantly, those of opponents could have risen sharply at an identical level, thus continuing the long-term trend but veiling oppression as a factor. As the examination of suicide rates among prisoners and army recruits demonstrates, however, this was not the case. Members of the armed forces, for instance, were as likely as the average citizen to end their lives. In a similar vein, suicide rates in East and West German prisons were identical during the 1960s, before they fell to significantly lower levels in the East. Crucially, as Grashoff realizes, this drop was the result of improved methods of surveillance in both state and MfS prisons that sought to prevent suicides by enforcing, for instance, correct sleeping postures. Ironically, then, coercion in East German prisons actually decreased the inmates’ ability to commit suicide.

Grashoff does not, however, absolve the SED regime of all responsibility for East German suicides. The inability to emigrate, in the author’s view, contributed heavily to suicides by preventing East Germans from escaping unbearable life circumstances and thus escalating the experience of crises. Moreover, the politicization of everyday life frequently created situations in which East Germans who evidenced no predisposition toward committing suicide chose this path. The case studies of such instances, such as the high school student who terminated his life for fear of punishment after defacing a student newspaper display, or the sixteen-year-old who killed himself after being pressured into spying on his friends by the MfS, constitute the most emotionally gripping sections of the book. Indeed, politicization of everyday life affected suicide rates more pronouncedly than concrete political events. The worker revolt of 1953, the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, and the repressive measures surrounding the Wolf Biermann case in the 1980s were not followed by increased numbers of suicides, which reached their highpoints in 1966 and 1976, apparently unrelated to specific political events. Politics did play a role, however, in the lack of suicide prophylaxis in East Germany. Based on the view that suicides were incompatible with the achievement of a socialist society, the SED regime delayed research into the causes of suicides and the foundation of suicide prevention centers. Into the 1970s, the regime deprived East Germans at risk of committing suicide of institutions that could have provided them with much-needed assistance and thus contributed indirectly to the high number of suicides.

This study of suicide in East Germany succeeds admirably in its objective of distilling the motives for that act in a time span of approximately fifty years from a plethora of difficult-to-analyze sources. Despite the inherent difficulty of plumbing the reasons for an act that even close family members frequently failed to comprehend, the author’s close reading of medical, police, and MfS reports–Grashoff consulted more than thirteen hundred cases in this last genre alone–convincingly demonstrates that political oppression did not constitute a causal factor in East Germany’s high rate of suicide. It is a further strength of the book that the author eschews mere statistical analysis of the data in favor of providing a rich, cultural history of emotions in East Germany that will be of interest to many historians beyond specialists in studies of trauma or suicide. Equally important is the contribution Grashoff makes to the understanding of East German society at large by emphasizing the intense politicization of everyday life without taking recourse to notions of totalitarianism.

Minor weaknesses do not hinder these accomplishments. After reading this study, the reader is left to wonder why the Saxon and Thuringian propensity to commit suicide, a trend that prevailed for roughly a century, ended abruptly in the 1970s. Moreover, at several points the author stresses in his analysis that suicide-inhibiting factors specific to socialist societies, such as close personal relationships experienced in work collectives, were present in East Germany. Unfortunately, the study does not provide a more detailed investigation of such factors, which might have softened the blow of political events as the construction of the Wall or have made up partially for the lack of suicide prevention centers. How ordinary East Germans dealt with acute depression or unbearable life situations among themselves is an important facet of suicide and suicide prevention, but unfortunately, information about these matters is missing from the account. Still, Grashoff’s examination of suicide in East Germany deserves a wide readership and should be purchased by every university library.

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