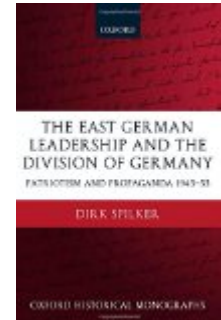


Dirk Spilker. *The East German Leadership and the Division of Germany: Patriotism and Propaganda 1945-1953.* Oxford Historical Monographs Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. xi + 296 pp. \$109.20, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-928412-2.



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Why, following defeat in the Second World War, was Germany divided into two opposing states, the capitalist Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in the western zones and the communist German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the Soviet zone of occupation? Why, despite a variety of gestures and overtures in the early postwar years, were attempts at reunification at this time a failure? Should early postwar German history be summarized in terms of a series of "missed opportunities," or rather in terms of propagandistic posing masking pragmatic policies or long-term intentions of a quite different hue? And do these questions even matter very much any more, some two decades after the collapse of the Soviet empire which had played such a major role a half century earlier? In attempting to answer these questions, Dirk Spilker provides a detailed account that may serve to lay out some of the debates about historical might-have-beens, missed opportunities, and lost turning-points to rest.

Spilker's book is a sustained debate with a variety of explanations for German division. Early Cold War western historiography tended to echo the political mood of the times by focusing blame primarily on an allegedly rapacious Stalin for expansionism and seeking to gobble up as much of Germany as the Russians could grab in their effort to spread communism. By the 1970s, revisionist historians, by now more critical of their own western governments, were highlighting American and British postwar misperceptions of the alleged threat from a Soviet Union that was in reality much weakened by massive losses in war, with little by way of either economic and manpower resources or political appetite for expansionist empire building. In more recent turns of the historiography, the arguments have polarized once again. On the one hand, the division of Germany has been painted again as largely the outcome of Joseph Stalin's longer-term desire to install Soviet-style "socialism" in postwar Germany, whether in the whole or merely in the Soviet-occupied part, although now emphasizing that Stalin retained a

degree of flexibility along the way, keeping his options open in light of changing circumstances. Most controversially in recent years, however, Wilfried Loth has sought to argue almost the opposite: namely, that it was East German communists under the leadership of Walter Ulbricht who effectively pushed through the establishment of an East German communist state, in Loth's view largely against Stalin's wishes. In this maze of positions, familiar terrain is traversed again and again: the twists and turns of the chronology are familiar, while explanations often rely on speculation or informed guesswork and plausible interpretation. Although he swipes at all these positions along the way, Spilker takes most forceful issue with the thesis propounded by Loth, who provides a very welcome butt--Spilker does not even need to invent a straw man--against which to highlight his own arguments.

Spilker's careful reconstruction of the development of German division from the closing stages of the war through to 1953 underlines the view that the path to German division was far from straightforward. History was contingent rather than predetermined by any particular blueprint for the future with respect to the division of Germany. At every stage, a variety of possible alternative options were open for consideration by all the parties actively involved. Spilker makes detailed use of the extensive archival records of the Socialist Unity Party (SED), formed in April 1946 out of the "forced merger" between the German Communist Party (KPD) and the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), embedding his account firmly within the broader context of the by-now rather extensive secondary literature, including the works of scholars who have trawled the Soviet archives, to reconstruct in detail the various potential turning points where (to echo A. J. P. Taylor) the history of Germany failed to turn, and the prospect of a united Germany of whatever political persuasion became an ever-less-plausible candidate on the postwar political

agenda. Spilker is also very careful to situate the detailed political history of East Germany within the wider field of forces, both domestic and international, at least as seen through the lens of the SED leadership's spectacles.

Spilker's primary focus falls on the mentalities, perceptions, and actions of the East German communist leadership in a constantly changing environment. It is clear that SED leaders were often prepared, for pragmatic reasons, to adopt political positions in public that were at odds with their real aims (such as the "democratic" façade of the early months after the war's end, encapsulated in Ulbricht's much quoted comment, cited by Wolfgang Leonhard, about everything having to look democratic while really communists retained control in the background). Again and again, East German communists were called to discuss their position and to receive advice and direction from the Soviet authorities, adjusting the course of policy and proclamation accordingly. But for all the twists of policy and apparent differences of opinion along the way, Spilker suggests, against Loth, that the strategic thinking of members of the East German communist leadership was generally in broad alignment with views emanating from Moscow. Moreover, Spilker's reading of party political sources allows him to highlight the role, not of what the situation actually was at any one time, but rather what the East German leadership thought it was. Perceptions and prognoses were often far more important than realities. And far from becoming self-fulfilling prophecies, communist (mis-)readings of the political entrails frequently stimulated actions that were ultimately counter-productive in terms of their overall aims.

The East German communists constantly sought to gauge the mood of the West German public, as well as of their own population; it was crucial to guess which way public opinion might turn. On the domestic political front, early SED considerations included both what appeared to be the surprising continuing strength of widespread

National Socialist sympathies among Germans before the collapse of the Third Reich--despite Stalingrad--and the perhaps less surprising disappearance of any apparent active support for Nazism immediately after the end of the war. The question of the relative support for other parties, particularly the SPD, then assumed the position for the SED as a top priority in communist strategic and tactical thinking. Local and regional elections in both the western and the Soviet zones soon provided an unwelcome corrective to early communist optimism on this score. While the chronological narrative of these developments is very familiar, Spilker provides insights into the reactions of SED leaders not found in more traditional political narratives.

Optimism about likely support for left-wing policies was closely related to optimism about likely failures of the capitalist economy in the war-torn West, and the hoped-for speed of recovery in the areas under Soviet control. Given both famine conditions in the western zones during the harsh winter of 1946-47, and Soviet control of the primary food-producing areas of Germany (including the Soviet zone of occupation and the territories behind the new Oder-Neiße border with Poland), a degree of optimism about the potential for political radicalization of ordinary West Germans was perhaps at first well founded. But in the longer term, the East German leadership overestimated the likely strength of a planned economy, and underestimated the scale--and hence the political implications--of a West German "economic miracle" that at the time lay in an unrealized future. Indeed, the implications of almost every postwar economic development--the scale and character of reparations, the likely political fallout of the 1945 land reform in the Soviet zone, the currency reform of 1948 and the introduction of the Marshall Plan in the western zones, and the rapid building of socialism in the newly founded GDR, accelerated in 1952--were poorly judged; yet in Spilker's account, the SED really seemed to

have believed in its project, and to have believed that its likely success would render it ultimately popular. In this view, division was no pushing-through of centrally planned misery against people's wishes, but rather of pushing through an idealistic blueprint for a genuinely better future, in which the SED leadership seem to have believed--in an ironic echo of the western "magnet theory"--would be widely applauded. With the benefit of hindsight, we can only marvel at the SED leadership's ideological commitment to the supposed virtues of a planned economy; current conditions notwithstanding, we have to make some effort to re-enter a mental world in which capitalism had, in very recent living memory, given more ample evidence of proneness to catastrophic inflation, economic depression, and mass unemployment than to undreamed levels of material prosperity and an unprecedented period of long-term growth. But it is far easier to understand the actions of the East German leadership if one is prepared to follow Spilker's reconstruction of their thinking, misguided though they ultimately proved to be.

Also important for the SED was the question of German nationalism, or "patriotic consciousness,"--a card the SED, following Moscow's lead, was prepared to play. This willingness, too, was closely related to wider developments, particularly on the international stage. The Korean War, the development of atomic weapons by the new Cold War superpowers, and the question of domestic remilitarization all fuelled massive fears of another war on European soil and prompted heated debates. For many West Germans--and not only for Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, who decisively led the way--integration into western economic, political, and defense alliances triumphed over commitment to any kind of united German nation. In any event, for the millions of refugees and expellees who had already left their homelands further east shortly before and after the end of the war, the question of "national division" had al-

ready taken a decisive turn well before the foundation of the GDR. For the communists in both Moscow and the Soviet zone/GDR, ultimately the character of the political system in part of a divided Germany proved more important than the possibility of a united Germany in politically unwelcome colors.

These major themes stretch through the book, woven through the detailed narrative of key events and decisions along the way. Spilker navigates at each turn the relevant historiography--though covering it less well in some areas (such as denazification) than others--and offers his own views on a series of by now rather well-worn debates, including the question of the "forced merger" between the KPD and the SPD in 1946, evaluating the complexities of the pressures at the top as well as genuine grassroots desires to overcome splits on the Left, and the perhaps even more well-trodden terrain of the "Stalin notes" of 1952. His account of the character and consequences of the June 1953 uprising is, by contrast, relatively thin--perhaps because it really occurs outside his framework of direct interest.

Spilker's account is generally written clearly (although a little pompously when referring to the author in the third person), argued forcefully, and covers the selected archival material thoroughly. Although points of detail may well be subject to amplification or amendment here and there, the general approach--highlighting both ideology and pragmatism, flexibility within over-riding goals, and continual tactical adjustments within a changing domestic and international environment--is clearly preferable to what one might call the primarily "intentionalist" accounts of the supposed supremacy of relatively unchanging political motives. Quibbles might include Spilker's frequent tendency to "improve" source quotations by adding words in square brackets, which sometimes serves to clarify but on occasion slightly alters the sense of the translation; and the fact that the subtitle is perhaps a shade misleading, since

we gain very little real sense of the character of either "patriotism" or "propaganda," topics that are not adequately explored as distinct themes in their own right.

The work also prompts some wider reflections. Questions about supposedly "missed opportunities" no longer seem quite so pressing as they did for pre-1990 German historians; meanwhile, this account adumbrates, but does not directly address, questions about the changing patterns of popular opinion across the 1945 divide and through the early postwar years. Some of the most interesting recent work among historians of postwar Germany has been written about the cultural, social, and psychological legacies of Holocaust and war, with highly suggestive work in areas such as gender relations, war stories, and the "mentalities" of the "reconstruction" period, a time of "life after death." Not all of the political developments traversed by Spilker can be understood in terms of the records of SED thinking found in the archives; and Spilker's understanding of communist mentalities and perceptions is, in turn, limited to immediate interpretations of the time, rather than rooting SED leaders' views in their longer-term socialization and their experiences at the hands of Nazis through the previous years. Richer connections need to be made across the 1945 divide, if we are truly to understand the twisted path not merely to Auschwitz, but also to the postwar division of Germany. Even as a history of high politics, the book lets its actors essentially remain names on a page, with little sense of personality, period, or place. One feels that, for all the thoroughness and the undoubted merits of this work in the area that it has defined for itself, missing dimensions nonetheless remain, without which we cannot adequately understand the division of Germany after Adolf Hitler's war. Even so, these final comments do remain simply broader reflections on works of this kind. Measured according to the questions that it sets itself, Spilker's

work will undoubtedly prove a very useful guide for serious students and scholars in the field.

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