



Feiwel Kupferberg. *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic*. New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2002. xi + 228 pp. \$35.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7658-0119-7.

Reviewed by Johanna Granville (Hoover Institution, Stanford University)
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Nullifying Nazism: Consequences of East Germans' "Predicting the Past"

Nullifying Nazism: Consequences of East Germans' "Predicting" the Past

"What do you call a Soviet historian?" a jokester from the communist era once asked. The answer: "Someone who predicts the past." In this thematically compact monograph, Feiwel Kupferberg (associate professor of sociology at Aalborg University in Denmark) explains that the real source of difficulties of German reunification stem not so much from the economic transition, but from the discrepancies in the ways the West Germans ("Wessies") and East Germans ("Ossies") have viewed their Nazi past. Whereas the West Germans grimly faced it, atoned for it, and transformed their half of the country into a prosperous, free democracy that valued both individual freedom and responsibility, the East Germans absorbed the Soviet-made myth that East Germany was the "victor of history" that successfully resisted the fascists. They blamed their western compatriots for the Nazi atrocities, because West Germany—like Hitler's Germany—was, after all, a capitalist economy. Contrary to popular belief, many Ossies have done quite well economically, precisely because they tend to be more obedient and less opinionated than Wessies, the author states (p. 19). While reunification has been difficult for both German groups, the East Germans have blamed West Germans for closing down their factories and trying to reclaim their land that was lost during World War II. This blame is ironic, given the fact that the East Germans clamored for reunification the most strenuously and have contributed the least amount of wealth to Germany. According to the author, the Kohl government decided to

move quickly on reunification because the piecemeal exodus of East German refugees was irritating local mayors and jeopardizing the reunification policy altogether. It would be better to push the policy through, open the floodgates, and then get on with the real business of assimilation (p. 28). In contrast to the petulant East Germans, inwardly resentful West Germans—who footed the hefty bill of reunification—generally restrain themselves from criticizing their eastern neighbors, deeming this "politically incorrect." Kupferberg points to the interesting parallel here to West Germans' manner of treating Jews gingerly just after World War II: it was also politically incorrect to pan them. Indeed a "philo-Semitism" developed. Jews in post-war Western Germany "were elevated overnight from sub-humans to model citizens," he writes (p. 25).

Although Kupferberg has neither worked with original archival documents nor conducted extensive interviews, he deftly synthesizes a large body of recent secondary literature, mostly by German authors. He offers profound insights about the long underestimated effects of the communist culture on East Germans, which only became clear after reunification in 1989, when the differences in coping styles and views of the Nazi past emerged. He articulates well the thesis that the rigid communist system in the GDR inculcated passivity, helplessness, and amoral pragmatism in its citizens. By depriving them of a panoply of individual freedoms—of creative expression, foreign travel, and so on—the system also relieved citizens of individual responsibility and necessary risk-taking. They were trained to look to external

sources for cradle-to-grave security. From this perspective, it is not surprising that East Germans also blamed an external source—the West Germans—for their post-reunification troubles.

As Kupferberg explains, the Soviet occupiers after 1945 were shrewd to promulgate the abovementioned “victors of history” myth. Indoctrinated to view themselves as communist resistance fighters who defeated the Nazis, East German citizens never had to ask and answer tough moral questions about their complicity in Hitler’s regime. It was easy to blame West Germany for World War Two and the Holocaust, given the presence of officials with Nazi pasts in Chancellor Adenauer’s government and intelligence service (originally General Gehlen’s Organization).

Not only historians, but political scientists and sociologists will find this book well worth reading. Although not a textbook (despite the title), Kupferberg’s book would fit well in graduate and undergraduate courses on East Central Europe, communist history, and international relations. Not all East Germans were as brainwashed as Kupferberg suggests, however, and for that reason serious students of German reunification should also consult Christian Joppke’s *East German Dissidents and the Revolution of 1989: Social Movement in a Leninist Regime* (1995). For a broader perspective on German reunification and its effects on German policies toward the European Union, students should read Jeffrey Anderson’s *German Unification and the Union of Europe: The Domestic Politics of Integration Policy* (1999).

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