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*The East German Dictatorship*, Corey Ross’ masterful survey of debates within historiography of East Germany, is an extremely clear and useful overview for scholars of divided Germany, the Cold War, or modern Germany in general. Modeled explicitly on the classic book by Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship*, this book tackles seven major areas of debate, first outlining the contours of each dispute, then providing Ross’ own synthesizing evaluation. Importantly, Ross provides summaries of the major works on the German Democratic Republic (GDR) written both pre- and post-reunification, from East and West German as well as international scholars. In his balanced evaluations, Ross insightfully favors nuanced, fluid, and historically contingent approaches over more static and universalizing concepts or models. In so doing, he successfully prompts scholars to maintain complexity in an understanding of the GDR, to avoid erasing the experiences of ordinary East Germans, and to move away from ideologically rigid views of the East German “dictatorship.” It is a wonderfully illuminating book that is very valuable after a decade-long boom in scholarship using newly opened GDR and Soviet archives.

In his first chapter after the introduction, Ross addresses the thorny issue of whether and how the GDR can be defined as a dictatorship. The terms of this debate are complex since many theories are still infused with legacies of Cold War politics. Ross breaks down the various models to show their relative usefulness. Ross concludes that the term “totalitarianism” is mainly helpful as a general shorthand label for the GDR regime’s goals for total power, but otherwise it is too politically loaded and does not get at actual structures of rule. Labeling the GDR as “Stalinist,” might work best for the pre-1956 period but the term is too connected with one man and dangerously conflates the GDR with the era of terror in the 1930s Soviet Union. Ross sees Konrad Jarausch’s more recent formulation of the GDR as a “welfare dictatorship” as potentially most useful, since it works to show connections between “real-existing socialism’s” aims of emancipation on the one hand and its repressive, paternalist technologies of rule on the other. However, he resolves that no one concept proposed in this flurry of “model mania” is sufficient to capture the complexities of the situation. Ross urges future researchers to focus more on empirical studies of GDR culture and society to understand the complex dialectical relationship between state and citizenry.

In that vein, the next chapter focuses on debates concerning state and society in the GDR, especially the question of whether there was an autonomous realm of society beyond state intrusion. Rather than looking at society as a realm that either “wITHERS away” or survives in niches in the face of state imposition of its political agenda, Ross suggests that historians explore the tensions between societial forces as “fields of negotiation and articulation” (p. 62) forming a dynamic relationship between state and society. In investigating social relations such as those of gender, rural and urban populations, consumers and producers, Ross contends historians might do best not to seek arenas beyond the limits of politics, but to reveal the way state political agendas and popular forms of agency or Eigen-Sinn (Alf Luedtke) mutually informed each other.

In the following chapter about the socialist economy, Ross examines arguments that have tried to account for the ultimate failure of the “planned miracle.” First,
he sketches theories that locate the roots of decline in the planned economy’s unfavorable starting conditions. These include the heavy reparations burden imposed by the Soviets, systemic problems of the planned economy itself, or crippling, ideologically-motivated decisions by political leaders at key moments. As in the other chapters, Ross pleads for a dynamic model examining how factors leading to the eventual economic lag behind the West changed over time. In particular, he suggests that the inability of the GDR to undertake real economic reform must be viewed in terms of its special Cold War situation as it was caught between interconnection with the USSR and competition with the BRD. Ross notes that the economic decline linked to Honecker’s inadequate version of “consumer socialism” may have been crucial in leading to the popular dissatisfaction that ultimately led to the regime’s collapse.

The extent of such popular dissent throughout the life of the regime and the factors that led finally to the surge of opposition that toppled the regime in 1989 are the subjects of the next two chapters. Historians have puzzled over how to define opposition or dissidence during the forty years that the GDR existed without major mass revolt besides the June 1953 uprising. Rather than focusing more narrowly on reformers within the SED, small groups of intellectual dissidents, or even the visibly dissenting churches, Ross recommends that historians take into account evolving contexts in which individuals articulated small-scale resistance and non-conformity. For, even if they seemed to agitate for “small material goals” rather than broader political change, over time these resistors could help chip away at the authority of the state. Ross surmises that these localized, less-visible forms of opposition might have set the stage for the mass movement of 1989, addressed in the next chapter.

Historians have sought the causes of the 1989 uprising by examining “internal versus external pressures, change ‘from above’ versus mobilization ‘from below,’ long-terms causes versus short-term catalysts” (p. 132). In his usual style, Ross suggests that a combination of factors was key. He evaluates claims that a handful of dissenters or political reformers drove events, but concludes that international reforms, such as the end of the Brezhnev Doctrine, and economic stagnation set the context for the uprising. In these new conditions, pressure from crowds in October and November 1989 was the real driving force behind the uprising. Civic associations such as New Forum focused this protest and kept it peaceful, but the critical movement came from the masses who, armed with the leverage that they could now flee through the opening border, claimed the public sphere in the name of a higher standard of living and basic freedoms within the GDR. This prompted the SED leadership to retreat from a “will to rule” (p. 137).

One of the key aims of this book is to help illuminate ways to consider GDR history as a piece of the overall project of “mastering the German past.” The final two chapters in the book focus most directly on issues pertaining to the GDR’s role within German history overall, including the continuities with the Nazi past and the legacy of the GDR for understanding the challenges facing reunified Germany. Chapter 7 interrogates the question of whether the GDR as a state represented more of a continuity of German peculiarities in line with the Sonderweg thesis or if it was more a product of Sovietization. In other words, did the state reflect German characteristics defined either partly by the influence of pre-1945 German communists or by authoritarian continuities with the Third Reich, or was it a “child” of Stalin? Ross suggests that the GDR combined German and Soviet influences in a way particularly influenced by Stalin’s inconsistent and shifting agendas. In tracing German “peculiarities,” Ross rejects stereotypes of timeless German characteristics. Although the title of his book and its direct reference to Kershaw’s volume on Nazism might lead the reader to think Ross aims to compare the “two dictatorships,” he actually rejects facile comparisons that conflate the two. He notes that particularly because the GDR’s humanist goals differed so much from the violence of the Third Reich, any similarities drawn based on mechanisms of rule could only be superficial. Rather he finds it more fruitful to investigate German peculiarity within the Soviet Bloc through the GDR’s special relationship with West Germany and in its own attempts to deal with the Nazi past. Finally, Ross looks at how restructuring the East German historical profession after 1989 and the legal proceedings against accused perpetrators of crimes within the GDR have shaped current understandings of East Germany after the Wende. One problem he finds with the top-down attention to the role of perpetrators has been the lack of attention to the lives of ordinary East Germans.

Since Ross works to evaluate the main streams of GDR historiography so far, his account necessarily relates most closely to these debates as they have emerged and suggests better approaches to these topics rather than setting agendas for new arenas of research. Thus, previously unexplored areas of research, such as the role of race relations in the GDR, continue to fall out of the scope of this overview. In some cases, Ross raises more
questions than he can answer, but this does not de-
tract from his compelling map through the sometimes
confusing terrain of new literature on the GDR. Ross is
able to provide clear syntheses of diverse views on the
GDR without oversimplifying its history or succumbing
to clichés. This book will serve future historians of the
“worker-and-peasant state” well in evaluating this state’s
role in German and European historiography.

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