



**David Childs.** *The Fall of the GDR: Germany's Road to Unity.* London: Longman, 2001. xvii + 188 pp. \$17.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-582-31569-3.



**Reviewed by** Rob Willingham

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I assigned David Child's *Fall of the GDR* to my Modern Germany class last semester. The book is an admirable attempt to provide a thorough narrative of the collapse of the SED regime and the German Democratic Republic, and at the same time offer insight into the nature of that regime through in-depth profiles of its leaders and a brief look at the history of East Germany since its earliest years. Though these elements of the book sometimes compete with one another for attention--and as a result the whole is not as strong at any one of them as it might be--it is still a very useful work for an undergraduate survey of Germany in the modern period.

The book opens with a description of the GDR in its waning years, asking whether what the SED had built was really stable. Not surprisingly, Childs concludes that it was not, that the GDR was propped up from the East, and was ripe for a fall the moment the Soviets decided to move away, a situation nicely chronicled in his chapters on Gorbachev. The second of those chapters is subtitled "Life Punishes Those Who Come Too Late," but it is difficult to see what the men in East Berlin

could have done differently to aid themselves in 1989, at least from Childs's description.

The emphasis on the alienation of the regime from the people of East Germany--its essential foreignness--provides what little analytic direction there is to the book. (It is after all designed for teaching, and does not have the same agenda that a monograph on the same subject would.) This emphasis is of a piece with Childs's long-standing criticism of the regime, dating back before his important *The GDR: Moscow's German Ally* (1983) and based on his long activity as one of the most important English-language commentators on East Germany. Childs knows, in a way that few outsiders could, where the bodies are buried.

And this is the great strength of the book. Childs has secured interviews with some of the most important players in the process of the *Wende*--from government and opposition, too--and is thus able to paint a picture of that process that is at once engaging and enlightening. Discussions with figures ranging from the former head of the MfS, Erich Mielke, to the leaders of the protests in Leipzig flesh out a vision of the regime

and its end that few could reproduce, because few have Childs' long history as an observer. His profiles of the leaders of the regime, and his glimpse into their lives, so separate from the citizens they led, make clear that this was a government apart from the people.

Honestly, though, that same vision, of a regime so out of touch with its own people that it is forced to rely on a secret police apparatus dizzying in its scope, is limiting when he moves on to the creation of a new politics in East Germany after the collapse of the SED. Though he clearly understands why the CDU was so dominant in the first elections after the end of the SED regime, he seems to have a harder time explaining the successes of the PDS, the successors to the ruling party of the GDR. Perhaps this is because some elements of the regime that were more popular, and more reflective of native political desires and cultures than Childs has often recognized.

Of course the GDR would not have happened without the presence of the Red Army, and it went away when the Russians did. Supporters of the regime were a clear minority by the end, and with good reason. But the SED did not emerge fully formed from Stalin's forehead: the pre-existing German communist tradition did have adherents, and the fact that they did not all go away suggests, perhaps, a greater connection between the governed and the government than this book lets on. Maybe a preface on the history of the KPD and of its wartime exile would serve to place all of this into clearer focus.

But the narrative of the *Wende* is fine, compelling stuff that holds the attention of even the most demoralized twenty-year-old. It is not as in-depth as Konrad Jarausch's *Rush to German Unity* (1994), or as journalistically colorful as Robert Darnton's *Berlin Journal* (1991), but this book also does much that those do not. The history of the regime is practically breezy in tone but substantive, and my students got more out of it than they

did from Henry Turner's *Germany from Partition to Reunification* (1992), which they also read. It is certainly not as complete as Mary Fulbrook's *Two Germanies* (1997), but, again, it has goals that book does not. My students' only real complaint with the book was that the profiles of the leaders of the regime went on too long. I found them fascinating and quite useful in understanding the nature of the regime.

This is a first-rate piece of work by one of the eminent figures in the field. It is at once accessible and intellectually exciting. Its author combines the skills of historian and eye-witness chronicler with a literally unique personal history and connection with the subject. Though--because of the breadth of its ambitions--I would probably use something more specifically oriented for a class on the GDR alone, it works very well for an undergraduate class in modern German history.

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