

Rolf Steininger. *17. Juni 1953: Der Anfang vom langen Ende der DDR*. München: OLZOG Verlag, 2003. 206 S. EUR 14.00 (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-7892-8113-6.

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The Long Result of Throwing Stones

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For most of the Cold War, West Germans took advantage of a national holiday in the spring to walk the woods or take the waters, although they had very little, if anything, to do with the origins of that holiday. In recognition of the East Germans who stared down Soviet tanks, stormed prisons, trampled gargantuan posters of Stalin, and shouted for free elections, the West German government declared June 17, the “Day of German Unity” in 1953, and so it remained until replaced by October 3, the Day of German Unity as of 1990. It is indicative of Steininger’s position in this slim but powerful work that he laments the passing of June 17 as Germany’s national holiday. All Germans, he believes, should celebrate the uprising of June 17, 1953 and recognize the demonstrators’ aspirations for unity (p. 107).

The uprising of June 17, 1953 was one of the first topics scholars addressed during the stampede into the East German archives following their opening, and rightly so. This, the first uprising in the Soviet bloc, remained a murky event for western scholars. Initial works focused on the nature of the revolution and the social composition of the demonstrations and, not surprisingly, scholars came to different conclusions. Whereas Armin Mitter, Stefan Wolle, and Manfred Hagen offered an interpretation of June 17 that focused on a cross section of the population participating in an event best described as a “revolutionary uprising” or “popular uprising,” Torsten Diedrich and Gerhard Beier downplayed both the revolutionary aspect of the uprising, and the role of the non-

working class in the events of the summer of 1953.[1] These latter authors echoed the long standard interpretation of the uprising found in Arnulf Baring’s *Uprising in East Germany: June 17, 1953*. Given these similar conclusions pre- and post-opening of the archives, some historians began to speculate that the East German documents would not radically change historical interpretations of the German Democratic Republic.[2]

Steininger’s account appeared last year amidst another flurry of scholarship on June 17 which included works by Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, Thomas Flemming, and myself, as the fiftieth anniversary approached[3], an event that was marked in Germany by roundtables, conferences, celebrations and two dedicated Web sites that reveal the truly astonishing amount of material now available on the revolution of 1953.[4] These recent works show the distance covered since the initial foray into the archives. Whereas some in the field scoffed at Armin Mitter and Stefan Wolle’s characterization of June 17 as a “revolutionary uprising” in 1993, the latest works tend to emphasize popular and revolutionary aspects of the events. At a minimum, the sheer magnitude of the events of June 1953 revealed in these works—there were demonstrations in over seven hundred localities in East Germany on and around June 17—suggest that the traditional moniker of “Berlin workers’ uprising” is now inadequate, perhaps even laughable.

Steininger is interested in both the revolution of June 1953 as well as its long-term effects on East Germany. Accordingly, he has divided the work into three sec-

tions: the first deals with the revolution, the second with the long-term effects, and the third section contains a selection of relevant documents. In the first section, Steininger provides a good, albeit short, overview of the origins and course of the revolution. There is little that is new here, and researchers interested in a more detailed account of the outbreak and course of the revolution would be advised to consult other works.[5] Steininger emphasizes that the revolution was extremely widespread, encompassed a cross-section of society, and quickly moved from work-norm to political issues. Thus, he states clearly which camp he falls into with his characterization of June 17 as an “unfinished (*unvollendete*) revolution with long-term consequences” (pp. 10, 105).

The second section of the book details several key developments in the history of East Germany after the uprising. Steininger provides the reader with a dismal picture of life in the GDR, from the dreadful supply situation of the 1950s and early 1960s to the building of the Wall and the explosive expansion of the system of repression. Steininger points out that the building of the Wall was a major turning point here as the vent of exodus was shut. Ironically, the Wall would tie the Socialist Unity Party’s (SED) hands as internal discontent had a greater chance of leading to rebellion after the Wall had been built. Indeed, repression increased after the Wall.

With East Germany teetering in the late summer of 1989, Erich Mielke, head of the Stasi, said in a closed session: “Is it so that we are on the eve of another 17 June?” Historians have rightly cited this passage many times in order to emphasize the specter of June 17 on the ruling Party. Steininger argues that this sentiment was continually present in the SED. As the East German economy plummeted in the 1970s, as a result of such factors as an oil crisis with worldwide repercussions, hapless economic management and the elimination of private industry, the sensible approach would have been to reduce expensive foreign imports and prepare the population for belt-tightening (pp. 10, 97, 100). Even twenty years after the fact, however, the image of East Germans dragging Party comrades through the streets still informed SED decision-making. The SED did not adopt the necessary corrective because it feared another June 17 (p. 100). The head of the Central Committee Planning and Finance Department referred to the economic bind in 1989: “[At] least since 1973 we have lived beyond our means ... We paid for debt with debt” (p. 102). This eventually led to the situation in 1989 when the SED confessed that the reduction in standard of living necessary for the GDR to meet its debt obligations would make the GDR “un-

governable” (p. 103). Steininger has provided an important component to answer the question of why the SED had so little economic room to maneuver.

Of course, the worst fears of the SED were realized in the mass demonstrations of October 1989 throughout East Germany. Here, Steininger sees very little fundamental difference between the revolutions of 1953 and 1989. June 17, 1953 was similar to October 9, 1989 in Leipzig, except in 1989 the Russians stayed in their barracks (p. 106).

The section of the work that contains documents is slightly disappointing. Only five of the twenty-four documents are not available in printed form elsewhere, and there is a heavy reliance on the 1989 documents in Armin Mitter and Stefan Wolle, *Ich liebe euch doch alle: Befehle und Lageberichte des MfS, Januar-November 1989* (1990), a book which has drawn considerable academic attention.[6] Documents from the 15th Plenum of the Central Committee of July 1953 at which the SED adopted a policy that Kowalczyk, Mitter, and Wolle call the “Innere Staatsgründung” would have been a welcome addition to Steininger’s book, given the importance of this meeting—which the author also recognizes (p. 10).[7]

Steininger’s work is reminiscent of *Untergang auf Raten* in so far as it argues for an analysis of the end of the GDR that takes into account the June 17 revolution. Although historians may well continue to argue the poet Manlius’ assertion *finis origine pendet* (the end depends on the beginning), it seems prudent to recognize that June 17, 1953 was not without serious long-term consequences for the ruling Party. As Guenter Grass so elegantly said, referring to June 17 in *My Century*: “Sometimes, even if decades after the fact, stone throwers do prevail.”

Notes

[1]. Armin Mitter and Stefan Wolle, *Untergang auf Raten: Unbekannte Kapitel der DDR-Geschichte* (Munich: Bertelsmann, 1993); Manfred Hagen, *DDR–Juni ’53: Die erste Volkserhebung im Stalinismus* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2002); Torsten Diedrich, *Der 17. Juni 1953: Bewaffnete Gewalt gegen das Volk* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1991); and Gerhard Beier, *Wir wollen freie Menschen sein—Der 17. Juni 1953: Bauleute gingen voran* (Cologne: Bund Verlag, 1993).

[2]. See Lutz Niethammer’s comments in Juergen Kocka and Martin Sabrow eds., *Die DDR als Geschichte* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1994).

[3]. Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk *17.6.1953:Volksaufstand in der DDR* (Berlin: BStU, 2003); Thomas Flemming, *Der 17. Juni 1953* (Berlin: be.bra verlag, 2003); and Gary Bruce, *Resistance with the People: Repression and Resistance in Eastern Germany 1945-55* (Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

[4]. See <<http://www.17juni53.de/>>&<http://www.17juni53.de> and <<http://www.bstu.de/ddr/juni1953>>&<http://www.bstu.de/ddr/juni1953>.

[5]. Bruce, *Resistance with the People* and Christian Ostermann, *Uprising in East Germany, 1953* (New York: Central European University Press, 2001).

[6]. David Childs and Richard Popplewell, *The*

Stasi: The East German Intelligence and Security Service (Houndsmills: MacMillan, 1996) is based almost exclusively on *Ich liebe euch doch alle*.

[7]. See Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, Armin Mitter and Stefan Wolle, *Der Tag X-17. Juni 1953* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 1995).

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