FOOTNOTE OR FOOTPRINT? THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC IN HISTORY

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Twenty years ago the German Democratic Republic (GDR) collapsed from a fatal sickness and swiftly succumbed, unloved and unmourned. This, of course, we know. Yet one sometimes wonders if rumors of the GDR’s death have not been greatly exaggerated. Over the last twenty years, the GDR has periodically risen from the grave to haunt German public life. Early in 2009, this surprisingly frisky phantom emerged yet again, disturbed—as in a classic ghost story—by an attempt to bury the cadaver much deeper and thus be finally, truly, and absolutely done with it. I am referring to the controversy stirred up by Hans-Ulrich Wehler in the fifth volume of his Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte. Wehler set off a spirited debate in Germany with his assertion that “the short-lived GDR was only ‘a footnote in world history.’” As Wehler noted, he was quoting the East German writer Stefan Heym, who in March 1990 had said, “The GDR will be nothing more than a footnote in world history. The only thing that remains for us to consider is what comes next.”

When articulated in 1990 by an East German dissident, this opinion elicited little vocal opposition. The “footnote” phrase received a decidedly more hostile reception when proclaimed in 2008 by a famous historian in a major work of contemporary history. At real forums and in e-forums, in interviews and in publications, historians, politicians, and the lay public debated this characterization, and Wehler defended it.

My lecture joins this controversy. Before beginning, I would like to express my appreciation to the German Historical Institute for inviting me to speak on the question of the historical significance of the state and society whose death throes began with the dramatic opening of the Berlin Wall exactly twenty years ago. I would also like to acknowledge my deep respect for Hans-Ulrich Wehler. He is a great scholar whose work has profoundly influenced several generations of scholars in German history as well as other national histories. I will disagree with his view that the GDR was, or will become, a historical “footnote,” but I aim to present my standpoint provocatively, not polemically. To argue with Wehler is to provide

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yet more evidence—as if that were needed—of his outstanding influence as a scholar and public intellectual.

Many participants in the debate about Wehler’s dismissal of the GDR agreed with him that its history will slide into footnote status over the long run, particularly from a world-historical perspective. Yet many of these same people objected to Wehler’s formulation of this point. They did so mainly for two related reasons. The footnote remark, they contended, was a ham-fisted, if understandable, reaction to the widening political appeal of the post-Communist Left Party in Germany today. Additionally, many noted the psychological insensitivity of pushing the GDR into the shredder of historical significance only two decades after its collapse. Like Wehler, various participants expressed impatience with the wave of Ostalgie that has swept up many former East Germans. They criticized him, however, for stepping so insistently on the feelings of the millions of Germans for whom life in the GDR constitutes a major part of their personal histories. It is natural, his critics asserted, for former East Germans (including even many dissidents) to remember the GDR, as one does any homeland, as a world of the good and the bad, the loved and the hated, the personal and the political.  

It was certainly politically and psychologically maladroit of Wehler to revive Stefan Heym’s words. Such a critique does not, however, present a historical challenge to the dismissal of the GDR in history. Here, I will offer an historical argument to explain why the GDR will
not slip into footnote status in scholarly or even popular histories. The GDR has, I contend, left a footprint in modern history, both in the everyday meaning of “footprint” as an imprint or dent in time or place and in the archeological sense of “footprint” as illustrative or representative evidence of major developments in an historical era. (Having no crystal ball, I will make no prediction on the much grander question of the GDR’s world-historical significance.)

Why did the GDR not pass the test of historical significance, according to Wehler? His book puts forward four explicit arguments. The GDR’s population was always small and shrank over time. The GDR was a failed state and society in every way: economically, politically, socially, and culturally. The GDR never had real autonomy as a state, but originated and ended as a “satrapy” or “sultanate” of the USSR. The GDR exists no more, and did not exist for a significant period of time. These points are connected to a fifth argument that is implicit in Wehler’s analysis of the GDR; its dictatorial nature undermined its historical significance. He does not suppose, of course, that a dictatorial regime per se has no historical significance. Rather, his discussion of the GDR and Stalinism suggests that the GDR’s supposed insignificance was conditioned by the coincidence of its dependent status and its nature as a Communist dictatorship.

In addressing the pros and cons of “totalitarian theory,” Wehler recognizes central contrasts between National Socialism and Communism as mass ideological dictatorships. Both dictatorships were massively destructive, but, he emphasizes, in fundamentally different ways. While Nazism fomented and carried out ethnic slaughter and racial genocide, Communism systematically smashed independent societal structures and entire social classes. Stalinism created states based, therefore, on the mere vestiges of a society with no real social force, much less the independence to organize social interests.

For a political historian of dictatorship, the lack of societal autonomy in Communist states would not ipso facto imply historical insignificance and, indeed, this lack might enhance his or her interest in the peculiarities of Communist political history. Wehler, however, is a founder and practitioner of “societal history” (Gesellschaftsgeschichte)—he investigates social processes and changing social structures, including class relations, as they have developed in relation to economic and political power. He studies, in other words, the interactive history of state and society. In his view,

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3 I use the phrase “footnote status,” as Heym and Wehler do, in the derogatory sense in which it is used in the lay world. For me and most historians, however, “footnote status” does not necessarily imply low ranking. Historians, legal scholars, and, indeed, many academics generally hold the footnote in high regard and are not displeased to find our work tucked into this space.

such interaction does not occur in a Communist state, and thus, scholarship can study only the social consequences—or, better, the social-statistical artifacts—of party decisions and its controlling structures. The Soviet Union was historically significant despite its lacking societal history, because it had a huge impact on the world stage. The GDR, by contrast, did not make a big impression on international relations. In sum, I infer that, for Wehler, the GDR did not attain historical significance because of the conjunction of its lacking autonomy and its failure as a Communist state to develop a dynamic relationship between state and society.

Wehler is not alone in believing that these arguments build a definitive case against the significance of the GDR in history. He is, however, the most famous historian and most prominent public intellectual to make this argument, and, indeed, the one who has made it most forcefully. GDR history, he concludes, is significant only as a “contrast” case to its successful and ultimately victorious rival, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). East Germany is important only as the negative pole to the West German positive pole. Wehler is not uncritical of the FRG; while he has only praise for its political and economic development, he critiques its societal history sharply and insightfully.

Wehler’s explicit points about the GDR are factual and, as such, undeniable: the GDR was small and shrinking; it failed; it lacked autonomy; it disappeared. These facts, in my view, do not set the bar for historical significance. Historical significance is a mysterious quality, even when looking backward to find it, much less looking forward to predict it. I do not claim to have a well-developed definition, much less a theory. I would suggest, though, that historical significance arises from a connection between the historical content and context of the topic or theme of study, on one hand, and, on the other hand, the structural characteristics of its history. (Wehler’s structural elements include, for example, size, failure, and dependence.) An historical subject will gain “shelf space” and “shelf life” if its substance, context, and structure conjoin to capture the attention of (enough) historians and provide (enough) evidence to allow scholars to apply methods of historical analysis and interpretation. If their research constructs an interesting, well-supported story and a persuasive interpretation, then it will attract the wider attention of the discipline and might (a big caveat) grab the attention of a wider public, and could (an even bigger caveat) stand the test of
time, thus winning the subject a place in the annals of longer-term historical significance.

The GDR, I will argue, is of historical significance because it made a “dent” and an “archeological” footprint within several historical contexts that are of recognized significance to the history of the twentieth century: Germany, Communism, the mass entry of (married) women into the public sphere, and, in particular, wage labor. Before I address these substantive themes, I will lay out the structural elements that provide the foundation for historical interest in the GDR.

In tandem with West Germany, East Germany offers a virtually unique instance of a controlled experiment in historical development. One can encapsulate the terms of comparison in several ways: one nation, two states (to quote Christoph Klessmann); one culture, two systems; two “nows,” one “then” (most significantly, the National Socialist past). The appeal of the German-German comparison is evident in the number of recent scholarly works it has spawned. Let me cite several examples that give a sense of the varied, interesting, and significant social, cultural, and political themes these comparative studies have covered: Elizabeth Heineman’s book on marriage in the Third Reich and after 1945, Uta Poiger’s analysis of the discourse about Americanized youth cultures in the 1950s and ‘60s, Carola Sachse’s study of debates about women’s wage and household labor, Jeffrey Herf’s volume on the political memory of National Socialism and the Holocaust, Dagmar Herzog’s investigation of discourse about sexuality in post-fascist Germany, Rainer Geißler’s study of postwar social structures, and, last but not least, Hans-Ulrich Wehler’s “contrasting” societal history. The study of change and continuity within this unusual comparative framework contributes, I would argue, to a theoretical understanding of the interaction between culture and system in general, beyond the borders of Germany, on one hand, and before the twentieth century, on the other. From a scientific viewpoint, this controlled experiment is tainted because the control condition and the experimental condition “contaminated” each other’s political culture and policies. For the historian, however, the mutual antagonism and reciprocal influence between the two states make the comparison not only more complex, but also more intriguing.

The second structural element was the dynamism of the GDR’s historical development. Between 1949 and 1989, East Germany

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experienced profound changes in its state, economy, society, and political culture. These changes are important in their own right, but also as case studies of the interrelationships between economic, social, and cultural change under a tyrannical party dictatorship. The GDR represents, in fact, a classic case of a “rise and fall” or a “reversal of fortune” story: the rise and fall of the power of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) in all its manifestations. Not only did the SED state suffer a gradual reversal of fortune, but its rise and fall were punctuated by three events that are of proven historical interest. The workers’ uprising of June 1953 continues to draw the attention of historians and political scientists who study state socialism. The sudden construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 provokes the interest of both scholars and the lay-public due to its real and heartbreaking meaning for East Germans and its symbolic and moral meaning as a defining event of the Cold War. The opening of the Wall in 1989 captivates the whole world and is seen as the iconic event of the Cold War’s end. Popular fascination with these happenings is certainly less sophisticated and more emotional than the critical perspective of contemporary historians who try to resist the simple appeal of the master narrative. Still, one cannot deny that the historical eye, whether naive or trained, is drawn to a rise-and-fall story whose arc is interrupted by riveting events before ending in the sudden collapse of apparently total power.

The third structural element is that the GDR exists no more. For Wehler, its disappearance helps doom the GDR to insignificance. Yet, why should that be? A ghost state is interesting as a self-contained subject with, in the case of the GDR, a clear beginning and a definite end. Historians have traditionally preferred to study the distant past, in part because bygone times are, well, bygone and “closed.” The GDR’s demise presents a different kind of historical closure,
but one that provides similar analytical and interpretive advantages to the passage of time. We know when and how the story began and ended, although we still have to investigate what happened in between and why it ended as it did. Undoubtedly, a considerably longer period of time must pass before we can evaluate the “afterlife” of the GDR, that is, the ways in which its existence continues to influence society, politics, economics, and culture in unified Germany.

The excellent documentary record left by the GDR is another element in favor of its historical significance. This record includes a wide variety and large number of sources, including, above all, reams of archival documents, and also statistics, oral histories, memoirs, print literature, the built-environment, and cultural artifacts. The archival and statistical records were mainly generated by party and state officials and, as such, are uncritical of power relations in the GDR. They do not, however, necessarily “white-wash” daily relations as they unfolded in ministries, factories, schools, stores, divorce courts, or hospitals. Nor do they always cover up undesirable social trends, worrisome public health developments, falling productivity, or popular dissatisfaction with living and working conditions. The records are so plentiful and diverse that one can be overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of individual complaints, ministerial correspondence, factory reports, and studies of, for example, marital divorce, youth attitudes, or nude bathing in the GDR. Scholars have to read the documents within the context of specific sets of power relations as well as within the overall framework of repression and surveillance. Still, the GDR definitely provides the records that historians need in order to construct a story, document an interpretation, and produce many long and detailed footnotes.
The GDR draws historical attention, finally, because it had a real societal history. Like Wehler—indeed, partly because of his seminal work on Imperial Germany—I consider myself a societal historian, that is, a student of the relationship between society and the state. GDR history fascinates me—and many social and cultural historians—precisely because there was a relationship between state and society that was not completely one-sided, although the lines of power and decision-making all ran from the top down. The SED’s restructuring of society, radical and rapid as it was, had its limits. First, the SED never transformed a basic social structure: the nuclear family. Second, before 1960, the SED moved unevenly against some social groups such as physicians and private farmers. Third, and most significantly, the SED both falsely predicted, and could not control, many of the social, cultural, and economic consequences of the societal transformations that it set in motion. It also could not control the societal consequences of the GDR’s many and deep economic problems. GDR policy succeeded in crippling, but not pulverizing, East German society, a fact that would come back to bite the SED, provoking the state and party to revise many policies. These revisions led, in turn, to additional, unexpected social consequences that would often negatively impact the SED. An example would be the SED’s gradual and escalating concessions to accommodate people’s increasing desire for more and better private consumption.7

These structural elements make the GDR a candidate for historical significance. I would not claim that they are necessary prerequisites for historical significance, much less that they are the only possible such characteristics. I think, though, that they provide a sufficiently sturdy foundation to sustain historical attention, research, and interpretation. They help to explain why the GDR has remained a subject of considerable and serious scholarship for two decades. They do not, however, assure its historical significance. One has also to consider the historical context in which the GDR existed and its role in that context. The GDR was of consequence, I contend, to three major stories of the modern era: Germany, Communism, and the mass entry of married women into wage labor.

**The GDR and Modern German History**

The German Democratic Republic was part and parcel of modern German history. Its history cannot be understood outside of German history, nor does Germany’s postwar or post-1989 history...
make sense without incorporating the GDR. Although the GDR was dependent on the USSR, it was neither in its origins nor its existence a “satrapy” or “sultanate” of the Soviet Empire. It was a Communist state, and also a German one. It existed as one side of the dyad that was the mutually antagonistic and interactive relationship between East and West Germany. The GDR was not, despite the best efforts of the SED, sealed off from the West. West Germany was, despite the denials of many politicians and public commentators, influenced by the East. Given their paired and intertwined status within the Cold War constellation, I would argue that to consign East Germany to “footnote status” is to do the same to West Germany.

The GDR was a product of German history most obviously because it would not have existed but for German history. There would have been no Western or Soviet occupation of Germany and, thus, no East or West Germany without the war that Germany began, fought with incredible determination, massive violence, and unsurpassed murder, and, finally, lost. Peter Bender makes this point forcefully in his recent book *Deutschlands Wiederkehr: Eine ungeteilte Nachkriegsgeschichte* (German’s Return: An Undivided Postwar History). One finds an analogous argument in *Postwar*, Tony Judt’s survey of European history since 1945. “Postwar” and “Cold War” were coterminous, Judt contends. The Cold War defined postwar Europe and, above all, Germany. Yet the Cold War, he emphasizes, was a *postwar* phenomenon, a product of the Second World War. The war hung over East Germany as much as it hung over the West. Interestingly, until at least the late 1970s, it was the SED that most vigorously denied the hold of the past over the GDR. As a Communist party with close ties to the USSR, the SED claimed to represent, by definition, a decisive break with the German past and, especially, fascism. That claim was untrue. The SED certainly tried to abolish by fiat the material, social, and cultural structures it inherited from the German past, but it could not escape them. Like the FRG, the GDR also had to come to terms with National Socialism, although each state dealt with the Nazi past differently.

The GDR was also part of the history of German Communism, not just a creature of Soviet Communism. The German Communist party was born out of the First World War, German domestic politics and class relations, and the Russian Revolution. It was infused with

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Bolshevik politics and ideology, but also with Social Democratic Arbeiterkultur (workers’ culture). In its twenty-five years of existence before 1945, the German Communist Party (KPD) was shaped by its cadre’s experiences in the Weimar Republic, Third Reich, and Second World War as much as by the party leaders’ exile in the USSR.  

The GDR remained a German state with a German history throughout its existence. Given its dependence on the Soviet Union, one could argue that the GDR was not a real national state. That argument is risky, however. As Bender emphasizes, West Germany was dependent on the Western allies, especially the United States, for approval of its military policies and its relationships with most other states, especially, the USSR.  

Although West Germany—unlike the GDR—enjoyed domestic autonomy, its external dependence would weigh heavily against significance on some historical scales. Traditional diplomatic and political historians, for example, count foreign-policy autonomy as a key criterion of a state’s legitimacy and independence. I reject the idea that West Germany’s external dependence undercuts its standing as a German state or an important one. I also object to the proposition that GDR dependence on the USSR excluded it from German history or significance. No one would dispute that the GDR was strongly shaped by its rivalry with the FRG.SED fixation on the FRG as its economic standard of measurement reflected the orientation of the East German people, yet the popular orientation toward West Germany and SED sensitivity to popular attitudes arose because the GDR’s rulers and its people were German. It is more controversial to argue that the FRG was also affected by its relationship with its despised “brother” (to borrow the metaphor used by Bender). The Cold War was most intensely experienced in the two Germanys; that comes as no surprise. It is easy to forget, though, that for years the SED was absolutely convinced that its side would win the battle between capitalism and socialism. In triumphalist rhetoric, it trumpeted this confidence in the press and in speeches both at home and abroad. Its stance and language provoked anxiety and analogously passionate responses from the West German opinion-making apparatus. In the oratory of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, especially, one finds repeated references to “Asiatic” Communism and constant reminders that Communism was not German, not “Western,” and not Christian. Both the content and extremity of such claims surely influenced the
political culture of West Germany, making it different than it would have been without a German Communist rival. 12

As the devil in a red dress, the GDR was the anti-model that influenced not just rhetoric, but policy in West Germany. The FRG is known for a welfare state that is considerably more conservative than those of some other European countries, especially the Scandinavian countries and France. Indubitably, the Christian Democratic Union truly believed in the conservative family policy that characterized West Germany from the 1950s through the 1970s and even afterwards.13 My guess, though, is that there would have been greater political interest and popular support for progressive variations of the Scandinavian type if the GDR and its social policies had not existed as the “Schreck” next door. Why, one might ask, have West Germans worried more about the effects of daycare on young children and the “all-day school” on older children than have the populations of most other European countries or, indeed, the United States? Surely, it has something to do with forty years of defining family and child nurture in opposition to the social policies of a German socialist state, which, in the lurid accounts of many West German preachers, politicians, and sociologists, was allegedly destroying the family and “taking children from their mothers.”

The GDR also influenced West German economic history. The flood of some twelve to fifteen million German refugees and expellees into both Germanys is well documented. What was initially a huge burden became a demographic plus. Economic historians agree that this immense in-migration contributed to the economic boom in both Germanys in the 1950s. West Germany also took in around three million people who fled East Germany in the 1950s. Many of these, too, were refugees and expellees, but many others were native East Germans who were, on average, better educated and better trained than the East German or West German population as a whole. Their contribution to the West German economy was therefore proportionately greater than that of the original refugees.14 The SED absolutely did not intend that consequence when it implemented the draconian educational and economic policies that provoked the westward flight of doctors, engineers, skilled workers, farmers, and teachers. Intended or not, the social and economic effects were real, and were a consequence of GDR history, or, rather, of its integral intermeshing with the history of the Federal Republic.

12 Bender, Nachkriegsgeschichte, 44–47.
14 Werner Abelshauser, Deutsche Wirtschaftsgeschichte seit 1945 (Munich, 2004), 315; Geißler, Die Sozialstruktur Deutschlands, 69; Wehler, Gesellschaftsgeschichte, 5:35–6.
The GDR and Communism

Communism was an undeniably central force in twentieth-century history, and the GDR was a significant example of a European socialist state and society. In his contribution to the debate over the “footnote” remark, the historian Martin Sabrow argued, “[The GDR was] the endangered external border [of Communist Europe] and, therefore, [is] especially productive to investigate as an example of a world-historical alternative that substantially shaped the century of extremes.” I will list only a few examples of how the study of the GDR can illuminate and contribute to the history of communism. Several points are formulated as questions, because historians (as opposed to social scientists) have conducted little comparative research on state socialism to date, and thus I speak speculatively on the theme of the GDR’s significance within European Communism after 1945.

I would first point to the GDR’s significance as a German Communist state. How did its German-ness shape its relations—and especially the relations of its people—not only to the Soviet Union and its people, but also to other Eastern European socialist states, especially Poland? The GDR’s “special” place within the Eastern bloc is as important to recognize as partnerships within the Western alliance—particularly the relationship between West Germany and the United Kingdom, and, above all, the relationship between the FRG and France. How did East Germany’s proximity to West Germany and their shared language contribute to the version of Communism that developed in the GDR as compared to the variations that unfolded in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia? Rather than merely point to the well-known fact that East Germans watched West German television, as though its impact is self-evident, we need serious comparative studies of cultural, political, and consumer attitudes in the various Eastern European countries in order to understand how Eastern Europeans variously did and did not come to terms with Communism.

The GDR’s status as a German Stalinist state is also relevant for the comparative study of modern mass dictatorships, particularly comparative studies of National Socialism and Stalinism. Again, the GDR case offers a controlled experiment because it was German and Communist. What can we learn from the comparison of these two mass dictatorships inside one cultural tradition? How might that
comparison challenge or confirm current interpretations of Stalinism as a dictatorial system?\textsuperscript{17}

A striking difference between National Socialism and Communism was the different timing of the radicalization of each of these ideological dictatorships. National Socialism’s early years in power were relatively moderate; its racist practices became increasingly radical, reaching their highest intensity during the war. In Eastern Europe, Stalinist class-struggle began with fire and fury, but Communism grew less radical over time, becoming more willing to make adjustments to its original policies and, finally, stagnant and decadent. This evolution typified the history of state socialism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union (and in China). What explains it? The East German case was characteristic of the general path and is, again, especially well-documented. It could be fruitfully examined in comparison to the rest of socialist Eastern Europe. An important line of investigation would be the comparative study of the secret police. How did the Stasi’s relationship with the East German population compare and contrast over time to that of the state police in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and, of course, the USSR? Comparative investigations of the evolution of postwar Communism should, in my view, look at societal change and social development as one source of the amelioration of the radicalism and repression of the early years. Comparative investigation of the rise of an educated social stratum in the Soviet bloc would illuminate, I believe, the origins of the invisible inner erosion of Communist commitment to the ideological goals of the early Stalinist era.\textsuperscript{18}

Also illuminating would be consideration of the ways in which East German Communism was socially and economically atypical. East Germany began as the most industrial economy ever to endure a Stalinist transformation, and it remained the most industrial until the end of European Communism. Did GDR Communism work differently, therefore, than its Eastern European and Soviet counterparts? How did its higher level of industrialization shape the relationship between the East German state and society relative to other Eastern European socialist states and the USSR? Especially enlightening would be comparative studies of the industrial working class, its cultural milieu, and its “silent social contract” with industrial managers and the state.\textsuperscript{19}

In the case of the GDR, a lot of this research is already taking place, promoted most notably by the Zentrum für Zeitgeschichtliche Forschung (ZZF) (Center for Contemporary History) in Potsdam.\textsuperscript{20} We have

\textsuperscript{17} I am not calling for a revival of the totalitarian thesis, much less advocating “democratization through comparison,” a tendency that has been rightly criticized by Wolfgang Wippermann in his Dämonisierung durch Vergleich: DDR und Drittes Reich (Berlin, 2009). The two dictatorships can be compared without implying equivalency and can be contrasted without apologizing for one or the other. An example is provided by the fair, if brief and schematic, comparative discussion of National Socialism and East German Stalinism by Wehler in Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte, 5: 414–19.

\textsuperscript{18} Winfried Thaa, et al., Gesellschaftliche Differenzierung und Legitimitätsverfall des DDR-Sozialismus (Tübingen, 1992).

\textsuperscript{19} Christoph Klessmann, Arbeiter im “Arbeiterstaat” DDR: Deutsche Traditionen, sowjetisches Modell, westdeutsches Magnetfeld, 1945 bis 1971 (Bonn, 2007), 774–75.

studies of East German socialism as an “alternative modernity,” investigations of its (political-)cultural world, and, as noted earlier, a relative abundance of research on state/society relations in the GDR.21 Hopefully, this GDR research will get “plugged” into studies of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union so that a history of the Communist “alternative modernity” and its characteristic relationships between state and society can help us interpret the rise and fall of European Communism. Truly comparative primary research is difficult, of course, as it requires knowledge of several very different languages. I take my hat off, therefore, to the ZZF, which is nurturing comparative studies of many kinds.

The GDR and Women’s Employment

The history of the GDR is significant as part of a profound and continuing process of social change in Europe, the United States, and much of the world: the mass entry of wives and, particularly, married mothers into wage-dependent labor. East Germany was ahead of the curve in this process. In 1970, East Germany had the highest rate of female employment in the industrialized world. Especially notable were the high levels of participation in wage labor among married mothers with multiple young children. Let me make clear: I come here neither to praise this development nor to condemn it. The entry of East German women into wage labor did not equate to their emancipation, and, contrary to SED claims, it did not signal the party’s commitment to women’s emancipation. Female participation in the workforce was, above all, the result of economic necessity—although one should note that Communist ideology did theoretically support the hiring and, more importantly, training and education of married mothers. Rather than credit or criticize the SED on the “woman” question, I want to emphasize that the rise of women’s employment constituted a huge societal change that reverberated in many directions. Consider its ramifications for the private sphere: husband-wife relations; the rate of divorce; single parenthood; children’s nurture; the birth rate; attitudes toward female sexuality, contraception, and abortion; and demand for private consumption, including easy-care clothing, washing machines and other household appliances, modern kitchens, and indoor plumbing—anything and everything that would make it easier for women to get out of the house and into training and work, while also bearing at least two children. Consider its implications for the public sphere: male workers’ resentment and prejudice against women workers and

strong opposition to women supervisors; official discussions of women’s wages and work hours; gender job segmentation; women’s training and higher education; expansion of daycare and afterschool programs; adjustments to the economy to meet the demands of the private household; and modification of social and family welfare policies to encourage a higher birth rate. The consequences for women were both depressing and impressive. To provide just one contrast: East German women’s wages remained 30 to 40 percent lower than men’s in 1989, but female rates of secondary and university education gained parity with statistics for men by the 1970s, eventually surpassing them.

We can focus on all this as an East German story—and it was an East German story, given that the state’s need for employed women and a rising birth rate were both exceptionally high. We can view it as a socialist story—and it was a socialist story, given that socialized industry and private consumption mixed like oil and water.

Yet it was not only an East German or socialist story. The mass entry of married women into wage labor and the accompanying rise in women’s education are huge social processes that straddle the German/German divide, the capitalist/Communist divide, and the Cold War/post 1989 divide. Here, too, the GDR serves as a test case, indeed, a virtual “Petri dish” of the social impact of women’s employment in a small, closed, and well-documented environment that allows us to study the interaction between women’s employment, family roles, economic exigencies, and state policies from many angles and in much depth. Bringing the East German case into comparative studies of women’s employment, education, and political participation will reveal both its anomalies and its typicality. Study of the GDR experience will also shed light on this world-historic process as a whole.

Conclusion

I have argued here that East Germany will claim historical significance in studies of the modern era due to its history’s structural elements: its almost unique comparability as a “controlled experiment,” the dynamism of its history, the “closed-ness” of its story, its rich documentary base, and its real societal history, which allows historians to compare state/society relations in the GDR to other Communist and even non-Communist societies. The GDR has left a footprint because of its substantive role in three undeniably major stories of the twentieth century: the history of Germany, the history of Communism, and the history of women, employment, the family, and social policy.

These arguments for the significance of GDR history have, of course, nothing to do with justifying its existence: The SED-state was a manipulative, controlling, and dictatorial mass-party state whose policies not only failed on every front but also greatly harmed East Germans. Precisely because the GDR was a repressive and failed state that deserved to collapse, we neither should nor can turn away from its history. Indeed, we should investigate that history from every angle in order to expose it for what it was. We should also present the GDR in all its complexity, rather than as a two-dimensional caricature. To demonstrate that the SED was unable to control, much less predict, every aspect of societal development does not weaken the condemnation of the GDR as a Communist dictatorship. On the contrary, shining a light on chinks in its armor exposes all the more decisively the hubris of the Communist claims that a socialist state knows all and a socialist economy can solve all.

Historical simplification always cuts both ways. Yes, absolute opponents of the despised object can mock and cut down a surly “straw figure,” but absolute supporters of the admired subject can rally around a smiling “poster child.” Studied from many angles as a three-dimensional entity, GDR history takes on significance, yes, but does not win friends or influence. As we know from the ongoing history of the study of National Socialism, serious historical research undermines nostalgia and amnesia. While I am not moved by political or psychological arguments for the significance or insignificance of GDR history, I believe that richly layered, well-documented, and analytical histories of the GDR alone, and in comparison with other states and societies, could have psychological
and political benefits. Such histories may or may not conform to the personal memories of East Germans, but they will confirm their suspicion that the GDR was a real and complicated homeland and, accordingly, contribute to the process of moving beyond—but not forgetting—a difficult past that is over, but not gone.

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