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**HANS-ULRICH WEHLER'S
DEUTSCHE GESELLSCHAFTSGESCHICHTE**

A. J. Nicholls

HANS-ULRICH WEHLER, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, v. *Bundesrepublik und DDR 1949–1990* (Munich: Beck Verlag, 2008), xvii + 529 pp. ISBN 978 3 406 52171 3. €34.90

More than twenty-five years ago, Hans-Ulrich Wehler set out to write a single, if doubtless large, volume which was intended to demonstrate what a history of German society in the modern era might look like. By 2008, and five volumes later, he had completed a massive survey of German social development from the seventeenth to almost the end of the twentieth century.

In this volume, he considers the nature of society in two very different German states, the Federal Republic and the German Democratic Republic. In carrying out this Herculean task he has not only provided his readers with a mine of information; he has also presented them with critical assessments of historical, and particularly sociological, interpretations of his subject. Nor does he ignore political history, realizing that to understand social developments, it is necessary to consider the political context in which they take place. So far as West Germany is concerned, he is appreciative of the stability created by the Bonn Republic, but does not fail to note its shortcomings, in particular, its expensive system of social welfare. On the other hand, he is completely contemptuous of the 'German Bolsheviks' in the Soviet-controlled GDR, and ironically quotes Stefan Heym's plaintive question as to whether their regime might turn out to be only a 'footnote in World History'.

Looking back over the years between 1871 and 1949, Wehler is struck by a unique lack of continuity in the political governance of Germany. The authoritarian *Rechtsstaat* of the Wilhelmine Empire was followed by the short-lived democratic experiment of the Weimar Republic and the Nazi dictatorship of the Third Reich, which led to total defeat and occupation by enemy forces. Even though the inhabitants of the Habsburg Empire might doubt the uniqueness of this experience, it is clear that the Germans had undergone a disori-

entating period of political instability. Yet Wehler also notes a remarkable continuity in the German class structure, extending from Bismarck's Reich to the Federal Republic. This applies in particular to the middle-class elites. Despite the fact that twentieth-century German nationalism rejected the ideas of the Enlightenment and was contemptuous of 'bourgeois' culture, it was the German upper middle class which emerged as the social group best equipped to flourish in the liberal, market-oriented Federal Republic. Continuities were strikingly evident in the economic elites. With the exception of German Jewish entrepreneurial families, dispossessed and often murdered during Nazi racial persecution, the ownership of industrial or commercial enterprises showed remarkable continuity with the pre-war period. Similarly, the intellectual elite, the academically trained *Bildungsbürgertum* of senior state officials and university professors, maintained and increased its influence in society, with academic families showing considerable success in retaining their positions at the top of the social tree.

It is true that Soviet occupation of East German territories, including those now in Poland or even Russia, broke the political and the economic power of the Prussian aristocracy. But most of them were able to establish themselves in West Germany, where their noble titles gave them an entrée into an existing aristocratic society which possessed remarkable wealth – including 1.3 million hectares of land, much of it supporting lucrative commercial forests. Although support for the Third Reich and contempt for democracy had been widespread amongst German aristocrats, they were reassured by the security against Communism vouchsafed to them by the Federal Republic, as well as its readiness to protect private property. Their own, understandably exaggerated, stress on their role in the resistance to Hitler helped them to assimilate into the Western-oriented Republic, whilst maintaining their social exclusiveness at the family level.

When explaining the success and stability of the Federal Republic, Wehler gives priority to the economic boom which lasted from 1948 to the oil crisis created by the Yom Kippur War in October 1973 – albeit with a blip in the mid 1960s. He attributes this to the technically advanced state of German industry, the export opportunities presented by the Korean War, and the fortunate circumstance that international trade was in the process of liberalization. Important though

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these factors undoubtedly were, more stress might have been put on the role of Ludwig Erhard and those in the Bizonal Economics Administration who, in 1948, battled fiercely to reintroduce market economics and the free price mechanism when the Western Allied governments implemented their currency reform. It was that liberalization that proved crucial in galvanizing the West Germany economy, a fact that was demonstrated by the negative experiences in the French and the Soviet Zones, where currency reform also occurred, but economic liberalization did not. So far as the Anglo-American Zone was concerned, Erhard's policy, supported by a scarce hard currency and the prospect of Marshall Aid, generated a new dynamism in the economy. Absenteeism dropped sharply, over-manning was reduced, and industrial inventories which had been hoarded or used for barter were combed out and put to productive use. If, as had seemed most likely before Erhard's appointment in the spring of 1948, the system of bureaucratic allocation and price controls taken over from the Nazis by the occupation authorities had been maintained into the Federal Republic, the economic 'miracle'—a term which Erhard himself rejected—in West Germany might have come too late to give the new regime its flying start.

At one point Wehler also presents his readers with the somewhat quaint idea that the industriousness of West German workers was a legacy of the fanatical Nazi commitment to *Leistung* or individual achievement leading to higher production, inculcated into the labour force during the Third Reich. In fact, before the summer of 1948, West German workers showed little sign of commitment to *Leistung*. They were more likely to devote themselves to growing tobacco, dabbling in the black market, or engaging in barter transactions which were of little use to the economy as a whole. General Lucius D. Clay, Military Governor of the American Zone, was critical of German labour morale, and at one point bemoaned the sight of young Germans sunbathing with their girlfriends whilst the Allied occupiers were working overtime to try to set the West German economy on its feet. As late as July 1948, the unsatisfactory progress of a programme of rolling stock repairs was being partly attributed to the 'incredible laziness' (*Lässigkeit*) of some workers.¹ Interestingly enough, it was in

¹ A. J. Nicholls, 'Zusammenbruch und Wiederaufbau: Die Reichsbahn während der Besatzungszeit', in Lothar Gall and Manfred Pohl (eds.), *Die Eisenbahn*

the Soviet Zone that the 'German Bolsheviks' trumpeted the virtues of *Leistung*, following the Stakhanovite teachings of their Russian masters. Erhard, on the other hand, outraged the puritanical inclinations of German Social Democrats and New Dealers in the US occupation administration by favouring consumer goods over heavy industrial production, reckoning that material incentives were more effective than exhortations when persuading people to work.

It was, of course, true that the post-war boom in the West did give the West German state an advantage denied to its Weimar predecessor. But, as Wehler himself points out, it also owed much to its constitutional structure, created by politicians who drew the right lessons from the disasters of the past, and to the shrewd leadership of Konrad Adenauer. It was his determination to root the Federal Republic in the Western Alliance which effectively freed it from the financial and psychological burdens of defeat that had proved so intractable in the 1920s.

From the 1960s onwards British visitors to West Germany were struck by the relatively high standard of living enjoyed by the majority of the population. The class divides which characterized the United Kingdom did not seem so glaring in the Federal Republic. West German social scientists, like Helmut Schelsky, claimed in the 1950s that Germany's class structure was undergoing a 'meltdown' as the result of the Third Reich and its aftermath. But Wehler successfully demonstrates that, so far as the ownership of property was concerned, wealth was highly skewed in the Federal Republic and that, as time has gone on, this imbalance has not been evened out. On the contrary, it has become more marked. In 1986, 12 per cent of West German households owned 60 per cent of all statistically recorded private wealth. Industrial property (*Betriebsvermögen*) was even more heavily concentrated: 7,700 households owned over half of it. Overall, one-quarter of all households possessed 80 per cent of recorded wealth, set against the poorest 30 per cent, which had to make do with 1.5 per cent. The gap between the affluent and the less fortunate grew wider throughout the period Wehler is studying. Already by 1960 it had been noticed that the concentration of wealth in the upper echelon of West German society was more marked than that in the USA, Britain, or Sweden. In this context Wehler notes that inheri-

in Deutschland: Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart (Munich, 1999), 270. See also 266.

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tance tax in Germany was only a quarter of that charged in the USA. However, he also records that, by 1980, two-thirds of German households possessed wealth worth on average 100,000 DM and that in 1990 one in two households possessed wealth of 200,000 DM or more. This he refers to as the quiet 'upward lift effect' which benefited most of the population. However, when describing the social stratification of the Federal Republic, he emphasizes the concentration of wealth on the uppermost floor of the West German market economy. He does note that in the 1980s Reaganism and Thatcherism – neither of which was 'neo-liberal' in the German sense – intensified the uneven distribution of wealth in the USA and Britain. But he claims that the Federal Republic quickly followed this trend, which continued under successive Social-Liberal and Christian-Liberal governments.

It is in many ways this issue of apparently inhibited social mobility in the Federal Republic which concerns Wehler most throughout the volume. For example, he expresses disappointment over the failure of West Germany's school system to improve the prospects of social mobility for working-class children, and particularly the children of unskilled workers. Between 1960 and 1980 there was a huge expansion of state spending on education. The number of teachers rose by more than 70 per cent, while the pupil-teacher ratio improved from more than 30 to one to 18.5 to one. It is interesting to compare this situation with that of state education in Britain. On the one hand, there were similarities. There appeared after 1975 the same tendency amongst officials and politicians to seize upon demographic forecasts of falling pupil numbers as excuses for cuts in funding rather than as opportunities to create smaller classes. As in Britain, the forecasts proved misleading, not least because immigration expanded pupil numbers. As in Britain, school education was also vulnerable in this period to interference by academic educational theorists, described by one German historian as 'didactic locust swarms'. The influence of the so-called student revolution in 1968 also created a horror of 'achievement terror' (*Leistungsterror*) in educational circles, thus inhibiting motivation amongst precisely the children who needed it most.

There was, however, one great difference between the development of the German and the British school systems. In Britain the publicly funded county grammar schools were fiercely attacked, even though, or perhaps because, they provided the most effective

ladder of social improvement for the majority of the population who could not afford expensive private education. Sociologists and left-wing politicians, many of them privately educated, complained that not enough children of manual workers were being educated in grammar schools and that the latter were too 'middle class'. As the result of political pressure, they were widely replaced by comprehensive schools. In Germany, the prestige of the state *Gymnasien*, upon which the British county grammar schools had been modelled from the beginning of the twentieth century, was too great for the proponents of comprehensive education to undermine them. The fact that the Federal states had responsibility for education also worked in their favour. When the Social Democratic government in North-Rhine Westphalia tried to introduce comprehensive education throughout its region it was crushingly defeated in a referendum, and thereafter enthusiasm for comprehensives among politicians waned sharply. The reason for this was the popularity of the *Gymnasien* and of the more technically oriented *Realschulen*, a type of school promised to the British in the 1944 Education Act and never delivered to them. Between 1990 and 1980 the number of *Gymnasien* pupils rose by 230 per cent and the number of *Realschule* pupils by 310 per cent. By 1990 there were 1.5 million children attending *Gymnasien* – many of them newly built – and 857,000 in *Realschulen*. The number attending the equivalent of secondary modern schools in Britain, the *Hauptschulen*, had fallen to 1.2 million, a much lower proportion of the total than had been the case thirty years earlier.

Wehler bewails the fact that relatively few children from the working class, and almost none from the ranks of unskilled workers, attained places in the *Gymnasien*. Whereas in 1950 the children of academically trained parents were twenty times more likely to enter higher education than working-class children, by 1990 they were still fifteen times more likely to do so. The schools to which the poorest parents would send their children had not only fallen in numbers, and therefore prestige, they were also the destination for the children of non-German-speaking immigrants, such as Turks or supposedly ethnic Germans from Russia. This made it even more difficult for such schools to overcome the handicaps under which children from poorer families were bound to suffer: lack of parental motivation, limited vocabulary, little exposure to books, and inadequate space in which to carry out private study. All these problems affect British

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comprehensive schools, but at least each of them can claim an appropriate share of public funding. It is not clear from Wehler's account whether the funding per pupil in a *Hauptschule* equalled that of a pupil of the same age in a *Gymnasium* or a *Realschule*. His dismissal of comprehensive schools as a political stunt promising an instant cure for the problems of mass education, whilst actually achieving nothing but a levelling down of standards, would doubtless be music to the ears of the British critics of comprehensive education. So far, however, nobody in Britain has come up with a more acceptable system. Nevertheless, the Federal Republic, with its preponderance of schools focused on equipping their pupils with the intellectual disciplines needed to fulfil their potential in adulthood, would seem to be better placed to enhance social mobility than is the United Kingdom.

There is also the question of apprenticeships. In Germany it is an understandable source of pride that every year hundreds of thousands of apprenticeships are on offer to school leavers. This has often been advanced as a reason for Germany's ability to maintain high levels of per capita production and technical excellence. After the Second World War there were also industrial apprenticeships in Britain, but trade union obstruction made it difficult to increase them. In the 1980s and 1990s there was a drastic reduction of jobs—and therefore of apprenticeships—in industries such as steel, ship-building, and engineering. Furthermore, the managerial ethos supposedly based on 'shareholder value' led to a disinclination on the part of employers to invest in training young people when it was easier to poach experienced workers trained by others. From time to time government agencies have tried to encourage employers to offer more apprenticeships, but the results have not been encouraging.

From all these points of view, therefore, the Federal Republic today is looking a good deal more open to social mobility than Britain—or, for that matter, the USA. It would be both churlish and unrealistic to demand that Wehler should write a social history of Britain as well as of Germany, but when examining his criticism of the Federal Republic we do have to ask whether there actually are Western countries, roughly equivalent in size, which have managed to create less unequal societies than that of Germany. This question does have a contemporary edge to it because the media in Britain and Germany have, since 1949, tended to be particularly sensitive to social and economic rivalry between the two countries. Until the

1980s Britain was perceived in Germany as an economic disaster area; by the beginning of the twenty-first century there was strident triumphalism in the British press about the supposed superiority of the United Kingdom's dynamic, money-led, service-based economy as against the stagnation apparent in the Federal Republic, with its inflexible labour market and its dependency on industrial exports. Such Anglo-Saxon smugness was effectively torpedoed by the melt-down in the financial services sector in 2008. But if the British economy is not as impressive as it was made out to be, what of social inequality and social mobility in the home of the welfare state?

It has finally dawned on politicians in the United Kingdom that over the last twenty-five years British society has become more stratified rather than less, and that the gap between the very rich and the rest of us is growing wider all the time. A former Labour Minister and Member of Parliament, Alan Milburn, recently chaired an inquiry into Fair Access to the Professions which found that, unless 'drastic action' was taken, 'tomorrow's generation of talented young people will miss out on a new wave of social mobility'.² Among the points made about the current situation in Britain were:

The typical lawyer or doctor of the future will today be growing up in a family better off than 5 in 6 of all families in the UK. The typical journalist or accountant of the future will today be growing up in a family better off than 3 in 4 families in the UK.

...

Over half of professional occupations such as law and finance are currently dominated by people from independent [i.e. private] schools which are attended by just 7 per cent of the population. Seventy-five per cent of judges and 45 per cent of top civil servants were independently schooled.

A typical professional born in 1958 came from a family that earned 17 per cent more than the average family income; but by 1970 the family income gap between those who went on to pursue a professional career and the average family had risen

² News release from the Cabinet Office Homepage. CAB060/09. 21 July 2009. 'Fair Access to the Professions Panel Publishes Over Eighty Recommendations', <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/newsroom/news_releases/2009/090721_accessprofessions.aspx>, accessed 18 Jan. 2010.

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to 27 per cent, with journalism – along with accountancy – seeing the biggest shift to more social exclusivity.³

A newspaper article based on the Milburn Report notes that 54 per cent of top journalists, 55 per cent of solicitors, 68 per cent of top barristers, and 70 per cent of finance directors attended independent schools.⁴

The problems Wehler has detected in the Federal Republic are therefore rampant elsewhere. One recent study of relative inequalities in developed economies demonstrated that in Singapore the richest 20 per cent of the population are nearly ten times better off than the poorest 20 per cent. Of the twenty-three countries listed in the survey, the USA displays the second highest inequality, with the top 20 per cent enjoying 8.5 times as much wealth as the bottom 20 per cent. The United Kingdom lay in fourth place – its richest fifth were 7.1 times better off than the bottom fifth. The Federal Republic, on the other hand, shows up fairly well, with the upper 20 per cent getting only 5.2 per cent of the wealth of the bottom 20 per cent. This means that Germany comes out as the eighth best nation in terms of equitable wealth distribution, twelve places ahead of Britain and fourteen ahead of the USA.⁵ Of course, such surveys are bound to be approximate, and different results can be obtained by focusing on different segments of society. But it does not seem that Germany has too much to be ashamed of when compared with other major European countries, let alone the USA.

Discussion of social mobility is bound to raise questions of definition. What is the nature of the 'working class' and the 'middle class' in the Federal Republic, and have these classes changed over time? Where does the lower middle class end and the upper middle class begin? In what sense are the very rich 'middle class'? Wehler dis-

³ Ibid. From the summary of recommendations produced in this publication it becomes clear that the solutions proposed by the Fair Access to the Professions Panel will demoralize schools and undermine the professional excellence of British universities. Perhaps fortunately, it is improbable that the money will be found for their implementation.

⁴ Patrick Wintour, 'Britain's Closed Shop: Damning Report on Social Mobility Failings', *Guardian*, 22 July 2009.

⁵ Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* (London, 2009), 17.

cusses class structure at length and has much of interest to say about it. But the more one reads about the complexities of German society, the more one doubts whether the term 'middle class' is particularly helpful. Again, this is not just a German problem. Most people in Britain refer to themselves as 'middle class' even though many of them in white-collar or even professional employment earn less than train drivers or skilled artisans.

As Wehler himself documents, the 'economic lift' effect of West Germany's economic success has reduced the proportion of its citizens in the ranks of unskilled manual workers. Whereas in 1950, 66 per cent of the working class were in this category, by 1990 this percentage had shrunk to 25 per cent, while the numbers in white-collar, semi-professional, and service sector occupations had risen strongly. These people were not 'bourgeois' in the Marxist sense of owning the means of production, nor were they particularly wealthy. But they were more likely to want higher education for their children, even if they did not have it themselves. In that sense the 'educational revolution' has had a big impact on Germany, and there is nothing like the gulf between privately and publicly educated children which has grown wider in Britain over the last three decades.

So far as universities are concerned, Wehler is rather conservative. In Germany, as in Britain, there was a tremendous expansion of university education. Between 1960 and 1980, twenty-four new universities were founded and existing institutions of tertiary education were greatly expanded. In 1960 the number of students had already risen from 100,000 in 1949 to 247,000. By 1990 it was 1.7 million. This meant that more than twenty per cent of the population in the relevant year's cohort were matriculated. Of these, 41 per cent were women, and soon thereafter female students outnumbered the men. However, the proportion of working-class children in universities remained low; despite attempts to encourage them into higher education, the percentage of students coming from working-class families was stuck at 7 per cent. Since overall student numbers were rising sharply, this must have meant a considerable increase in the number of students with working-class backgrounds, but they remained underrepresented as a proportion of the population as a whole. On the other hand, 38 per cent of lawyers' children and 45 per cent of medical doctors' children followed their parents into the same profession.

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It is difficult to see what could be done about this, and it is noteworthy that in this context Wehler does not touch on the subject of student finance. By 1990, university students in Germany did not pay fees, and there were opportunities to gain scholarships to help with maintenance. But the length of time required to complete a course of study in overcrowded and under-staffed universities must have made it an unattractive option for parents and children from poorer backgrounds. Attempts to reduce the period required to obtain a university qualification were resisted on the one hand by the professoriate—described by Wehler as ‘the backbone of any Western university’—and the organized student body on the other. It is ironic that the ‘student revolution’ of 1968 actually prevented pragmatic and sensible reforms which might have improved staff to student ratios and shortened the period of study. Instead, it tried to ‘democratize’ universities by imposing on them a complicated and inefficient system of government. The foreseeable upshot of this was virtual paralysis in university administration and the frustration of any progress towards serious reform. Wehler is rightly critical of the federal state governments in West Germany during the 1980s for their parsimony towards the universities, which led to declining staff numbers at a time when student numbers were increasing. In the Federal Republic, as in Britain, politicians preferred overcrowded universities to rising youth unemployment figures. But without the impact of the radical excesses of 1968—which crippled many humanities and social science faculties, but left the most conservative ones, like law and medicine, virtually unscathed—changes might have been made which could have helped German universities through the lean years which followed the oil crises of the 1970s.

A great many more areas of social and cultural development are covered in this stimulating book. Wehler describes clearly the important changes in the nature of confessional politics in West Germany after 1949. These were caused by liberalizing trends in both the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches and by the relative equality of both confessions in the Federal Republic in contrast to the Protestant dominance in the old Reich. The passages concerning the vibrant press and periodical culture of the Federal Republic are particularly impressive, not least because of the willingness of the author to criticize sharply the dumbing down of popular culture as the result of commercialization of TV and circulation wars in the press.

Here again, West Germany's experience is all too familiar to a British reader, although the regional character of the better German newspapers has helped to save them from the deterioration that has afflicted most of their British counterparts.

Another issue about which Wehler expresses firm but controversial views is that of immigration from Muslim countries. He notes that for too long West German governments tried to maintain the fiction that Germany was not an 'immigration country' (*kein Einwanderungsland*), but he then raises the spectre of Muslim extremism. He describes the large Muslim minority in Germany as a new ethnic underclass, living in ghetto-like circumstances, immune from assimilation and Western education, and thus vulnerable to the growing influence of fanatical fundamentalism. He claims that this is more threatening than the perceived 'Red danger' from the proletariat in the nineteenth century. His solution to the problem is that the explosive potential of this underclass must be defused by an intensive policy of integration. This is a worthy aim, but experience shows that it is difficult to achieve without arousing resentments which may then produce the opposite of the desired effect.

In his Epilogue Wehler stresses once again the remarkable continuity in social stratification in the Federal Republic, despite the political upheavals that Germany has experienced. Yet a few pages later he describes again how enormous changes have taken place in Germany's social structure: the once much feared industrial working class is now greatly diminished; the agricultural working class has almost disappeared; and the aristocracy has lost the political influence it had enjoyed even in the years after 1919. These changes would seem to indicate a radical upward social trend in social mobility, even if the elites at the top of the pyramid show much continuity.

Although Wehler pays tribute to the pragmatism of the two major parties in West Germany, the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats, he denounces the continuous expansion of social welfare measures, especially after the appearance of the Social-Liberal coalition in 1969. He claims that the increasing costs of social security were accompanied by an ever-growing amount of state regulation, which itself amounted to a discontinuity in West Germany's social development because it reduced the individual's responsibility for controlling his own life. He takes it for granted that, since this 'hypertrophied' social security system can no longer be financed, it must be

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decisively reformed, despite the opposition of its 'pampered clientele'.

Of course, the problems of the social state in West Germany were serious, and they became more so when the former GDR had to be incorporated into the Federal Republic's social welfare system. Doubtless the growth in the proportion of the labour force employed directly or indirectly by the state has been a burden on the economy in general, and Wehler quite rightly traduces the absurd level of subsidies and fixed prices enjoyed by the agricultural sector in the Federal Republic. It is worth remembering that Ludwig Erhard never had any control over agriculture in Germany, and that he disliked the agricultural protectionism practised by the European Community. The increasingly rigid regulation of the labour market over the period from 1969 to 1990 also made it difficult for the private sector to create jobs. But when looking at the man-made global disaster brought about by malpractices in the financial services sector in London and New York, it is difficult to find too much fault with the Social Market Economy in Germany. German neo-liberals never believed in unrestrained *laissez-faire*, any more than did Adam Smith. They recognized that a strong state was needed to set and enforce the rules of the game, whilst avoiding the temptation to play the game itself. To be fair, Wehler makes the same point in the penultimate paragraph of his book, when he stresses the need for state action to curb the excesses of large enterprises and to restrain the 'turbo-capitalism of globalization', just as the private capitalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was civilized by social and legal measures implemented by constitutionally based nation-states.

Alongside his thought-provoking and well-documented account of social and political developments in the Federal Republic, Wehler has added to each chapter a briefer survey of developments in the GDR. This relative brevity can be justified by the fact that the population of the East German state was much smaller than that of West Germany, and that the regime of the 'German Bolsheviks' as Wehler calls them, ended in complete failure. No serious historian would wish to defend Ulbricht's totalitarian methods, or his misguided economic policies. Indeed the most interesting section of Wehler's comments on the GDR is a comparison between the Nazi and Communist dictatorships in Germany. He carefully notes the differences as well as the similarities between the two regimes, concluding that it would

be false simply to equate the two, but that the GDR was, nevertheless, an example of a left-wing totalitarian dictatorship. Few would dispute that proposition.

However, Wehler might perhaps have demonstrated more sympathy for the unfortunate citizens of the GDR, who had to endure forty years of Soviet tyranny without having any prospect of rescue from the West. The division of Germany, like the division of Europe, was secured by the recognition that a third world war would be the worst possible outcome for all concerned. It is therefore worth stressing that, while the West Germans had emerged by the end of the 1955 as the equals of their occupiers, the citizens of the GDR were left to pay the bill for the war in the East. As Wehler himself notes, the result was a period of savage—and often mindless—Soviet requisitions, followed by enormous transfers of goods from current production. This catastrophe cancelled out any advantages the Soviet Sector in Germany might have enjoyed owing to industrial development under the Third Reich or its relative security against air raids for most of the war. The Soviet Zone was, and remained, an occupied country. Ulbricht was not ousted because he was obstructing economic reforms, but because the Soviet leadership thought he was getting too big for his boots. Honecker was rightly seen as a subservient person who would toe Moscow's line without wavering.

Once the Berlin Wall went up in August 1961 the Germans imprisoned in the GDR had to make the best of a bad job. When listing the differences between the Third Reich and Ulbricht's dictatorship, Wehler points out that the Third Reich was fundamentally a home-produced (*hausgemacht*) German product, whereas the GDR lacked genuine support among East Germans. Their liberation did not result from the impending bankruptcy of the system in East Germany; a Stalinist dictatorship would have used that to justify a new round of repression. The real cause was a change of policy in Moscow, brought about by a number of factors. These included the debilitating impact of the war in Afghanistan and the improved atmosphere between the Soviet Union and West Germany as the result of a consistent policy of *détente* followed by SPD and CDU-led governments after 1969. Once the Soviet domination over its satellites began to waver, however, the citizens of the GDR took matters into their own hands. By a combination of massive peaceful demonstrations and 'illegal' migration to the West through a newly porous Iron Curtain,

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they forced the collapse of Honecker's dictatorship, a process which culminated in the opening and subsequent destruction of the Berlin Wall.

Wehler does not seem overly impressed by their achievement. He does not make many allowances for the difficulties faced by Germans trapped in a totalitarian Communist system for over forty years. He presents them as people who left their Christian roots, despite the survival of the Protestant church in the GDR, and were brainwashed by anti-Zionist—and therefore anti-Semitic—SED propaganda. Leaving aside the question of how justifiable it is to equate criticism of Zionism with anti-Semitism, we would do well to remember that the most dangerous racist political parties in Germany have their origins, and their funding, in the old Federal Republic, not the GDR.

Unification certainly involved enormous costs for the Federal Republic, and the transformation of the GDR's crumbling infrastructure was a brilliant achievement. It was, however, unavoidable that the change from a command to a free market economy, not to mention the importation of West Germany's complex legal procedures and its highly complicated health and welfare systems, would be traumatic for many inhabitants of the GDR. The assumption that West German private capital would flood into the new Federal states proved false; the collapse of the Soviet system of distribution, Comecon, meant that the GDR's export markets disappeared and imports had to be paid for by the Federal government. In any case the over-manned, under-capitalized socialist enterprises could not survive in a global environment. In the years immediately following unification, many administrative and professional posts were filled by incomers from the West. Even though in many cases this was unavoidable, it caused understandable resentment among the population of the new Federal states. Relatively little effort seems to have been made to integrate those who had made professional careers in the GDR, leaving aside such obviously repressive institutions as the Stasi. This may well have contributed to the survival of the 'post-Communist' PDS into united Germany. Now operating throughout the country as the Left Party, it has begun to splinter the electoral support of moderate Social Democrats.

It has been rightly pointed out that in the West it has not been adequately appreciated what an enormous effort of reorientation was required of the East Germans after unification. They were used to

absolute security in their workplace and regarded it to a considerable extent as their second home, which formed, beside their family, their most important focus of socialization and security.⁶ Large state enterprises, however uneconomic they may have been, did provide social benefits, among the most important of which were childcare facilities for working mothers. Although Western welfare benefits were more generous than those of the GDR, they were often more complicated in their administration. More important was the sudden loss of security and of solidarity with workmates who were usually contemptuous of the Communist apparatchiks, and had little reason to fear them in a system which was desperate to maintain its labour supply. At a stroke, this security disappeared. Whereas there had been very little job mobility in the GDR, by the end of 1993 only 29 per cent of East German employees were in the same workplace that they had occupied in November 1989. Women were particularly hard hit by the change; in 1993/4 their unemployment quotient was double that of male employees. One result of this was that the birth rate, which had been low to start with, fell dramatically for several years to a level half that of 1989.⁷

It is, of course, unfair to criticize Wehler for not taking into account matters which go beyond his period. Some of the differences between the old and the new Federal states do, however, reflect different social experiences during the period of German division. Although there are few regrets in the new Federal states about the demise of the GDR, a poll taken in 2006 showed that 66 per cent of men and 70 per cent of women in that region believed that they were not receiving their fair share of the nation's prosperity.⁸ It is also not without interest that a survey in 2004 showed that 60 per cent of West Germans considered themselves to be part of the 'middle class' and about 10 per cent claimed membership of the 'upper middle class', leaving barely a third describing themselves as working or lower class. In the new Federal States, on the other hand, almost 60 per cent

⁶ Gerhard A. Ritter, *Wir Sind das Volk! Wir sind ein Volk! Geschichte der deutschen Einigung* (Munich, 2009), 138.

⁷ Ritter, *Wir Sind das Volk!*, 140.

⁸ This compared with 38 per cent of men and 37 per cent of women in the former West Germany who took the same view. Ritter, *Wir Sind das Volk!*, 142, citing Statistisches Bundesamt (ed.), *Datenreport 2006: Zahlen und Fakten über die Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Bonn, 2006), 457.

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saw themselves as working or lower class, about 40 per cent as middle class, and only 3 per cent ventured to put themselves in the upper middle or upper class.⁹ This suggests that notwithstanding the widespread rejection of Communism, which evidently failed at any point to engage the loyalty of the East German population, the social attitudes inherited from the Third Reich and the GDR would take some time to change.

Fortunately, the rehabilitation of the GDR after 1990, which required enormous sums of public money, has been a remarkable success, despite resentments on either side of the old Iron Curtain frontier. It is an accomplishment of which Germans in both parts of the country can be proud and which laissez-faire alone could not have achieved.

The fact that Wehler's book may provoke argument as well as admiration is all to the good, and in no way detracts from its importance. To have produced such a well-documented and detailed account of Germany's social development over a period in which so many economic and cultural changes were taking place is a magnificent achievement. No historian writing about this period will be able to ignore this book. It is unlikely to be surpassed for many years.

⁹ Ritter, *Wir Sind das Volk!*, 142.

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