
The division of Europe, and of Germany in particular, is a central field of research in contemporary history. Causes and effects have been comprehensively researched, but opinions continue to diverge sharply when it comes to evaluations. Assessments of the Stalin note of spring 1952, or of Nikita S. Khrushchev’s Berlin ultimatum at the end of the 1950s are examples. However, one question is central to almost all studies. How seriously should Moscow’s and East Berlin’s moves towards German unification be taken? Was this just a propaganda trick to win over Western sceptics for good and to divide the anti-Communist front in the West? Was Moscow interested only in preventing Western integration and rearmament in the Federal Republic? The investigation of these questions also casts light on Soviet relations with East Germany, in particular, on the relationship between the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolshevik) and the German Socialist Unity Party (SED). It has long been accepted that the German Communists, when they returned to Germany with the Red Army in 1945, were acting fully in accordance with Stalin’s policy for Germany, for example, by promoting the idea of a united Germany under Communist leadership. The SED Politburo, as is well known, remained committed to this goal until the 1960s, at least publicly. In a fundamental study,1 Michael Lemke has recently shown that in the early years of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the SED believed that unity and socialism were compatible, which suggests that the initiative for German unity was not just a propaganda instrument. In the study under review, covering the years 1945 to 1953, Dirk Spilker also endorses this view.

The book is divided chronologically into five large chapters. The first starts by looking at the post-war planning which the German Communists in Moscow undertook even before the end of the Second World War, in close agreement with Stalin and the Soviet leadership. These plans demonstrate the German Communist Party’s

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(KPD) dependence on its Eastern protector, and the dominant position that German policy interests already had in the Kremlin at the end of the war. A few days before the signing of the unconditional surrender, three groups of émigré German Communists were flown from the Soviet Union to Berlin, Saxony, and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. Under the leadership of Walter Ulbricht, Anton Ackermann, and Gustav Sobottka respectively, their task was to support the Red Army in rebuilding the country. The first job was to set up civil administrations at local level. Thus when the three Western occupation forces entered the former German imperial capital, they were already confronted with faits accomplis. Communists were favoured in key positions in the administration not only in Berlin, but also in other parts of the Soviet zone of occupation (SBZ). The Soviet occupying power also had its fingers in the pie when it came to setting up political parties. Order no. 2 issued by the Soviet Military Administration in Germany (SMAD) on 10 June 1945 laid down the framework within which the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the two bourgeois parties, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) could act. All three had been newly established, or revived, after the KPD. In this way the Soviet Union early made its intention to give the KPD preferential treatment clear. Spilker then looks at the enforced unification of the two workers’ parties in response to the rapid rise in the SPD’s membership and the devastating losses suffered by the Communists in the parliamentary elections held in Hungary and Austria in November 1945. Stalin and the KPD leadership were now convinced that the only way to maintain the leading role of the German Communists in the SBZ was quickly to establish a unity party.

The second chapter looks at the period from the Potsdam Conference to the establishment of the Bizone in Western Germany. The author deals in detail with Soviet occupation policy and investigates the origins of the KPD’s Western policy. In this context, for example, the top SED politicians visited the Western zones in the summer of 1946 in order to influence developments in the West. Thereafter Spilker’s study turns to Moscow’s reparations policy and socio-economic structural changes, which reached a first climax in the land reform of autumn 1945 and the industrial reform of a year later. These measures, as is well known, ushered in the expropriation of the hated high financiers and large landowners (Junker). The East Ger-
man Communists followed Moscow’s leadership on the assumption that Western capitalism was in steady decline and that socialism would gain the upper hand in the long term. This fed an almost boundless optimism which shaped the SED’s German policy until the beginning of the 1950s. Comrades in East Berlin assumed that the economic and social burdens arising from the consequences of the Second World War would be too much for the Western occupation zones to bear, and that Communism would celebrate a victory there too. Spilker can show that Otto Grotewohl, later to become the GDR’s minister president, developed his own ‘magnet theory’ as early as June 1946 to demonstrate the superiority of the East German planned economy over West German capitalism.

This optimism was not entirely unfounded because the young Federal Republic was threatening to plunge into a ‘founding crisis’, in Hans Günter Hockerts’s words. The need to provide for war victims, empty pension funds, and initially persistent unemployment seemed to be making excessive demands on the West German state. But failures started early for the SED leaders too, and these form the subject of chapter three. Thus the first local, regional, and Landtag elections in the autumn of 1946 showed that despite being promoted by the Soviet Union, the SED faced competition from relatively strong bourgeois parties. In the elections to the Berlin city parliament, the SED gained only 19.8 per cent of the votes cast. To protect its own rule, the SED started a purge among its own ranks, directed primarily against former Social Democrats, and forced the CDU into the straitjacket of the Anti-Fascist Bloc. All this showed that Pieck, Grotewohl, and Ulbricht could not take absolute rule in the SBZ for granted. In drawing up the constitution, the SED took advice from some of the CDU’s and LDP’s legal experts, but the large gap between constitutional norm and constitutional reality soon became apparent. The failure of the SED–KPD Working Group and the Stalinization of the SED were clear indications that while the top comrades paid ostentatious lip service to the demand for German unity, they were actually giving precedence to consolidating their own rule at home. Under its leader Kurt Schumacher, the SPD, which separated itself strictly from the SED and strongly resisted all attempts at rapprochement, certainly contributed to this situation, as did the policy of the Western Allies, who increasingly impeded the work of the KPD in their zones. The West German KPD was ulti-
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By convening the German People’s Congress for Unity and a Just Peace in December 1947, the SED wanted to present itself as a pioneer of German unity and mobilize the West German workers in particular. The reorganization of the German Economic Commission (DWK) at the beginning of 1948 and the permanent weakening of federalism in the SBZ associated with it smoothed the way for the establishment of the GDR. This is the subject of the fourth chapter. The rhetoric of unity lost its attractiveness and increasingly became a propaganda instrument used by the SED, which blamed the West for the division of Germany. Spilker investigates in detail the reactions of the SED to the Marshall Plan and the beginning of West Germany’s economic integration into the West. In this context, he analyses the development of East Germany’s planned economy and the implementation of its own currency reform in June 1948. At this time, the SED was already trying to persuade Stalin to found an East German state. The author describes in detail the intense preliminary discussions in Moscow and outlines the individual stages which, ultimately, led to the foundation of the GDR. This study is based throughout on a systematic evaluation of the relevant documents in the SED party archive. Whereas Spilker often breaks new ground in the first four chapters, the reader finds little that is new in the last one, which deals with SED German policy in the early 1950s. This applies to Grotewohl’s letter at the end of 1950 and the East German campaign to hold elections for the whole of Germany, and especially to the Stalin note of spring 1952 and the crisis year of 1953.

On the whole, this is a well-structured and readable study of SED policy towards Germany and the West which is closely based on the sources. It complements Lemke’s work mentioned above as it deals primarily with the early post-war years. Spilker shows that the SED leadership faced a dilemma even before the foundation of the GDR. On the one hand, it was pursuing goals relating to the whole of Germany which did not always agree with Soviet notions. On the other hand, it began to establish itself in the SBZ after the idea of transferring the East German model to West Germany had receded into a far distant future. To the extent that the SED turned its attention to stabilizing its own power, its German-policy initiatives increasingly became propaganda events. The SED leadership, which had initially seen no contradiction in the aims of unity and
socialism, ultimately preferred to have a dominant role in the SBZ/GDR rather than a subordinate position in a unified Germany.

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