DEBATE*


A study which, five years after the end of the SED (Socialist Unity Party) regime, aims to reveal the ‘inner life and workings’ (p. v) of the East German dictatorship faces unusual difficulties. These are caused not by any great distance from the subject, but on the contrary, by its close proximity. The historian has a wealth of historical sources which the former East German state left behind when it collapsed. The task of describing and classifying them, in some cases even just making them available, will not be completed for years to come. Moreover, the integration of GDR studies into contemporary German history has produced a flood of new research that has swept away the old discipline of DDR-Forschung, which existed for years as a mixture of history, sociology, and political think-tank. In 1994 the Bundestag’s official commission of enquiry registered, in the German-language area alone, 750 scholarly projects on the future of the former GDR. By now this number has probably grown to more than 1,000. And finally, any work on recent German history takes place in the context of a public debate in which politics and scholarship are unusually closely intertwined. This discussion has been marked by sharp controversies between accusing and apologetic, between conciliating and condemning voices. Perhaps the detached view of someone who is familiar with the querelles allemandes, but not caught up in them, is needed for any attempt at a synthesis in such a confused situation, a synthesis which lays bare the anatomy of the second German state and exposes the ways ‘in which the dictatorship was sustained and the manner in which it finally came to an end’ (p. 14).

How was it possible for an imported dictatorship, which was never wanted by a majority of the population, to exist in an outwardly stable form in Germany for more than forty years, and then to collapse

* Mary Fulbrook’s response will be published in the November 1998 issue of the Bulletin.
overnight? Mary Fulbrook rightly rejects the two most common explanatory models. The statement that the durability of the dictatorship was the result of the ‘alleged docility of the apolitical German’ (p. 270), a view derived from the well-known Sonderweg thesis, does not stand up to closer scrutiny. On the contrary, an examination of the internal workings of the GDR reveals the ubiquity of popular unrest. The sources that have now become available show that the East Germans’ dissatisfaction with their state was by no means less than that in other Eastern bloc states. Nor do the explanations that see GDR life based solely on Soviet bayonets hold water. The view that the GDR was kept alive only by Soviet power, seemingly confirmed by the events of 1989, cannot explain the different degrees of stability in the Eastern European states, all of which were subject to Soviet hegemony. Nor does it do justice to the phenomenon of complicity and resistance, which also shaped the second German dictatorship. But if neither anthropological nor foreign policy explanatory patterns can do justice to the paradox of the stability and collapse of the GDR, then internal key factors must be identified, which can illuminate how domination was really exercised, interpreted, supported, and endured in the GDR.

Fulbrook’s approach makes sense. She puts forward a thesis of the ‘critical historicization’ of the GDR. After an initial phase of delegitimization and distancing from the second German dictatorship, this notion gradually seems to have begun gaining ground. It is suitable for countering public and academic polarization, and can help us reach a historical assessment of the GDR going beyond condemnation and ‘ostalgie’. Just because this book’s approach and the degree of reflection in it are so informative, I shall critically juxtapose what it sets out to do, and what it actually achieves. From this point of view, the work holds some disappointments in the area of theory. Almost in passing, Fulbrook rejects approaches drawn from the theory of totalitarianism, and in particular, a comparison between the Nazi and SED dictatorships. She explains the renaissance of such comparisons in rather general terms as a political rather than scholarly phenomenon. The propaganda service it can render the process of coming to terms with and delegitimizing a defunct dictatorship is in inverse proportion to its analytical usefulness. Rather, Fulbrook suggests, it invites cheap ‘black-and-white depictions of the GDR [which] tend to categorize the dictatorship rather simply, in terms of oppressors and victims, rulers and repressed’ (p. 127). However, it could be argued that the theory of
totalitarianism, which has now become highly differentiated, has long gone beyond a simple equation between ‘brown’ and ‘red’ dictatorships. In fact, by systematically distinguishing between the theory and reality of totalitarian claims, by looking at the interpretative concept of ‘political religion’ and bringing it up to date, and by addressing the question of the totalitarian potential of the modern period in general, the theory of totalitarianism has become open to issues which are also discussed by Fulbrook. More important, however, is a noticeable inconsistency in Fulbrook’s use of the totalitarian model which she first rejects so strongly. She herself argues within the framework of this theory in her examination of the dictatorship ‘from above’, for example, when she writes: ‘The party aimed at total penetration and control of social processes, total persuasion of all the people, total conformity and outward support’ (p. 62).

To return, however, to Fulbrook’s own analytical concept, her *Anatomy of a Dictatorship* is a post mortem, so to speak, at three levels. The first looks at ‘contours of domination’, the second at ‘patterns of complicity’, and the third at ‘challenges to domination’. The book covers the entire life-span of the GDR from 1945 to 1989, but in line with her approach the author concentrates on the periods when the system of domination was under particular challenge, or could have been, that is, 1953, 1956, 1968, and the 1980s. Economic and social developments in the GDR are not included; the ‘exploration of its inner processes’ (p. 14) is limited to an examination of its political culture (if this term is applicable to dictatorships of the Soviet type).

The first part centres on the viewpoint of the rulers. It is about ‘the ways in which the rulers conceived, presented and legitimated their power’ (p. 22). Here Fulbrook is on well-surveyed terrain. In a clearly structured account, she presents the mentality of domination of the SED dictators, and outlines the Stalinist transformation of fundamental anti-fascist legitimation and the emergence of the ubiquitous friend-foe mentality. Fulbrook is totally convincing when she relates the development of the dictatorship to generational change, and contrasts the two critical phases in the only apparently monolithic SED rule (1948-1955 and 1984-1989) with a period of stability and consolidation of power between 1971 and 1976, during which the rise of a technocratic generation, international recognition, and Honecker’s ‘unity of social and economic policy’ seemed crucially to reduce the gap between coercion and consent.
However, this first part does not fully convince me because of a methodological decision which shapes the whole investigation. The consciousness of the actors, their ideological convictions, traditional attitudes, and mentalities are largely excluded. This becomes clear when Fulbrook describes the SED leadership’s mentality of domination as a ‘curious combination of paternalism and paranoia’ (p. 22). The institutionalized demonology which suspected the machinations of the class enemy behind any resistance, and which blamed the West German anti-republic for every barrier to the state’s claim to total penetration seems paranoid to Fulbrook. Yet this sort of thinking was ‘paranoid’ only from a Western view. In fact, every outside influence from the non-socialist camp was a threat to the artificial closedness of the SED state, and the Party had to aspire to total domination in order to exist at all. The diagnosis of ‘paranoia’ resigns rather than explains, and ignores the possibility that the irrational thing was not the self-understanding of the rulers and especially of state security, but the reality on which it was based. There is a similar short circuit in Fulbrook’s argument on the role of the Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter (Stasi informers) which has been so prominent in the German debate. With their assistance, the East German Ministry for State Security was able to keep the country under Orwellian surveillance. The compliance with which such a shockingly large number of GDR citizens allowed themselves to be recruited as spies by the Stasi requires explanation. Fulbrook suggests a number of factors: naivety, boastfulness, a desire for political influence, and ignorance on the part of the recruits. Apart from a presumably rather short-hand assumption about the easiness of de-conspiring, Fulbrook argues from an ex post facto position which sees the Stasi as the personification of evil, as an immoral institution from the start. But did contemporaries act in the same understanding? Or do we need to look more closely and differentiate more precisely in terms of population groups and age cohorts when researching motives? In any case, the vast majority of Stasi recruitment records give ‘political-ideological conviction’ as the motive for self-commitment. As a rule, this stereotyped assessment was not the whole truth, but it points to a field of investigation that Fulbrook’s study bypasses: the points of view and the standards by which values were measured in the socialist dictatorship itself.

In the second main section Fulbrook looks at the complementary development of opposition challenges to the Communist dictatorship.
She rightly emphasizes that the GDR’s trajectory was less a decline and fall, to quote the title of a popular book by two East German historians (Armin Mitter and Stefan Wolle), than a ‘rise and fall’ (p. 172), and that the change in the nature of resistance from below contributed decisively to this result. Fulbrook argues that, paradoxically, the direct opposition and frontal challenge to the system of the 1950s unintentionally contributed to its stabilization and to the perfecting of its techniques of domination, whereas the reform attempts which came from within and aimed to improve socialist rule in the 1980s ultimately dug its grave.

This section is structured more chronologically than the first. Using reports on ‘moods and opinions’ and ‘special events’ from the East German trade unions (Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund), Fulbrook traces the development of political opposition during the forty years of SED rule. Her general conclusion that the extent of demonstrated dissatisfaction and political opposition in East Germany was far greater than the West was aware of before 1989 is convincing, and is confirmed by a number of more recent studies. However, Fulbrook’s concentration on a single group of sources raises a fundamental question. Do the proportions remain the same if the sources she uses allow her repeatedly to establish ‘clear indications of widespread unrest’ (p. 188), but not the extent of support for the regime at the same time? How, for example, does the ‘picture of uncoordinated protests and confused responses’ (p. 184), which she draws from her sources for the uprising of 17 June, square with the declarations of loyalty to the regime made, for instance, by many university teachers during the same period, as the records of the Central Committee’s Abteilung Wissenschaft (academic division) reveal? The conclusion that Fulbrook draws about the situation after the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961 is similarly problematic: ‘The regime had the power to control, but not the power to persuade’ (p. 192). But that is precisely the question. Many reports show that especially among Party intellectuals, the closure of the borders was regarded, however paradoxical it may seem, as a liberation from external pressure that would at last allow the Party leadership to embark on a course of reform. And this hope seemed to be vindicated until the Central Committee’s Kulturplenum of December 1965. It is a weakness of this book that it ignores the internal development of the people’s belief in legitimacy and the regime’s cohesive power, and therefore overlooks the significance of the key date of 1956 for the internal acceptance of the state in the GDR.
This also applies to the otherwise highly convincing account of the growth of a new type of opposition in the 1970s and 1980s. Fulbrook cautiously analyses the interconnections between the GDR’s internal and external situation. With good reason she takes the accord between the Protestant church and Honecker of March 1978 as the starting point for the development of reform-orientated groups whose organizational networks and new forms of publicity make it possible to speak of the gradual emergence of elements of a civil society in the GDR of the 1980s. The peace movement, in particular, proved a threat to the internal consistency of SED rule because it was capable of dissolving the ubiquitous friend-foe image by means of a way of thinking that valued the joint preservation of peace more highly than socialism. In the words of a letter by theology students, quoted by Fulbrook: ‘In our society, images of the enemy are constantly being created in order to arouse hatred and readiness to engage in violence. This hinders a positive attitude towards peace’ (p. 205).

Fulbrook suggests dividing the emergence of the new opposition into three stages. The period from 1978 to 1984 she sums up as a phase of the ‘controlled ventilation of dissent’ (p. 206), in which the Protestant church leadership was able to keep political protest within the bounds of religiosity and the church, thus fulfilling the regime’s demands. The next stage, from 1984 to 1987, she calls a phase of transition in which the state seemed to have triumphed by successfully demoralizing the peace movement and exiling many of its activists. The final stage covers the period from 1987 to 1989, when the SED regime wanted to return to open repression because the church leadership was no longer capable of effectively controlling an opposition movement that was becoming increasingly differentiated. This process, the result of increasing instability and political polarization, could no longer be prevented.

The approach chosen by Fulbrook means that large sections of this account are more narrative than analytical. The crucial question of what the decisive internal causes of the breathtaking process of delegitimizing the SED state were in the last three years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, is touched on only in passing, or overshadowed by judgements such as this about the culmination of the crisis in the summer of 1989: ‘The moment was clearly ripe for the nascent movements for democratization within the GDR’ (p. 241). This section presents the conditions under which ‘increasing numbers of East
Germans began to change from being passive subjects to active citizens’ (p. 247). Fulbrook asks the second question, equally crucial to the collapse: ‘Why were SED and Stasi so helpless in the face of mass popular unrest, despite the massively increased numbers of those working in the state security apparatus, and in stark contrast to the smooth, effective repression of unrest in 1968?’ (p. 252). Yet Erich Mielke’s dumbfounded question, put retrospectively – ‘How did it come that we simply gave up our GDR, just like that?’ (p. 252) – remains in the most profound sense unanswered. Fulbrook compensates with an admittedly dense and successful description of the SED’s final loss of power between October and December 1989, which ended with the seemingly resolute decision to put the security forces on a state of alert and the loss of the ‘functionaries’ will to rule’ (p. 263).

The most interesting section of the book, however, is devoted neither to the regime nor to its opponents, but to the in-between region of popular behaviour which reveals the limits of the state’s claim to exercise total control. In other words, it examines patterns of popular compliance and complaint which do not submit unconditionally to Party influence. Here the analysis concentrates not on the minority of the rulers, nor on the even smaller minority of open opponents, but on the broad majority of the population and their ‘strategies of coping, of coming to terms with an often repressive but not always unpleasant regime’ (p. 124). Where, if not here, should the secret of the stability of the Communist dictatorship be found? For good reason more and more studies of the GDR deal with the phenomenon of ‘loyal reluctance’ (‘loyale Widerwilligkeit’) and, taking a cultural history or history of everyday life approach, investigate the development of a belief in the legitimacy of the system and a positive sense of self in the second German dictatorship.

Yet even Fulbrook’s impressive analysis leaves much to be explained here. She insists too dogmatically on her initial hypothesis that the GDR lacked internal legitimacy. If, at the same time, ‘the population of the GDR’ was certainly not ‘the most docile in character, the least “uppity”’... ‘among Eastern European states’ (p. 129), as she claims, then the investigation runs the risk of missing the point that it wanted to explain, namely, the longevity and relative stability of the SED dictatorship. The author resorts to the explanation that ‘the central thesis of this book [is] that popular discontent alone was not sufficient to fell the system’ (p. 127). This is as general as it is true, but it does not
take the argument much further, and is certainly not the main statement of her book. This is, rather, the thesis, supported by numerous examples, that responding to pressures to conform and making use of the remaining areas in which they were free to act, the people of the GDR developed a type of behaviour that could be described as a ‘combination of conformity and crumbling’ (p. 139). Fundamentally, this refers back to the argument, popularized by Günter Gaus and expressly acknowledged by Fulbrook, of a niche society, in which the ‘East Germans came to terms with the pressures and demands of their regime by leading a double life of outward conformity combined with private authenticity’ (p. 129). Taken together with the fact that resistance and disobedience were always more widespread than was once assumed, something that Fulbrook demonstrates convincingly, she concludes that ‘perhaps the “niche society” [was] not so much an accurate description of a passive reality’ as ‘a reflection of the efficiency of East German security and police forces in repressing unrest’ (p. 141).

There are two objections to this finding and to the account of daily dissent and resistance which follows. First, the rather static dichotomy – ironically, one inspired by theories of totalitarianism – between ‘above’ and ‘below’, between the claim to power and submission, and between action by the state and reaction on the part of the people leaves little space for the numerous areas of transition, mutual interactions, and areas of overlap between ruling and being ruled in SED society. Secondly, and to my mind more seriously, Fulbrook never reflects systematically on the difference between loyalty and legitimacy in the GDR, and how they were related. Her *Anatomy of a Dictatorship* merely delineates the coercive power of the political system. This continued to exist even under the conditions of normalization in the 1960s and 1970s, in essence, in the state of emergency, imposing external resignation and conformity. And as a result of the monolithic self-presentation of the SED leadership, it long remained effective. But this is just one side of the coin. The other is the admittedly limited and socially highly differentiated development of a popular belief in the legitimacy of the SED in the Weberian sense. While it did not have to be bound to ideological conviction, it did go beyond merely outward conformity. And finally, in Foucaultian terms, it was not least the order of another discourse that helped shape the political culture of the GDR. Without including this, the book’s main question – ‘why is it that the dominated accept their own subordination’ (p. 272) – perhaps cannot fully be answered.
It must be asked whether the disintegration of this doctrinaire and closed discourse of domination during the 1980s did not contribute more to the destabilization of the GDR than the rigidity of the gerontocratic Party leadership. It could also be asked whether this disintegration of the artificial reality of a Communist dictatorship was not a crucial factor in creating the astonishing phenomenon of a SED leadership which, by the end, had lost its own will to domination. To sum up, it could be said that this impressively conceived, fluently written, and in many respects extremely stimulating study by Mary Fulbrook profitably investigates the anatomy of a dictatorship, but that the result of her post mortem is not yet final.

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