

BOOK REVIEW

## End Game: The 1989 Revolution in East Germany

**By Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk. Translated from the German by Patricia C. Sutcliffe. New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2023. Pp. 532. Hardcover \$179.00. ISBN: 978-1800736214.**

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This is probably the best book about the 1989 revolution in East Germany. To have it available now in English translation, after fourteen years, is a very good thing. In its original context, the book came out in Germany in 2009, as one of many works that marked the twentieth anniversary of the peaceful revolution in the German Democratic Republic. The book is based on careful historical research and archival work, but Kowalczyk, born in East Germany in 1967, is himself a witness to history, and his passion for the subject is evident on every page. None of what he writes about is merely academic; he clearly has a strong personal interest—and stake—in the subject as well.

Although he has academic historical training, Kowalczyk is not a conventional academic historian. He does not have a position at a university and has instead worked primarily elsewhere, above all at the Stasi Records Agency, which is now part of the Federal Archive. The book benefits considerably from Kowalczyk's access to such sources, but it goes well beyond the Stasi Archive to include a vast trove of published and unpublished sources. While the author takes issue with some of the key positions within the academic historiography of the GDR, he does not do so in the manner of an academic historian who might typically cite sources and identify intellectual opponents. For instance, he argues that "The GDR was not a 'niche society' and certainly not a 'welfare dictatorship' or even a 'consensus dictatorship'" (137) without referencing any of these terms or identifying the people who coined them. The idea of a "welfare dictatorship" is associated primarily with the work of Konrad Jarausch on the GDR, while the idea of a "niche society," again used with reference to the GDR, comes from Günter Gaus, who was West Germany's first official "permanent representative" to East Germany. The term "consensus dictatorship," meanwhile, has been used by Peter Fritzsche to refer to Nazi Germany and by Martin Sabrow to refer to the GDR. All of these terms, when used in reference to the GDR, are attempts to get away from rigid top-down models of "totalitarianism"—which imagine an all-powerful central authority and a powerless population whose existence is reduced primarily to the status of the victim—and to show the ways in which citizens may even participate in and draw benefit from a dictatorship. For someone used to reading academic historiography, it can be disconcerting to see such widely accepted and acknowledged notions summarily dismissed without reference to specific arguments or the people who make them. Although the book is very strong on primary sources, it is weak on secondary ones.

At the same time, however, Kowalczyk's picture of the late GDR is anything but traditional top-down Cold War historiography. The entire first part of the book—comprising seven chapters, the majority—gives readers "Images of a Social Crisis" that show in considerable detail how hollowed-out and brittle the East German dictatorship had become by the late

1980s, on the eve of the revolution. Large numbers of ordinary citizens—and especially young people, whom communist loyalists recognized as the most important group for the country's future—had rejected the dictatorship in social terms even before they began to work against it in concrete political terms. “GDR society also went under because it was terminally ill” (140), the author writes. In other words, the East German dictatorship in its final decade was hardly “totalitarian” in the sense of being all-powerful and all-encompassing. In these chapters, Kowalczyk seems inadvertently to support the idea that the GDR in its final years was, in fact, precisely a society of niches: after all, that is what East German churches, punk culture, right-wing youth culture, and a multiplicity of other non-conformist social formations actually were. And yet Kowalczyk steadfastly refuses to use the term. The reason for his refusal remains his secret; he does not reveal it in the book.

The other two sections of the book deal with the revolution itself, which the author sees as a direct outgrowth of the “social crisis.” The second section, “From the Social Crisis to a Crisis of the Dictatorship,” describes the early days of the revolution in September and October 1989, but also the essential prelude to those days: the fraudulent election of May 1989 and citizens' ongoing protests against that fraud. The third section, “The Fall of a Dictatorship,” moves from the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 to the elections of March 1990, which set East Germany on a path toward national reunification. The heroes of these sections are members of the East German opposition and social movements opposed to the communist dictatorship. West German chancellor Helmut Kohl also comes in for praise because he recognized the gravity of the situation in the east and moved quickly toward unification, whereas the West German Greens and large segments of the SPD (Social Democratic Party) come in for criticism because of their discomfort with notions of national unity. Kowalczyk suggests that in the crisis of November/December 1989, the ruling SED (Socialist Unity Party) decided to lay blame for the ills of the dictatorship at the feet of the country's security service, the Stasi, and he rightly argues that the focus on the Stasi has subsequently tended to serve as a convenient alibi for anyone who was not involved with the Stasi. The author even sympathetically cites Stasi chief Erich Mielke, who argued in a speech to the East German People's Chamber in November of 1989 that “We have reported all shortcomings ... The only thing is that perhaps what we reported was not always taken into account and was not assessed” (401). In other words, Kowalczyk argues, if anyone in the ruling apparatus knew about the real problems of the country it was the Stasi—but the Party leaders to whom they reported did not want to hear the bad news. After the collapse of the regime, however, the Stasi served as a convenient scapegoat for those very leaders, thus, ironically, fulfilling its assigned role as “shield and sword of the party, even when the party raised its sword against the” Stasi itself (401).

Although Kowalczyk has considerable sympathy with the main proponents of the East German revolution—for instance people like Bärbel Bohley, Rolf Henrich, Sebastian Pflugbeil, and Jens Reich, who helped to create the group New Forum—he does not share the ambivalence or even skepticism that many of them had toward German reunification itself; he is far from dreaming of democratic socialism. For him, ultimately, the struggle for freedom and the struggle for national unity were the same. He is not interested in dreams of utopia; he is content with an imperfect democracy in the here-and-now. On the other hand, in the eloquent and angry afterword to this edition, Kowalczyk argues that the actual process of reunification has been exceedingly unfair to East Germans. This does not lead him to revisit the revolutionary concepts of a “Third Way” between capitalism and dictatorial socialism that developed in the autumn of 1989, however. Other analysts might differ from him on this and other points. Nevertheless, this is an indispensable book about the East German revolution, and while there are occasional slight problems with the English translation, the book is nevertheless highly readable and engaging.