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BOOK REVIEW

1989 – Eine Epochenzäsur?

Edited by Martin Sabrow, Tilmann Siebeneichner, and Peter Ulrich Weiß. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2021. Pp. 307. Hardcover €27.94. ISBN: 978-3835350212.

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1989 – Eine Epochenzäsur?, a collection of essays edited by Martin Sabrow, Tilmann Siebeneichner, and Peter Ulrich Weiß, originated in a Humboldt University (Berlin) 2019/2020 lecture series on the impact of 1989 in East Germany and central and eastern Europe. The contributing scholars interrogate the extent to which 1989 can be understood as a caesura and examine both the liberal and illiberal manifestations of the collapse of state socialism. The book does not profess to be comprehensive but rather to provide focused analysis of individual topics. Nonetheless, the editors could have done more to craft an introduction that pulls the contributions together and explains the organizational layout of the book, thereby allowing the essays to be in conversation with one another. Notwithstanding this critique, *1989 – Eine Epochenzäsur?* is a thought-provoking book that explores the question embedded in its title through careful historical research on a range of diverse historical topics.

1989 is taken "unquestionably" as the "endpoint of an epoch" (9), Martin Sabrow writes in the opening essay, and this caesura framing is embedded in the many documentaries, films, and anniversaries that have marked the collapse of dictatorship and celebrate the victory of freedom and democracy. Yet, as Sabrow argues, these commemorations often convey mythologies, not histories. Many East German citizen activists envisioned a "third way" rather than an absorption of the GDR into the BRD, for example, yet such "third way" ideas are not a site of remembrance. Likewise, the question of to whom 1989 belongs is caught up in competing historical narratives that have little correspondence to the actual historical events, with both heirs of the East German citizens' movements and right-wing populists claiming to embody the true spirit of 1989. Sabrow describes the essays of the book as intended to use careful, focused historical research to question and correct these mythologies.

Reflecting "1989" as a shorthand for transformations throughout the Eastern bloc, five of the volume's 14 chapters look beyond Germany to examine central Europe, southern Europe, and the Soviet Union more broadly. André Steiner casts a wide net in a chapter on socialism and economic globalization and demonstrates that the collapse of state socialism was decisively a caesura in both the engagement of former socialist economies in the global economy and in economic globalization itself, though with variations between the former East Germany, which became part of the European Union by way of its reunification with West Germany, and other former socialist states. Nenad Stefanov analyzes the intellectual discourses on post-socialist Europe which contrasted the "civilized" central European states, who oriented themselves to the west and worked to join the European Union, with the "uncivilized" Balkans, which descended into violence and war. Stefanov rejects this framework and argues that the developments in the Balkans are more properly explained by a longer-term process through which ethnic understandings of national belonging, often

closely identified with political authoritarianism, replaced democratic foundations for national belonging. Such authoritarian populism, he soberly concludes, can hold great appeal in many places, not just Yugoslavia. Dieter Segert likewise analyzes the rise of populism throughout central and eastern Europe, demonstrating that capitalism and democracy, as many observers had assumed in 1989, are not inherently bound together. Indeed, in the absence of economic security, many citizens have moved away from liberal democratic parties to embrace populist political movements. Jan C. Behrends's analysis of the top-down nature of the collapse of Soviet communism vis-a-vis the revolutions in central Europe and the authoritarian continuities that continue to shape post-Soviet Russia, and Jochen Töpfer's political and sociological analysis of stagnation in the former Yugoslavian states, round out the volume's chapters that take a broad look at central and eastern Europe.

The volume also features nine Germany-centered chapters that interrogate the extent and the nature of 1989 as a caesura. Several reveal unrecognized influences East Germany had on united Germany. Anja Schröter demonstrates that many women from the former GDR did not seek alimony during divorce proceedings in united Germany, due to their GDR-era experiences in dual-earner marriages that had normalized female economic independence. By 2008, German alimony law, which had previously reflected widespread West German assumptions about female dependence on male breadwinners, shifted to reflect the East German model of the individual breadwinner. The merger of East and West Germany was not, Schröter concludes, one-sided. Jutta Braun's chapter on the reunification of East and West German sports systems likewise complicates one-sided narratives of western absorption of the east. At the grassroots level, centralized East German sports organizations rapidly disbanded and registered as *Vereine*, thus joining the independent Verein tradition that had characterized West German sport in the postwar years. In the realm of elite sports, in contrast, West German sports associations sent sports functionaries to learn from the successful sports methods of the East German system, and West German clubs and teams in a variety of sports actively recruited successful East German athletes. This openness to East German sports constituted a clear contrast with the West German devaluation of East German training and expertise in other spheres of society and economy. True, Braun argues, revelations about state-sponsored doping in the GDR cast a shadow over efforts to borrow from the East German system, with "doping victim" emerging as a category of oppression. Yet, nuances are evident even here, as legal queries into doping in East Germany also brought West German doping traditions to light. As Braun writes, sports was the only area where unification brought the misdeeds of the BRD and not just the GDR to light. Astrid Mignon Kirchhof demonstrates how several pre-existing East German environmental initiatives, such as campaigns to create national parks, came to fruition in the context of reunification, which provided East Germans the opportunity to form citizens' initiatives and engage in direct advocacy. Ultimately, five natural sites in the former East Germany gained formal recognition as national parks in Germany's 1990 unification treaty. Yet, because West Germany had created national parks in the 1960s, the long-standing East German engagement on behalf of the five new parks is usually overlooked, with their creation attributed to West German leadership during reunification.

Continuities across 1989 in East Germany come forward in chapters by Peter Ulrich Weiß and Mandy Tröger on post-reunification developments in television and newspaper publishing. As Tröger shows for newspapers, despite the hopes of some activists in the citizens' movements of 1989 for a new form of media that aligned with neither state socialism nor with profit-oriented market capitalism, 1989 was clearly a caesura for East Germany's press, as Western media corporations assumed ownership of former East German newspapers. Yet continuities remained, as the vast majority of the editors and staff were former East Germans. Weiss likewise shows how the East German television stations fell under West German corporate control. At the same time, however, regional channels such as Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk and Ostdeutscher Rundfunk Brandenburg remained 90 percent eastern in personnel and focused on broadcasting programs from the former East

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Germany or developed with a former East German audience in mind. The strong "eastern" identity of these regional stations helped ease the transition of the East German state from lived experience to memory.

Rounding out the chapters on Germany are essays by Tilmann Siebeneichner on astrofuturism in both Germanies before and after 1989, Peter Brandt on transitions on the German Left since the 1980s with a particular focus on the PDS and Linke parties in unified Germany, Matthias Warstat on the merger of the West and East Berlin theater scenes, and Gerhard Sälter on the influence of post anti-communist ideologies on post-reunification understandings of the GDR.

Although the book does not have a formal conclusion that pulls its themes together, Sälter's essay, which comes last, nicely aligns with Sabrow's opening chapter about mythmaking. Sälter demonstrates how an early Cold War era anti-communist framework, embedded in postwar desires to bypass engagement with the crimes of the Third Reich and boost West German state legitimacy, dominated post-unification efforts to process the complex history of East German state and society. He calls for the replacement of this anti-communist framework, which embraced a good versus evil narrative and overlooked the complexities of everyday life for many East Germans, with careful "historicization and contextualization" (301–302). By raising provocative questions and featuring rigorous scholarship, *1989 – Eine Epochenzäsur?* provides an excellent example of how careful and contextualized historical research advances historical understanding.

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