Everyday Communism: New Social History of the German Democratic Republic

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Konrad Jarausch, ed., *Dictatorship as Experience. Toward a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999), 388 pp., £14.00 (pb), ISBN 1-57181-182-6.

Thomas Lindenberger, ed., *Herrschaft und Eigensinn in der Diktatur* (Cologne, Weimar and Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 1999) 367 pp., €39.90 (hb), ISBN 3-412-13598-4.

Annegret Schüle, '*Die Spinne'. Die Erfahrungsgeschichte weiblicher Industriearbeit im VEB Leipziger Baumwollspinnerei* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2001), 398 pp., €18.00 (pb), ISBN 3-934565-87-5.

Patrick Major and Jonathan Osmond, eds., *The Workers' and Peasants' State. Communism and Society in East Germany under Ulbricht 1945–71* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 272 pp., £15.99 (pb), ISBN 0-7190-6289-6.

Joshua Feinstein, *The Triumph of the Ordinary. Depictions of Daily Life in the East German Cinema 1949–1989* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 331 pp., £19.50 (pb), ISBN 0-8078-5385-2.

The works reviewed here are part of an upsurge in research on the communist countries since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The collapse of these regimes has opened the floodgates to what Jarausch has called 'historicisation', made possible by the opening of archives and a relative decline in politically entrenched historiographical oppositions.[1] The German Democratic Republic (GDR) is especially accommodating in this regard, since most of its archives were opened up very rapidly in the 1990s. All the volumes reviewed here reflect well the quality of empirical research into the very diverse archive sources, and also of oral history. However, despite the abundant documentation, the history of the GDR still raises a good number of questions. The

[1] The history of communist regimes is still riven with political and historiographical conflicts, particularly owing to the persistence of the 'victim-oppressor' syndrome. As far as the GDR is concerned, the situation is further complicated by the unification spearheaded by the Federal Republic. Whereas West Germans have tended to take a decidedly negative view of their new fellow citizens, the latter have developed a strong sense of identity often expressed through what has been called 'ostalgia'. See Detlef Pollack, 'Wirtschaftlicher, sozialer und mentaler Wandel in Ostdeutschland. Eine Bilanz nach zehn Jahren', *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* (2000), 40. The problem of identity in the GDR, both before and after reunification, provides non-'Germans' with ample licence to interest themselves in its historiography. On this see also the introduction to Feinstein's *Triumph of the Ordinary*, p. 17.

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sources may be numerous, but they can also be difficult to exploit.[2] Moreover, the 'archive revolution' and the upsurge in primary research have developed alongside attempts to explore new explanatory paradigms, as witnessed by the vast number of studies published since the 1990s, including those reviewed here.

Besides being part of this renewal, the works discussed in this essay also belong to a historiographical trend of which the fulcrum, so to speak, is the Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung in Potsdam (Institute for Research into Contemporary History, ZZF). Its work is represented by two collections, of which one, edited by the current director, Konrad Jarausch, is of papers from a conference on 'Die DDR eine moderne Diktatur' ('The GDR: A Modern Dictatorship?') held in Potsdam in 1996. The second, edited by Thomas Lindenberger, reports results from one of the Centre's research teams. There can be no doubt that the ZZF has been the prime mover in the construction, and particularly the dissemination, of a new social history of the GDR. Created in 1996 as the successor to the Forschungsschwerpunkt Zeithistorische Studien, founded in 1992 by Jürgen Kocka, who was succeeded as director by Christoph Klessmann together with Konrad Jarausch, it has always included both East German historians (formerly of the Academy of Sciences) and West Germans, and has always favoured comparative and multidisciplinary approaches. It aims to encourage primary research freed from the totalitarian paradigm which 'reproduces totalitarian ideology instead of analysing it' (Mario Kessler and Thomas Klein, 'Repression and Tolerance as Methods of Rule', in *Dictatorship as Experience*, p. 111), and tries to understand the 'normal' political working of this regime in its social and cultural dimensions. This approach is also accepted by the others whose works are reviewed here: both Feinstein and Major and Osmond stress in their introductions how much they have learned from discussion with ZZF historians.

However, although in one way they belong to a consistent ensemble, these works also draw on different historiographical traditions. While Annegret Schüle is influenced by ZZF approaches, she also follows in the wake of pre-collapse historians such as Lutz Niethammer, Alexander von Plato and Dorothee Wierling, whose extensive oral history projects prepared the way for a 'comprehensive' approach by placing individual experience at the core of historiography.[3] The English and American researchers whose work is reviewed here draw on approaches to social history revived in the 1970s, and on the results of 'revisionist' histories of the Soviet Union.[4] Alongside these we may place work done in France since the 1990s which is largely inspired by a socio-historical approach to politics.[5] This historiography of

[2] Among the numerous studies of this problem see Peter Becker and Alf Lüdtke, eds., *Akten, Eingaben, Schaufenster. Die DDR und ihre Texte. Erkundungen zu Herrschaft und Alltag* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997), and special issue 'Archives de l'Est', *Genèses*, Sciences sociales et histoire, 52 (Sept. 2003).

[3] Lutz Niethammer, Alexander von Plato and Dorothee Wierling, *Die Volkseigene Erfahrung. Eine Archäologie des Lebens in der Industrieprovinz der* DDR (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1991).

[4] By e.g. Sheila Fitzpatrick, Moshe Lewin, Stephen Kotkin and Lewis Siegelbaum.

[5] Recent works in this line are Sandrine Kott, *Le communisme au quotidien, les entreprises d'Etat dans la société est-allemande* (Paris: Belin, 2001); Jay Rowell, 'L'Etat totalitaire en action. Les politiques du logement en RDA (1945–1989)', doctoral dissertation, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales,

the GDR, and of communism more generally, seems to me a successful example of encounters and cross-fertilisation between national historiographical traditions which formerly seemed to be on proximate but parallel lines.

Approaches to the study of everyday life under communism

All these works have a common aim: to present a 'nuanced' view of communism, transcending the polar opposition between 'totalitarian' historians interested chiefly in repression and 'revisionist' historians who look only at social actors and social logic and so tend to ignore political constraints. Thus our authors seek not to shoe-horn the GDR into a preconceived political category, but rather to understand the peculiar nature of the regime. To do this it is necessary first to 'penetrate beneath the uniform surface of dictatorship' (Jarausch in *Dictatorship as Experience*, p. 11) or get into the system's 'black box' so as to get behind the most obvious aspects of political and social structures and understand how they really worked from day to day. Both Lindenberger and Jarausch say in their introductory essays that they are looking for the hidden articulations between the essential political abnormality of dictatorship and the normality, even banality, of everyday life in East German society. Feinstein offers an interesting defence of this viewpoint, arguing that this very banality of daily life turned into a major structuring element of East German identity.

This induces our authors to venture outside disciplinary boundaries. In 'Retheorising State and Society in the GDR', her stimulating conclusion to *The Workers' and Peasants' State*, Mary Fulbrook strongly emphasises the need to examine 'the inter-relations between the overlapping and mutually informing elements of state and society' (p. 289). Most of these works are at the interface between the social, the political and the cultural. Lindenberger studies political domination both as social praxis and in its symbolic dimension; Schüle views dictatorship and work as a social and cultural experience; Feinstein sees culture as a political object.

While sharing a common viewpoint, these authors utilise diverse methodologies. The essays in Jarausch's *Dictatorship as Experience* and Major and Osmond's *Workers' and Peasants' State* are chiefly macro-social; Feinstein, Lindenberger and particularly Schüle prefer a micro-historical or ethnographic approach that owes a good deal to the *Alltagsgeschichte* (history of everyday life) pioneered by Alf Lüdtke.[6] These authors attribute some importance to everyday routines and practices and try to restore 'ordinary people' to a place at the heart of history. Nevertheless, while preferring the view from below, they do not scorn an analysis 'from above', while keeping the focus on individual behaviours and strategies rather than institutions. These individuals are seen not as agents, which would mean accepting the 'totalitarian' idea that society

2001, and 'Pouvoir périphérique et "centralisme démocratique" en RDA', *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine*, 49, 2 (2002), 102–25; Michel Christian, 'Le SED et les entreprises est-allemandes pendant les années 1960', *ibid*., 145–76; and current work by Emmanuel Droit on education, Caroline Moine on cinema and Agnès Bensussan on the opposition.

[6] See esp. Alf Lüdtke, ed., *Alltagsgeschichte zur Rekonstruktion historischer Erfahrungen und Lebensweisen* (Frankfurt: Campus, 1989), trans. as *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

ceases to exist under a dictatorship, but as actors. Some authors, having restored individuals as actors of their own history, try to reconstruct their behaviour, whereas for Dorothee Wierling ('The Hitler Youth Generation in the GDR. Insecurities, Ambitions and Dilemmas', in *Dictatorship as Experience*), Annegret Schüle and (to a lesser degree) Leonore Ansorg ('"Irgendwie war da eben kein System drin": Strukturwandel und Frauenerwerbstätigkeit in der Ost-Prignitz (1968–1989)', in *Herrschaft als Eigensinn*) it is the experience acquired in specific contexts that constitutes the individual as a political subject. Schüle points out the evident (active/passive) contradiction between these two approaches, but stresses that it is possible, and indeed necessary, to combine them, particularly by drawing on various sources of enquiry. Schüle, Wierling and Patrice Poutrus ('"Mit Politik kann ich keine Hühner aufziehen": Das Kombinat Industrielle Mast und die Lebenserinnerungen der Frau Knut', *ibid*.), who are all attempting to reconstruct the everyday life experiences of female workers who left few written sources, base their work on interviews, which in turn shape the authors' approach. Schüle, on the basis of long conversations with working women, sees each of them as a product of some formative experience, whereas company records (particularly the collective journals kept by the brigades) rather emphasise the active role these women played. The balance is almost entirely the other way in the essays by Ansorg, Dagmar Langenhan ('"Halte Dich fern von Kommunisten, die wollen nicht arbeiten!" Kollektivierung der Landwirtschaft und bäuerlicher Eigen-sinn am Beispiel Niederlausitzer Dörfer (1952 bis Mitte der sechziger Jahre)', *ibid*.) and especially Feinstein, all of whom use interviews to circumvent all-pervading official discourse and explain how the actors themselves coped with their 'life world' (*Lebenswelt*). In every case, the interview is a valuable tool for analysing the creation of the new socialist individual – 'the formation of social personality' which Mary Fulbrook sees as the ideal central focus of communism studies (*Workers' and Peasants' State*, p. 290).

In order to recover the viewpoint of these 'actors' and understand the interactions between them, our authors sometimes prioritise micro-social observation. Langenhan examines peasant attitudes to collectivisation in certain villages; Feinstein, analysing a number of East German films, probes the complex relationships between personal aesthetic choice and general political constraint. Industrial firms are another favourite observatory of both individual experience and social or political relationships, exploited by Poutrus, Ansorg and Schüle, who justify this preference by stressing the importance of such firms in personal and collective life, particularly for women. Peter Hübner, like many others, characterises the GDR as a 'society of work' ('Stagnation or Change? Transformation of the Workplace in the GDR', in *Dictatorship as Experience*), meaning particularly work in industry where the firm is not just a unit of production but a central institution of the regime – indeed, the GDR has been defined as a firm-centred society (*betriebszentrierte Gesellschaft*).[7]

[7] See esp. Martin Kohli, 'Die DDR als Arbeitsgesellschaft? Arbeit, Lebenslauf und soziale Differenzierung', in Hartmut Kaelble, Jürgen Kocka and Hartmut Zwahr, eds., *Sozialgeschichte der DDR* (Stuttgart: Klett Cotta, 1994), 31–62; Renate Hürtgen, 'Entwicklung in der Stagnation', in Renate

Dictatorship and its limits

None of the works reviewed here seeks to deny the dictatorial nature of the regime. While none of them focuses on political repression, the monopolising of power by the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (Sozialistische Einheitspartei, SED) and the constraints it imposed on individuals underlie all the essays involved. In fact, several directly tackle the question how and by what forms of control the SED exerted its political and ideological monopoly, and how this impacted on the 'public space'. Mark Allinson argues that politicians in the GDR were literally obsessed by the need to know what their citizens were thinking, not so much in order to meet their needs as to head off or monitor expressions of discontent ('Popular Opinion', in *Workers' and Peasants' State*). Siegfried Lokatis and Sylvia Klötzer think that as far as control of the arts was concerned the system of East German censorship in the 1960s was among the most modern and efficient in the world ('Criticism and Censorship. Negotiating Cabaret Performance and Book Production', in *Dictatorship as Experience*). Control of the Lutheran Church, to which 80 per cent of the population belonged, was particularly rigorous as the Party tried to restrict its influence. Merrilyn Thomas shows how the Church finally bowed to the SED's demands in an attempt to maintain its influence at individual level. Both the introduction of civil communion (*Jugendweihe*) and the building of the Wall, which put an end to Protestant unity, encouraged the Church to refrain from direct opposition – but this did, in the long run, safeguard its independence ('The Evangelical Church in the GDR', in Major and Osmond, *Workers' and Peasants' State*).

There can be no doubt that, as Mario Kessler and Thomas Klein suggest ('Repression and Tolerance as Methods of Rule', in *Dictatorship as Experience*), censorship and political control prevented the constitution of a public space and encouraged individual and collective defection. Gareth Pritchard argues, using the suppression of the 17 June 1953 revolt as an example, that the SED's crude stigmatisation of the ringleaders as 'saboteurs' shocked many Party members, particularly those among the most ardent communists, into resigning; which in turn facilitated the Stalinisation of the Party and its domination by the cadres ('Workers and the SED in 1953', in *Workers' and Peasants' State*). While the reported opinions examined by Allinson are mostly unfavourable to the regime, the population seems to have remained generally apathetic, a fact he attributes chiefly to a retreat into the private sphere.

Defection was an important expression of political opinion in the GDR. Patrick Major shows that while *Republikflucht* (escaping the republic) was stigmatised as a criminal offence – desertion – it was first and foremost an expression of dissent, albeit not untainted by economic motives. Several authors, following Hirschman,[8] have

Hürtgen and Thomas Reichel, eds., *Der Schein der Stabilität. DDR-Betriebsalltag in der Ära Honecker* (Berlin: Metropol, 2001), 12.

[8] Albert O Hirschman, *Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations and States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970). Hirschman demonstrates the applicability of his model to the GDR in an article, 'Exit, Voice, and the Fate of the German Democratic Republic: An Essay in Conceptual History', *World Politics*, 45, 2 (Jan. 1993), 173–202.

pointed out that these desertions made it impossible to create a political opposition. In the long run they paralysed communication within East German society and so, arguably, contributed to its collapse.

Dictatorship as such is at the centre of the volume edited by Konrad Jarausch, which, as Christoph Klessmann explains ('Rethinking the Second German Dictatorship', in *Dictatorship as Experience*), seeks to explain how the GDR regime worked, and the factors which made it unique. Jürgen Kocka's term 'modern dictatorship' implies that the GDR regime was a continuation of previous German history. This thesis tends to extend the *Sonderweg* approach, in that it sees the GDR as, in a way, the outcome of a process of modernisation beginning in the nineteenth century, embracing such elements as bureaucracy, working-class movements, and so on; and it recognises that the GDR regime contributed to the rationalisation of politics (bureaucracy) and of economics (planning) ('The GDR: A Special Kind of Modern Dictatorship?', *ibid*.). Klessmann, however, points out that unlike Poland and other less industrialised Eastern bloc countries, East Germany saw very little real 'modernisation' during the socialist period. Jarausch lays more stress on the dogooder paternalism of what he calls the East German 'welfare dictatorship'. This approach works better when applied to the last twenty years of the regime, when it throws light on the diversity of the resources – going far beyond the mere exercise of political terror – exploited by the dictatorship. It also makes sense of Party rhetoric with its harping on the idea of 'gratitude and love'. But Hübner concludes that while social policy was an essential prop to the regime's stability, its 'uncaring application by the SED' limited its political impact on East German citizens ('Stagnation or Change?', p. 297).

Nonetheless, this was no monolithic dictatorship. From time to time it was subject to abrupt changes,[9] and these also were generated by conflicts within the apparatus of government. Monika Kaiser shows that the change from Walter Ulbricht to Erich Honecker coincided with a change of political direction ('Reforming Socialism? The Changing of the Guard from Ulbricht to Honecker during the 1960s', in *Dictatorship as Experience*). The failure of Ulbricht's 'reformist' policies led to the victory of a new political elite backed by Soviet leaders hostile to Khruschev's reforms. With this in mind, several authors writing in the 1990s or later, reacting against the 'totalitarian' thesis which assumed that total state control really did lead to social asphyxia, have pointed out that dictatorship had its limits.[10] Detlef Pollack identifies seven fault lines, or areas of conflict, which imposed limits on state control ('Modernization and Modernization Blockages', in *Dictatorship as Experience*).

The external limits have been studied by Jochen Laufer and Michael Lemke (respectively 'From Dismantling to Currency Reform: External Origins of the Dictatorship, 1943–1948', and 'Foreign Influences on the Dictatorial Development

[9] It should be borne in mind that the bulk of research to date has focused on the first twenty years, as our authors are well aware.

[10] See esp. Richard Bessell and Ralph Jessen, eds., *Die Grenzen der Diktatur. Staat und Gesellschaft in der DDR* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996). In their introduction the editors define and list these 'limits' to the dictatorship and sort them into three main groups: external, systemic and social.

of the GDR, 1949–1955', *ibid*.), who describe the constraints imposed by the great powers – particularly the USSR – during the formative period of the GDR, while Pollack brings out the subsequent importance of Western influence. As Burghard Cielsa and Patrice Poutrus have convincingly argued, East German economists consciously strove to emulate the Federal Republic; but at the same time the latter was, officially, a *negative* role model, even if its influence was tolerated, for example, in musical circles (see the essay by Toby Thacker, 'Dance Music in the Early GDR', in *Workers' and Peasants' State*). In fact, Western influence was an effective counter-balance to cultural and media censorship in the GDR (Simone Barck, Christoph Classen and Thomas Heimann, 'The Fettered Media', in *Dictatorship as Experience*).

The system-internal 'blockages' are identified by Detlef Pollack. The inefficiency of the planned economy contributed substantially to the undermining of the regime: Burghard Cielsa ('Eine sich selbst versorgende Konsumgesellschaft? Industrielle Fischfang, Fischverarbeitung und Fischwarenkonsum in der DDR', in *Herrschaft und Eigensinn*; see also Cielsa and Patrice Poutrus, 'Food Supply in a Planned Economy. SED Nutrition Policy Between Crisis Response and Popular Needs', in *Dictatorship as Experience*) shows how East Germany remained subject to an 'economy of penury',[11] despite the best efforts of the leaders to develop and diversify the supply of consumer goods, particularly from the 1960s onwards. Taking the fishing industry as an example, Cielsa analyses the shortcomings of central planning and shows that it never managed either to gear production to consumption or to meet consumers' needs. The East German consumer society of the leaders' dreams – in which they expected the population to believe implicitly – was baulked by the inherent limitations of the system. As for culture, the SED finally had to deny its own objectives and permit dance music in the 1950s – and American music too (Thacker, 'Dance Music'). Whether they were dealing with fish or with dancing, the leaders were forced to acknowledge and adapt to individual tastes and preferences, whatever their original objectives. It was this individual preference that constituted a third brake on the 'perfect' working of the system. That is why '*Eigen-sinn*' has in fact attracted more attention from these researchers than the evasions and practices of open resistance, which was confined to a minority. Thomas Reichel shows how the workers turned the official factory 'brigades' into a channel for their own demands ('"Jugoslawische Verhältnisse"? Die 'Brigaden der sozialistischen Arbeit' und die Syndikalismus-Affäre (1959–1962)', in *Herrschaft und Eigensinn*); Dagmar Lagenhan examines the resources used by ordinary peasants in their day-to-day resistance to collectivism ('"Halte Dich fern von Kommunisten"'); and Osmond convincingly demonstrates that the confiscation and subsequent collectivisation of land gave rise to settlements and realignments involving 'a complicated local interaction of personal, familial, social, economic and political motivation which militated against uniformity'('From Junker Estate to Co-operative Farm: East German Agrarian Society 1945–1961', in *Workers' and Peasants' State*). Feinstein, writing on cinema, concludes that there was no real,

[11] Echoing the methods of Hungarian economist Janos Kornai in *The Socialist System: the Political Economy of Communism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

unified cultural policy, but rather an endless to-ing and fro-ing between the demand for novelty and the desire to avoid upsetting entrenched habits; between the desire to convey a clear (but ever-changing) ideological message and the desire to produce films which would please audiences with an amalgam of realism and fiction. While it is true that political constraints weighed heavily on the arts, Feinstein considers it reductive to divide the protagonists into two separate camps, ruthlessly censorious administrators versus downtrodden creators. Until the 1960s at least, most artists were loyal to the regime and were in favour of socialist aims even if they disapproved of the way in which they were put into practice. On the other hand, there were state employees who strongly defended certain works of art.

All these essays are unanimous that the regime was capable of distorting – or reshaping – society, and also in saying that there were forms of social behaviour that remained stubbornly un-deformed, a token that a society, as such, did indeed exist.

A society in conflict?

The very expression 'East German society' has been vigorously disputed among historians. The 'totalitarianists' refuse to believe that any such society could have existed outside the political sphere. Following suggestions from left-wing writers, particularly Claude Lefort,[12] the political historian Sigrid Meuschel defends the idea that East German society was 'deformed', indeed 'annihilated', by the Party and the state:[13] the whole of society was homogenised by the Party's dictatorship, which finally asphyxiated it.[14] However, Pollack is the latest of many to point out that it is important to distinguish between the Party's aspirations and social and political reality. The SED did indeed attempt to homogenise society, but 'rather than absorbing society in its political constitution, the government's attempt to control and manipulate all social areas led instead to insoluble tensions within society' ('Modernization and Modernization Blockages', in *Dictatorship as Experience*).

The same conclusion is reached by Hübner ('Stagnation and Change'). He believes that the GDR really did produce a new, structured society, articulated around the workplace – which was how its citizens experienced it – and in which social inequality was not only less marked than in capitalist countries but was along different lines. In *Dictatorship as Experience* Ralf Jessen, in 'Mobility and Blockages during the 1970s', traces the antecedents of this 'new society' back to the 1950s, when it was encouraged by economic and social legislation and by massive emigration which left room for substantial upward social mobility. But although the Party managed to 'shape' a new world, the latter had its own dynamics which produced a

[12] See Claude Lefort, *L'invention démocratique. Les limites de la domination totalitaire* (Paris: Fayard, 1981), and more recently *La complication. Retour sur le communisme* (Paris: Fayard, 1999).In the latter work Lefort says that 'this domination [of power under the communist regimes] was so absolute that it tended to petrify society at depth, or lock it into itself' (186).

[13] Sigrid Meuschel, *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft in der DDR. Zum Paradox von Stabilität und Revolution in der DDR 1945–1989* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992).

[14] See Ralph Jessen, 'Die Gesellschaft im Staatssozialismus. Problem einer Sozialgeschichte der DDR', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 21 (1995), 97–110.

progressive 'blockage': 'Closer inspection reveals that the developments within East German society were only partially a result of dictatorial planning, and partly also the unintended consequences of the regime' (p. 353). Thus industrial workers – a significant part of the working population – were able to bargain for extensive, and costly, social measures in return for their contributions to production, and to impose a kind of workplace conservatism which was actually nourished by the inertia produced by central planning (Hübner, 'Stagnation and Change'). As a result, the upward social mobility of the 1950s was followed by a progressive blockage, or, as Jessen puts it, 'The fluidity of the early years paved the way for the stagnation of the next generation: the leveling policy indirectly led to a social re-differentiation' ('Mobility and Blockages during the 1970s', p. 353) – a re-differentiation based on political loyalty. This blockage gave rise to a generation gap which produced serious tensions in East German society. While Schüle did not set out to examine this generation gap, she swiftly realised that it was an inescapable feature both of working women's experience, as told to her, and of the statistics. The firm Schüle uses as an example employed two generations of women: those she calls the 'mothers', who had been through the war and were more steady at work, and the younger ones, born after the 1950s, who kept their distance and were seen by the mothers as 'frivolous'. Behind such judgements lurked a conflict between the older women, who had profited from upward mobility, and the younger, who had had a better education before entering the factory and felt themselves to be at a dead-end. This impression is confirmed by Dorothee Wierling's work on the 'Hitler Youth generation' ('The Hitler Youth Generation in the GDR. Insecurities, Ambitions and Dilemmas', in *Dictatorship as Experience*)[15] and Mark Fenmore's on young people in the 1960s ('The Limits of Repression and Reform: Youth Policy in the Early 1960s', in *Workers' and Peasants' State*). According to their statements, the people of the Hitler Youth generation felt that they had been predisposed by their experience of danger and war to seize eagerly on the opportunities offered during the period of reconstruction: having grown up under the Nazis, they were later willing to play along with change and assumed positions of leadership in the 1980s. By contrast, people who were young in the 1960s, born in the GDR and expected to display undeviating loyalty, were progressively more likely to express dissent (Wierling). Thus, while the regime celebrated the young as the bearers of the future, they were in fact becoming a social problem, as witnessed by the range of political measures taken against them in the early 1960s (Fenmore, 'Limits of Repression'), and by the film *Berlin Ecke Schönhausen*, analysed by Feinstein.

Another essential key to German society, over and above the generation gap, is the place of women. Schüle and others strongly insist that to understand the GDR in both its sociopolitical reality and its symbolic dimension, we need to understand its women. Because of its steady decline into banality, its loss of 'heroism', East German

[15] Wierling has done most of her work on the generation born in the GDR: see in particular her *Geboren im Jahr Eins. Der Jahrgang 1949 in der DDR und seine historischen Erfahrungen* (Berlin: Links Verlag, 2002).

society has often been said to be 'feminised'. Feinstein, indeed, has noted that at the time when East German cinema was turning its back on heroism, it was introducing more and more female characters.

Women were very prominent in the workforce, which gave them a new role in society – and communists were not slow to claim that equality had been achieved. How real that equality was is a matter of intense debate among historians. East German sociologists had already pointed out the discrepancy between Party discourse and women's real position in society. Sabine Ross and Dagmar Langenhan have shown that this discrepancy sprang initially from a narrowly 'economic' view of equality whereby working for a socialist undertaking was the fountainhead of female emancipation ('The Socialist Glass Ceiling: Limits of Female Careers', in Jarausch, *Dictatorship as Experience*). Donna Harsch argues that while the East German leaders genuinely believed in the emancipating power of work, the vast expansion of the workforce in the 1950s was in fact an economic necessity ('The Dilemmas and Evolution of Women's Policy', in *Workers' and Peasants' State*). The same ambiguity marked the whole of the SED's policy with regard to women. The political leadership did a great deal to improve women's qualifications, especially from the 1960s onwards, but failed to offer them the jobs for which they were qualified. Women were generally less well paid than similarly qualified men, and had less interesting jobs (Langenhan and Ross, 'Glass Ceiling'). Renate Hürtgen and Leonore Ansorg, studying a textile factory in a rural environment, turn the regime's arguments on their heads and show that far from being 'emancipating', conditions at work often reinforced inequality ('The Myth of Female Emancipation: Contradictions in Women's Lives', in *Dictatorship as Experience*). Schüle, however, would moderate that negative image: without disputing the subordinate status of women in East German industry, she argues that it did, as time went on, confer genuine opportunities for social advancement. The firm she studies – and which she admits may be exceptional – had a very large number of women in management in the 1980s.

Over and above the constraints of sexist policies and attitudes, women came up against a number of barriers – first and foremost the difficulty of combining a job with domestic responsibilities. In the 1960s there was an attempt to transfer some of the latter to the workplace, but the only successes were the establishment of nurseries and canteens (Harsch, 'Dilemmas'). The East German leaders were mostly still locked into the traditional concept of family and gender roles. Thus Ansorg and Hürtgen show that family policies under Honecker were essentially geared towards women. To the end it was assumed that women would have a twofold working day, and this had a lasting influence on their careers. Women reacted in various ways to this contradiction between egalitarian discourse and actual inferiority. The individuals interviewed by Ansorg and Hürtgen do not seem to have questioned the hierarchies which oppressed them and largely withdrew into the private sphere; in the workplace they gravitated towards functions without political prominence intended to preserve social harmony. Schüle's research presents a more nuanced picture: her 'mothers' made concrete demands for equality, particularly through the women's commissions set up in 1952, whereas the 'daughters' were more inclined to compromise solutions

such as part-time working. Nonetheless, all of them seem to have resented male superiority and used their skills, including their technical skills, to overcome the discrepancy. In those circumstances work could indeed be emancipating, particularly for the most vulnerable group, single mothers. Interestingly, whereas Ansorg and Hürtgen see the way in which women took refuge in the miniature society of the workplace as a political renunciation, Schüle sees their involvement in the brigades as an effective way of managing the conflict between work and family life and of bending the firm to their own constraints: women went in not for no politics but for alternative politics, overcoming the private-public dichotomy by, in a way, politicising the private sphere.

A social and cultural approach to politics

Lindenberger's introduction to *Herrschaft und Eigensinn* is a very convincing account of the 'social' approach to political dictatorship. He refutes both the totalitarian hypothesis of a 'paralysed' society, all its differences ironed out by the Party and the SED, and the hypothesis of a 'limited' dictatorship (*Grenzen der Diktatur*). He calls for a reconsideration of political rule, taking into account not just the intentions of the regime and how far they were carried out, but above all the social praxis ('Herrschaft als soziale Praxis'), studied through 'asymmetrical power relationships'. Following Max Weber, he stresses the interaction inherent in all domination; following Foucault, he stresses that the ruled were not bereft of all resources in this relationship. Nonetheless, the practice of individual and collective *Eigen-Sinn* cannot be considered en bloc as the obverse of domination, because the former originates in specific social experience over time, even if its expression was forced into the one political straitjacket imposed by the rulers.[16] Thus Lindenberger's interesting change of perspective finally leads him to prefer the limitation hypothesis (*Diktatur der Grenzen*). This hypothesis is confirmed by the rich empirical studies in this volume; focusing on power relationships in a variety of social contexts, they form a remarkable intellectual unity and back up Lindenberger's conclusions.

With regard to the police force, neither Lindenberger ('Der ABV als Landwirt. Zur Mitwirkung der deutschen Volkspolizei bei der Kollektivierung der Landwirtschaft', in *Herrschaft und Eigensinn*),[17] nor Richard Bessel ('The People's Police and the People in Ulbricht's Germany', in *Workers' and Peasants' State*), see it as a monolith: both stress the importance of mere presence as a strategy of control and repression. The sector police (*Abschnittsbevollmächtigen* or ABVs), like the voluntary auxiliaries, were all the more effective in that they were a ubiquitous element within society. Lindenberger, however, shows through his examination of rural ABVs that the practice of this 'inside' control was in fact ambiguous. In the same vein, Jens Gieseke stresses the importance to the political police (the Stasi) of informers, who were better able than

[16] See also Lindenberger, 'Creating State Socialist Governance: the Case of the Deutsche Volkpolizei', in *Dictatorship as Experience*.

[17] See also his book *Volkspolizei. Herrschaftspraxis und öffentliche Ordnung im SED-Staat 1952–1968* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2003).

the officers themselves to infiltrate society ('Ulbricht's Special Police', *ibid*.). Corey Cross argues that East German militarism was primarily based on the permeation of society by militaristic values and education ('The (Re)militarisation of Life in the GDR', *ibid*.). Similarly, media censorship was not really effective unless exercised, as it were, in advance, through the training of the individuals who made and broadcast programmes – 'censorship without censors' as it has been called (Barck *et al*., 'Fettered Media', p. 214). All these essays trace the processes whereby various social actors were made to facilitate the workings of dictatorship, what Jessen has called the 'socialisation of the State'.[18] But it would be equally possible to stress the instrumentalisation of individuals by the State and call it the 'Statification of society'. In the first case the stress will be on the existence of niches or 'limits of dictatorship', in the second case on the constraining of these areas of freedom – the 'dictatorship of limits' (Lindenberger). Langenhan also shows that while most peasants were hostile to government-imposed collectivisation, the latter did split the peasant community. The peasants did recover a degree of independence as producers, but it was severely restricted. Thomas Reichel shows that if the 'socialist brigades' were successful, this was because they were used by the workers as a channel for their own demands; but the fact that one could be imprisoned for 'trade unionism' shows how narrow were the frontiers within which that autonomy was exercised in East German factories. Sylvia Klötzer shows that within a controlled public space, cabarets were able to maintain an interactive form of criticism ('"Volldampf woraus?" Satire in der DDR. "Eulenspiegel und Kabarett am Obelisk" in den siebziger und achtziger Jahren', in *Herrschaft und Eigensinn*). Although political satire was officially promoted from the 1970s, the primary aims were to force it to operate in a controlled space and to establish parameters for an acceptable kind of satire.

The establishment of such parameters was a complex process which generally involved the interiorisation of political constraints by the individual in society. Thus the regime's recognition of the value of women's work did alter entrenched habits and create new forms of behaviour, but these were not uniform. Poutrus reports an interview with one worker, a card-carrying member of the SED, who expressed pride in her work as a kind of self-realisation. But female textile workers in eastern Prignitz, unaccustomed to factory routines, untrained and badly supervised, with no hope of internal promotion, were quick to express feelings of social and personal frustration (Ansorg, 'Strukturwandel'). With hindsight, this multiplicity of individual and collective experiences looks like a precarious compromise between individual inclinations and careers and the imposition of values by the political dictatorship at the very heart of society. Inga Markovits's excellent essay on the workings of the civil courts in the GDR traces the construction of this compromise through the example of one court in a small town ('Der Handel mit der sozialistischen Gerechtigkeit. Zum Verhältnis zwischen Bürger und Gericht in der DDR', in *Herrschaft und Eigensinn*). Fear of conflict, celebration of harmony in the community can be seen as one way of exercising domination; but it was constantly interacting with individual inclinations

[18] Jessen, 'Gesellschaft im Staatssozialismus'.

and aspirations, which were the very thing that enabled it to penetrate society and re-shape the individual.

This interiorisation of rules and values was particularly intense in the SED cadres well studied by Arndt Bauerkämper and Jürgen Danyel: their learned behaviour was very different from that of their Western counterparts ('The Pivotal Cadres: Leadership Styles and Self-Images of GDR Elites', in *Dictatorship as Experience*). There is room for more examination of the sociocultural aspects of the SED, which can be seen as an apparatus of domination but also as an instrument for disciplining its own members. Peter Grieder's essay on the SED leadership, 'The Leadership of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany under Ulbricht', in *Workers' and Peasants' State*, brings out the tensions among them, but sees these too narrowly as the result of a conflict of differing tendencies among the protagonists – Ulbricht, the Soviets and the 'younger members' – without describing either the sociocultural identities which shaped the different groups or their specific lines of action. The truth is that beside its social roots, the symbolic and cultural dimension of political power is a sine qua non of its exercise.

Both the discourse and the politics of culture are present in these volumes. Martin Sabow shows that the discourse of identity constructed by the regime does a good deal to explain its staying power, despite its chronic lack of popular support ('Dictatorship as Discourse', in *Dictatorship as Experience*). Looking at history writing in the GDR, he sees it not as a falsification of reality but as a discourse with its own form of logic, different from Western logic, in which toeing the Party line (*Parteilichkeit*) was not necessarily incompatible with scientific rigour. Stefan Berger shows how East German historians constructed a new national paradigm to justify the existence of this little socialist homeland in opposition to the 'bad' Federal Republic: a paradigm based on the 'good' German tradition of the 1848 revolution and the working-class movement ('National Paradigm and Legitimacy: Uses of Academic History Writing in the 1960s', in *Workers' and Peasants' State*). But Heiko Feldner thinks that certain historians (particularly Jürgen Kuczynski) succeeded in writing 'scientific' history despite the inherent bias, or adopted viewpoint, of East German historiography ('History in the Academy: Objectivity and Partisanship in the Marxian Historiography of the German Democratic Republic', *ibid*.).

While culture can be seen as a 'legitimising' discourse, it can also be used as a straightforward political tool. The GDR, which could be described as an 'educating' dictatorship, espoused a voluntaristic cultural policy which was seen as an essential tool for building the new (socialist) man. There was a bookshop in 97 per cent of municipalities; indeed, the GDR has been described as a country of readers (Barck *et al*., 'Fettered Media'). Similarly, the regime channelled substantial funds into the East German film company (Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft or DEFA) to encourage film production, which it saw as an ideal tool of popular education – or propaganda (Feinstein, *Triumph of the Ordinary*). At the same time, in a country which was effectively bereft of communicative space, culture could to some extent fill the gap. This helps explain the public role of artists, particularly writers (Barck *et al*.; Feinstein). But literature and cinema, precisely *because* they became communicative

spaces and channels for public debate, were very closely monitored. This twofold 'political' dimension of cultural production, as both area of expression and object of political control, did much to determine its style. Feinstein examines the main films produced from the late 1950s to the 1970s in order to trace the creation and imposition of the East German brand of cinematography. Interestingly, he shows that this 'everyday' approach to film was accepted slowly and reluctantly and not without a series of conflicts. For a start, it did not agree with the Party's desired image of the new socialist Germany. Thus the rootless youths of Klein and Kohlhaase's neo-realist *Berlin Ecke Schönhauser* were severely criticised for their remoteness from 'positive' socialist realism. The question of how to reconcile individual aspirations with socialist constraints was another bone of contention between directors and Party representatives. Several of the DEFA's films were proscribed by the Eleventh Plenum in 1965: Feinstein looks in particular at Kurt Maetzig's *Das Kaninchen bin ich* (*The Rabbit is Me*) and Frank Beyer's *Spur der Steine* (*Traces of Stones*). Both focus on the problem of individual fulfilment – through love and work – in a society ruled by a single ideology and an all-powerful Party. But while it is the individuals who 'fail', it is the Party, or rather its malfunctions, that are criticised. These films, made in an unusual political environment minutely reconstructed by Feinstein, bring out the complexity of decision-making by the individual, particularly at times of political uncertainty such as the early 1960s. But the Eleventh Plenum put a stop to the directors' illusion that cinema could be used as a political weapon, or as a contribution to building a better brand of socialism. The reaction from this produced the 'cinema of the everyday' in the 1970s. In *The Legend of Paul and Paula*, one of the DEFA's biggest hits in 1973, Heiner Carow and Ulrich Plenzdorff showed individuals turning their backs on political conflict in order to savour individual happiness. This message, so far removed from the exhortations to heroic realism of the first twenty years, was accepted and even encouraged by the government, which considered it less subversive than the sociopolitical criticisms contained in the earlier films. Similarly, the abandonment of aesthetic innovation and the return to a conventional style was much to the taste of SED functionaries. If there was such a thing as East German cinematographic style, then, it was imposed by default, by means of a sort of aesthetic and thematic compromise between the directors and the Party. But at the same time, this renunciation of messianic rhetoric, this glorying in the everyday, was the self-exhibition of a particular kind of society, fostering one image of East German identity.

One great merit of these books and essays is that their attempts to examine the socialist regime from the inside help to explain how it worked and why it survived for so long. By confirming the existence of an East German identity and describing the shaping of the socialist individual, they help to explain current manifestations of 'ostalgia' and also the particular difficulties of transition in all the central European countries, which are incomprehensible if viewed only from above, with the focus on top-down political repression. The GDR, with its passion for documentation, is an ideal laboratory for this approach, which demands a vast quantity of empirical research

into extensive sources; but the same approach is now increasingly being applied to the other socialist countries as well.[19] This trend can lead to fruitful comparisons among countries, and to a re-evaluation of the 'socialist' model and of the opposition between East and West.

[19] See in particular, for Poland, current research at the University of Warsaw under the leadership of Prof. Marcin Kula.