Political Control and Popular Participation

The collapse of the Communist regime in East Germany coincided with its fortieth anniversary. Remarkable regime stability was followed by unexpected—and unexpectedly complete—demise. Both, the persistence of the regime for forty years in the face of potentially disruptive discontent and its rapid fall, need explanation. In searching for a plausible account, we must avoid the fallacy of depicting now as inevitable what only a year ago nobody predicted.

This article—much of which was written before the "German revolution of 1989"—offers a contribution to an explanation both of the stability and the vulnerability of the state socialist regime of the German Democratic Republic. It focuses on social and political participation in the new towns of East Germany, and it contrasts the weak organizational penetration of the residential community with the comparatively stronger organizational hold the regime had on people at the place of work.

Organizational penetration of society is critical for our understanding of the GDR regime's stability, even though other factors rooted in its historical origins are important, too. In East Germany after the Second World War, the new regime was—for at least some Germans—the alternative to fascism, while the old

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elites were discredited by Nazi crimes and defeat in war. Denazification, massive emigration to the West, and the determination to staff critical positions (in education, law, and other fields) with loyal followers of the new regime created tremendous mobility chances for the young. This fostered an allegiance to the regime which, through the years, had been cemented by the privileges and the status accorded to these positions. The support of core cadres was complemented by a social and economic policy that guaranteed full employment and that offered a slowly rising standard of living.

These broad historical conditions of stability were important. However, they must be complemented by an understanding of the social structuring of power in the GDR. Here the most obvious factor was coercion, including the threat of coercion, which was coupled with a thorough system of surveillance. Yet coercion alone cannot guarantee stability. A critically important complementary factor underlying regime stability was the organizational penetration of GDR society by the leading party and its allied organizations.

It is in conjunction with this organizational penetration that political ideology and legitimation were important. Marxism-Leninism and a variety of pragmatic derivatives determined the discourse within the state, the Party and its allied organizations.

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