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POLITICAL LEGITIMATION IN THE USSR AND THE GDR: ENVIRONMENTAL DETERIORATION AS A CASE STUDY*

We know very little about the process of political legitimation in the USSR and Eastern Europe. We do not know why citizens of the USSR and most East European states generally obey their governments. If we have a somewhat better idea of why Polish citizens often do not, this is simply because their disobedience has periodically allowed public articulation of grievances. More commonly, however, limited information and restricted access in applying sophisticated research techniques relegate assessments of regime legitimacy in the Soviet bloc to the realm of speculation and journalism. Political scientists have suggested diverse explanations for political compliance in the Soviet bloc, only some of which imply effective regime legitimation: the totalitarian school focused on ideological indoctrination, personal charisma, and terror;\(^1\) the political culture school emphasizes nationalism and congruity between traditional and modern value systems;\(^2\) Samuel Huntington cites institutional stability as a source of system legitimacy;\(^3\) and others note pervasive depoliticization of the population induced by political repression and ideological confusion.\(^4\)

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If we lack the tools to assess the efficacy of the legitimation process, we can, however, analyze the way in which regimes try to legitimate their rule. Too often Western analysts understand the official rationalization system in Eastern Europe to be simply a tedious repetition of Marxist-Leninist phraseology, combined with more or less explicit patriotic subthemes. Preoccupation with the role of Marxism-Leninism in East European self-justification has led Western scholars to overlook the multi-leveled and complex picture of reality implicitly presented in the media of these relatively controlled political systems. Furthermore, possible differences in patterns of legitimation between the USSR and even her most orthodox allies, such as the German Democratic Republic (GDR), require further examination. Alfred Meyer has asserted that Soviet leaders have successfully indoctrinated their citizens, that Soviet citizens do in fact talk like Pravda editorials. The first step in assessing this claim (and counterclaims which assert an incongruence between official and popular conceptions) is to clarify how the East European media do portray the world. This article proposes to make a contribution to unravelling the system of official rationalization in the USSR and GDR, and in this way to bring a modest advance in our understanding of the dynamics of political legitimation in Soviet-type systems. By employing a comparative methodology (a comparison of the USSR and the GDR) we can relate differing patterns of rationalization to differing political contexts.

It is difficult to examine a system of rationalization in a general way. Such a task would be unmanageable. Furthermore, a general examination would exclude, a priori, the identification of micro-level explanations of social problems which form a part of the legitimation system. Therefore this article will focus on a particular problem area, that of environmental deterioration, which is taken to include environmental pollution as well as the disturbances of ecological balance (e.g., human-induced climatic changes; disturbance of spawning patterns; destruction of natural habitats for animals). At first glance, environmental problems may seem peripheral to the question of regime legitimacy. Environmental deterioration most likely does, however, pose disturbing problems of system legitimacy to Soviet and East German authorities (although to a degree this must remain a matter of speculation for reasons noted above). Furthermore, this issue area can serve as a useful microcosm for examination of the system of political rationalization more generally.

6. Depletion of natural resources is excluded from explicit consideration here because the economic problems involved are somewhat different from those engendered by ecological disturbances. They are more closely connected to broader problems of intensification of production.