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State and Minorities in Communist East Germany by Mike Dennis and Norman LaPorte (review)

Ruud van Dijk

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Mike Dennis and Norman LaPorte, *State and Minorities in Communist East Germany*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2011. xvii + 236 pp.

Reviewed by Ruud van Dijk, University of Amsterdam

This exceptionally useful volume by Mike Dennis and Norman LaPorte deals with a topic that not only forms an important part of the history of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), but also tells us a good deal about the nature of the Communist regime there, its obsessions, and the relative reach of its state apparatus. Using their own research in local, state, party, and national archives of the former GDR (including those of the Ministry for State Security, or Stasi) alongside much recent German-language scholarship, Dennis and LaPorte have delivered a series of essays that will be useful for both scholars and students. Next to the original research that has gone into them, the essays also provide context and historical background to make the material accessible for non-specialists.

The authors' ambition is greater than providing an English-language introduction to the way the East German regime tried to control and in some cases "operationally decompose" (p. 68) prominent non-compliant minority groups, and the ways these groups resisted. As Dennis and LaPorte discuss in the first chapter, they also seek to demonstrate that rather than plain "totalitarian," the regime dominated by the So-

cialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) can be more usefully characterized as “post-totalitarian.” The SED police state was intolerant and often nasty, and it aimed to be in full control of society, as witnessed by the mushrooming Stasi apparatus, especially after the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961. In practice, however, the SED also had to rely for its survival on a *modus vivendi* with the population, including minority groups (a quest that was ultimately unsuccessful).

A quick look at the conclusion may give the impression that Dennis and LaPorte see so much complexity and ambiguity that the criminal nature of the SED state falls by the wayside. Any depiction of the system, they say, “should embrace the intersecting and shifting layers of complicity, accommodation, retreat, cooperation, idealism and human agency typical of the experiences and actions of the wide range of minorities explored in this book” (p. 203). However, none of the chapters confirms such an impression. Rather, the case studies Dennis and LaPorte present make clear that although the regime ardently aspired to totalitarian control, this goal proved overly ambitious and impractical. The state apparatus was not up to the job because of a surfeit of repressive assignments, incompetence, and durable resistance by large sections of the population. One of the main strengths of the book is that it shows, on the one hand, the state’s efforts to control groups that tried to foster an identity or ideology separate from its own, and, on the other, how these efforts rarely, if ever, managed to meet the goals the regime set for itself.

Together, the minority groups that are covered in the individual chapters did constitute a sizeable, albeit heterogeneous, chunk of GDR society, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. Dennis and LaPorte have chosen groups that at first sight had relatively little in common: Jews, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Asian and African workers, soccer fans and hooligans, punks, and skinheads. What they did share was that they all defined themselves in contrast—though not always immediately also in opposition—to the Communist state. Jews and Jehovah’s Witnesses did so for religious reasons; Mozambican and Vietnamese guest workers especially set themselves apart through their independent economic activities outside regular work hours; the soccer fans, punks, and skinheads, for all their mutual differences and conflict, insisted on a separate cultural identity, although politics came to play a large role in it, especially in the case of the skinheads.

In taking an independent stance, these groups automatically represented a threat to the state, at least as viewed by the SED regime, which believed that non-compliance indicated not just opposition, but also complicity with the hostile West. Researching state strategies for dealing with all these groups (and their internal justifications), the authors invariably found evidence that the East German authorities perceived such a link. From the regime’s perspective, any kind of religious, economic, or cultural independence inside the GDR must have been instigated by the West.

Finally, when faced with state pressure to conform, all groups resisted and managed to a greater or lesser extent to hold their own. The individual stories vary greatly, both in the intensity of the repression the respective minority groups faced and in the way groups or members responded to government policies. In the aftermath of Iosif Stalin’s anti-Semitic campaign after 1949, Jewish communities in the GDR were “lit-

tle more than exhibits in a socialist museum” (p. 38), but these same moribund communities benefited in the 1980s from the regime’s desire for better relations with the United States. Jehovah’s Witnesses probably experienced the worst treatment because of their principled and organized resistance to the state’s pressure to submit and their ties to coreligionists in the West. Unlike other groups, they were banned and faced harsh persecution. Dennis and LaPorte argue that the incarceration of Jehovah’s Witness conscientious objectors was “one of the darkest chapters in the history of the GDR” (p. 78). In the 1970s and 1980s the outside world, especially the West, or the example of the West, did begin to intrude more and more into the GDR. However, football fans and hooligans, punks, and skinheads derived their energy just as much from local circumstances, whether hatred of Stasi chief Erich Mielke’s team BFC Dynamo, youth alienation from GDR society and a desire for autonomy, or nationalist, right-wing extremism.

The SED regime exacerbated many of the challenges it faced in dealing with its citizens. As Dennis and LaPorte point out, the regime had built an insular, intolerant, militarized, anti-Western, authoritarian society in which there had been no honest effort to master the past, especially Germany’s recent history. No wonder many GDR citizens, especially from minority groups with a strong sense of their own identity, would not comply. Perhaps it goes too far to dismiss the GDR as a mere footnote to world history, as Hans-Ulrich Wehler has done. However, after reading this rich collection of essays, one is struck by the misguidedness and futility of it all. The volume itself is anything but futile or misguided. On the contrary, through its careful depiction of the complex relationships between the regime and important minority groups, it throws much light on how the GDR functioned and why it ultimately collapsed.

