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Becoming East German is jointly edited by two of the foremost scholars of East German history in the United Kingdom and the United States, Mary Fulbrook and Andrew Port. The discussions that resulted in this volume began between the two editors as a series of conversations about the „Atlantic Divide“ separating scholarship on East Germany in their two countries. They were concerned that the differences between East German history as practiced in the UK and the USA still „posed a major problem for productive exchanges of ideas“ (p. vii). The resulting volume does not highlight – or even really discuss – these distinctions, as the editors appear to have concluded that their commonalities outweighed their differences. Instead, this collection highlights three themes: the reevaluation of historical ruptures and continuities, especially the establishment of SED rule after 1945, the role of health and dietary practices in disciplining GDR citizens, and the subjective experience of life in the GDR.

Port’s introduction casts the book as a corrective to the view of East Germany as a totalitarian state, dominated by the Stasi and evidencing little difference from the fascist state that preceded it. Indeed, many of the contributions to the book engage directly with the meaning of anti-fascism for GDR citizens, especially the contributions in Part I, by Fulbrook, Andreas Agocs, Joanne Sayner and Christiane Wienand. Ironically, it is Port’s own essay – an examination of why East Germany experiences a working class rebellion in 1953, while the Nazi State did not witness any significant working class activism – which comes closest to accepting the parallel between the Nazi and East German regimes as a given. Despite Port’s failure to grapple in a nuanced way with the highly charged comparison he invokes, this essay is a useful thought-piece.

The introduction also highlights the contribution that Fulbrook and other British scholars have made in introducing the concept of „normalization“ to explain the middle period of the GDR, roughly from 1960–1980. As Port explains, scholars have used this concept to explore „individuals’ subjective perceptions of the political, socioeconomic and cultural circumstances in which they found themselves“ (p. 11). Normalization is not highlighted in this book, as it has been in other edited collections; however, the second part, an exploration of health discourses and practices, demonstrates how the state cannot be considered a monolith, but rather was one actor among many as East Germans dealt with health challenges and bodily practices. Jeanette Madarász-Lebenhagen and Donna Harsch’s pieces on heart disease and tuberculosis are particularly good at showing the contradictory legacy of the Third Reich and the complicated relationship to West Germany specifically and the West more generally. Madarász-Lebenhagen describes a convergence of Eastern and Western practices around a „risk model“ of heart disease by the 1970s, while Harsch describes an East German state that found doctors increasingly willing to toe the party line on TB treatment by the 1960s. These two essays are quite convincing in their own right and both describe a kind of convergence between East and West in the middle period of the GDR, but their different emphases and periodization make it clear that this is a topic worthy of further study.

The final section is a bit of a hodgepodge – David Tompkins’ essay on East Germany’s propaganda stance vis-à-vis Israel shares little with Alan McDougall’s essay on everyday life and football or Phil Lesak’s piece on humiliation. McDougall’s essay is a well-written gem, providing a sense of the frustrations and fun that constituted football culture in the waning days of the GDR. He persuasively argues that football’s culture of shortage was little changed from the 1950s; rather, complaints about such shortages and the examples of unfairness they engendered were a result of a decreased tolerance for such problems (p. 263). This is not an entirely surprising conclusion.  

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As McDougall himself states, his conclusions largely reflect the findings of other scholarship, for example, about the “fuzzy” boundaries between state and society and public and private rather than breaking new ground (p. 271).

McDougall’s essay is an example of a broader, curiously nostalgic cast to this book. Many of the contributions might well have been written a decade earlier than they were. In 2013, was it really necessary or even useful for historians of the GDR to engage with the totalitarian model, as Fulbrook and Port insist? If they are doing so, it would seem useful to engage more seriously with recent scholarship on other dictatorships, either that of the Nazis or of other Socialist regimes in order to sharpen their argument about the limits of this model. Very little of what this book has to say is really new on a theoretical level and the editors, in particular, sometimes appear to be fighting old battles rather than setting new agendas. While some of the individual contributions have considerable merit on their own, one comes away from this book wondering what new directions the field of East German history will take in the future.


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