

Dönninghaus, Victor: *Minderheiten in Bedrängnis. Sowjetische Politik gegenüber Deutschen, Polen und anderen Diaspora-Nationalitäten 1917-1938*. München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag 2009. ISBN: 978-3-486-58872-9; 693 S.

**Rezensiert von:** Christopher Gilley, Bremen

The Soviet Union, in an attempt to consolidate its rule in the non-Russian regions, followed nationality policies that eventually provided numerous ethnic groups, some of which had not even begun to think of themselves as nations before 1917, with a national territory, a written language and a national literature. Consequently, for many non-Russian Soviet citizens, communism and the nation were not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary elements of a single identity.

By way of contrast to this image of the Soviet Union as a 'maker of nations', Victor Dönninghaus has written a case study of the Bolsheviks' failure to inject national identity with socialist content. His 'Minderheiten in Bedrängnis' (Minorities in Distress) is a meticulously researched account of the Soviet organs responsible for drawing up and carrying out policy towards the western diaspora minorities – those national groups within the Soviet Union for whom a nation state existed in Western Europe, for example Germans, Poles, Finns, Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians. The diaspora minorities lived in scattered communities, often in the western regions of the Soviet Union, and as a result, argues Dönninghaus, fitted poorly into the Soviet theory of nationalism. The division of the Soviet Union into republics with a titular nation placed those peoples who lacked their own territory on the lowest rung of the hierarchy of nations. They therefore only received the attention of the highest organs of Soviet power when doubts about their loyalty turned the minorities question into a matter of security. Moreover, with most other national groups, Soviet nationalities policy sought to raise the non-Russians to the privileged status of the Russians in order to overcome the inequalities between nations created under the Tsars; the western diaspora minorities, however, were seen as being more culturally advanced than the Russians.

Dönninghaus structures his monograph around the bewildering array of state and party organisations at the union and republic levels that were created in order to work among the western diaspora minorities. He describes their activity in exhaustive detail, as well as their failure to instil a Soviet mentality among the minority nationalities. The departments for nationalities attached to the republican central executive committees lacked authority, resources and a clear definition of their task. There was no coordination of their activity from above. They often had to answer to two masters, one at the union level and one in the republic, and the jurisdictions of the different organisations regularly overlapped. A clear definition of the term 'national minority' did not exist, creating confusion among those working in this area. Many of the state organisations therefore confined their activity to the preparation of theoretical plans which were never put into practice.

The education system also could not Sovietise the western minorities. There was a shortage not only of qualified and loyal teachers, but also of textbooks in the language of the national minorities. Frequently, Russian teaching materials were used. At the same time, the Soviet institutions had to compete with religious and 'petty bourgeois' cultural and educational organisations set up by members of the minorities themselves. As a result, illiteracy actually increased among the 'advanced' western nationalities. Equally ineffective were the national sections of the communist party, which faced the same problems of jurisdiction and authority as the state bodies. Indeed, sometimes they saw the corresponding state institutions as rivals. Moreover, the German section, for example, was mainly made up of émigrés and former prisoners of war from Germany and Austro-Hungary who had no understanding of the issues that interested the Russian German settlers. It was unable to attract many indigenous Germans into the party or spread communist propaganda in their villages.

According to Dönninghaus, these failures allowed the national minorities to resist Sovietisation and maintain their national particularity for a longer time. As a result, the Soviet regime doubted the loyalty of the mi-

---

nority groups. In the case of the Germans, the surge in applications in 1929 and 1930 from German peasants living in the Soviet Union to emigrate strengthened this conviction. In the 1930s, Stalin's 'revolution from above' and the growing fear of war with the West led to the increasing use of repressive measures against those whose allegiance was in question. Although some proposals were made to win over the national minorities to the Soviet regime, these did not receive the necessary resources to implement them. Instead, suppression prevailed. Germans, Poles and other diaspora nationalities living in border areas were deported to parts of the Soviet Union which were less militarily sensitive. This set the pattern for the deportations of the Second World War. The Soviet security organs executed Germans and Poles charged with spying for Nazi Germany or Poland; the victims of these 'national operations' numbered in the hundreds of thousands. The Soviet regime sought less to punish those who had already supposedly shown disloyalty than to anticipate and prevent possible betrayal in the future. The diaspora minorities' shared nationality with 'bourgeois-fascist' states made them particularly suspicious to the Bolsheviks. However, at greatest risk were those members of the diaspora nationalities who had personal contacts outside the Soviet Union. Thus, argues Dönninghaus, during the repressions, the nation replaced class as the tenet guiding the Bolsheviks' policy.

Dönninghaus has produced a well-researched monograph that confirms many of the conclusions in the existing literature. He stresses a number of the same areas as Terry Martin<sup>1</sup> – the interconnection of nationalities and foreign policies, the failure of the relatively liberal nationalities policies of the 1920s and the Bolsheviks' suspicion of cross-border contacts. Though there are references to Martin's work, Dönninghaus could have done more to show how his research fits into the broader discussion on nationalities policies. For example, Dönninghaus does not examine the question raised by Martin of

whether cross-border contacts or membership of an ethnic group were more important in determining who was repressed.

Indeed, Dönninghaus's perspective is somewhat narrow and he stays very close to his original sources. He is extremely unwilling to leave out any material; the depth of detail is sometimes overwhelming, obscuring the book's general themes. For instance, the repeated quotations of the charges made against German 'spies' in the 1930s do not bring Dönninghaus's argument forward. Instead, the detail makes it more difficult for the reader to identify the most important moments in the escalation of the repression. The structure of the book exacerbates this problem. Although the title indicates that the work deals with a number of national minorities, Dönninghaus is really interested in the Germans. The material on the other nationalities often provides an introduction to the institution under discussion, which the author then follows with a more detailed description of the German version of the organisation. At times, therefore, one has the feeling that he is repeating himself, a problem compounded by the fact that some of his topics do not seem to warrant their own separate section. This concentration on the Germans also raises the question of whether Dönninghaus's conclusions can be generalised for all the western diaspora minorities.

Much of Dönninghaus's depiction is persuasive. However, his evidence for the minority nationalities' success in preserving their national particularly against Sovietisation only comes from documents written by state and party workers. As a result, he sees the Soviet organs' failure as the result of administrative failings. Perhaps, the use of sources produced by members of the minority groups themselves would have changed his assessment of the Soviet organs and offered another perspective on the reasons for their lack of success. Moreover, as Dönninghaus himself argues, the organisations he has investigated lacked power and influence; it is possible that their own assessment of their impotence convinced them of the failure of the Soviet Union as a whole to win support in the villages of the minorities.

---

<sup>1</sup> Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire. Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, Ithaca 2001.

Nevertheless, this is a thorough account of a number of state and party institutions which have not been the object of earlier research that will be of great use for those interested in the Germans and other diaspora minorities living in the Soviet Union.

HistLit 2009-2-088 / Christopher Gilley über Dönninghaus, Victor: *Minderheiten in Bedrängnis. Sowjetische Politik gegenüber Deutschen, Polen und anderen Diaspora-Nationalitäten 1917-1938*. München 2009, in: H-Soz-u-Kult 06.05.2009.