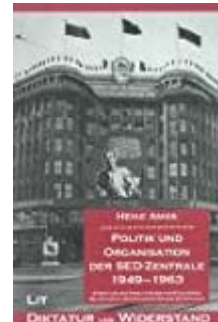


Heike Amos. *Politik und Organisation der SED-Zentrale 1949-1963: Struktur und Arbeitsweise von Politbüro, Sekretariat, Zentralkomitee und ZK-Apparat.* Münster: LIT Verlag, 2002. 715 S. EUR 29.90 (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-8258-6187-2.



Detlev Brunner, Werner Müller, Andreas Röpcke. *Land - Zentrale - Besatzungsmacht: Landesverwaltung und Landesregierung in der Sowjetischen Besatzungszone.* Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003. 218 S. EUR 35.30 (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-631-50665-3.



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How the SED Ruled the GDR

For many decades, students of the Communist political systems in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe operated like astronomers. They observed the outer surfaces of politics, trying to deduce inner workings from outer appearances: hence the famously detailed attention paid to who stood where atop Lenin's tomb in Moscow or on the reviewing stand in Marx-Engels-Platz in Berlin.

For students of the GDR, at least, astronomy has been replaced by geology. Thanks to almost unlimited access to the voluminous records of both the East German gov-

ernment and the ruling party, the SED, scholars can trace in sometimes stupefying detail both the critical events of East German history as well as the in some ways more important "normal" exercise of power. Just how much we can now know about how the GDR was ruled is illustrated by Heike Amos's ability, using the detailed records available in the SAPMO archive in Berlin, to relate in detail how the SED leaders organized their daily work, reached crucial decisions, and, not least, struggled among themselves for power. By contrast, we know less about the workings of the Soviet military administration, so

crucial for the first postwar decade, thanks to limited access to Soviet (now Russian) archives. Thus, as the Brunner et al. volume shows, we know much less about the Soviet analysis of German events or how that analysis was shaped by Soviet perceptions and motives.[1]

Amos's book benefits from her personal history: educated in the GDR (*promoviert* Leipzig 1987), she brings first-hand knowledge of GDR life combined with broader perspectives in public administration (gained in further schooling at Speyer in 1990-1992) to her analysis of just how the top levels of the ruling party operated. That her book appears under the auspices of the *Forschungsverbund SED-Staat* at Berlin's Free University helps to account for an unfortunately dismissive attitude toward the SED leaders she studied.

Amos sees as the central characteristic of Communist rule in the GDR the total power *Allmacht* of the SED leadership and its all-embracing and undivided political power (pp. 15-16). She analyzes this central political fact by focusing on three problem areas: the organization, structure, personnel responsibilities and tasks of the leadership, its work style and decision-making procedures, the structure and function of the central apparatus, and the political conflicts that erupted in 1953 and 1957-58. Specifically she analyzes the SED Politburo, ZK-Secretariat, ZK-apparatus, and the ZK itself. In her view, after end of GDR, too much research focused either on the beginning of SED power in 1946-1949 or on the late GDR period of SED's collapse. While this may account for beginning her study in 1949, it is unclear why she ended it in 1963, rather than in 1971 with the downfall of Walter Ulbricht (or even, if only in an excursus, in 1989.)

Her study is based primarily on SAPMO and state archival material. Her detailed examination of meeting minutes *Protokolle*, personnel files and preparation of sessions (documents prepared, agendas, etc.) allows for a detailed reconstruction of the way GDR politics worked at the highest party levels, how personal rivalries lead to major leadership crises, and how such crises were resolved.

For students of GDR politics and of similar systems, this book is a treasure of detailed descriptions of how work was done, meetings run, documents prepared and so forth. We learn (pp. 49-50) that relatively few formal votes were taken in Politburo meetings, that ideological and personnel issues dominated the agendas (pp. 626-627), and that some very inconsequential issues were bucked up to the highest party levels for resolution. The detailed accounts of decision making at the top is sup-

plemented by no less than 78 tables of membership in leading party bodies and the assignment of substantive areas.

Amos also presents interesting accounts of a number of useful secondary subjects, including the "normal" weekly work rhythm of Politburo members (pp. 340-343); the inability of the leadership to establish an impersonal mechanism for arranging a political succession, and indeed the psychological reluctance to consider this issue, which was surely one of the system's major weaknesses. Her rich use of archival sources (the listing of which runs to twelve pages!) is supplemented by purposeful deployment of non-archival memoir sources, such as the books of Fritz Schenck and Heinz Brandt.[2]

Despite its substantial merits, Amos's work suffers from a number of shortcomings. The machinery is taken for granted as working well, but how well did the machinery work when it was constantly bedeviled by personal strife? Her richly detailed accounts of inner party conflicts raise an unanswered question: What does it say about Communist practice that ambitious leaders—Ulbricht in this period—abused party statutes to enhance their own power? While she regards the SED machinery as an effective instrument of total domination, her work shows just how politically inefficient it often was, both in its misunderstanding of East German society and in its inability to implement its policies. The treatment of the relationship between policy issues and organizational matters is cursory; the view that only systemic opposition is "real" opposition, is Cold War simplistic (see the summary [pp. 635-637] of leadership power struggles).

All too often, and throughout the work, she repeats, albeit with often fascinating details, well-known facts of party life and structure. She rather slights the conflicting pressures on SED leaders who also had high government posts. The discussion of the 1953 crisis does bring out in vivid detail how overburdened some of these multiple office holders felt themselves to be (pp. 212-215). We know that Ulbricht, for one, tended (typically Soviet in this) to stress state offices as his power grew; it would have been useful to consider how state power could be used in party struggles, a topic crucial for the Ulbricht-Honecker transition.

These weaknesses in her book also emerge in her discussion (pp. 206-281) of the Dahlem affair and the long crisis about Ulbricht's leadership in the first several months of 1953 (as well as the later and similar crisis of 1956-1958). Her discussion of these events is rich in details and contains some sharp and justified comments on

individual SED leaders. But her basic conclusion as to the reasons for Ulbricht's political survival—his personal energy and ruthless ambition, and the indecision and formalist stance of his enemies—shows clearly that the decisive factors were personal and idiosyncratic, and not organizational. Here again, one may ask, what then was the importance of the elaborate structure she details?

Moreover, Amos—unlike, for example, Catherine Epstein[3]—shows no empathy with any of her actors. Because these long-time Communist apparatchiks did not become anti-Communist democrats, she cannot take their suggestions for change seriously. Their rather pitiful efforts, over many years (in some case pursued by their widows) for rehabilitation, which could be a subject for a serious and rather mournful psychological study, is a subject only for sneering (p. 313). Notwithstanding these limitations, this is a valuable book, indeed for many scholars in this field, an almost indispensable reference work.

A very different (and much shorter!) work, although also based on archival materials, is the Brunner anthology. The product of two scholarly conferences, the volume displays the disjointed character of many such productions. Dealing mostly with the northeastern state of *Mecklenburg-Vorpommern*, it contains some useful chapters in which important questions are raised. Among these are (pp. 7-10): Did the period 1945-1947 represent a “democratic prelude” to GDR, or a disguised first step toward Stalinization? What were respective roles of state administrations, central zonal economic administrations, and parties? Were states useful administrative tools for the Soviet occupation? Several authors point to bureaucratic behavior as indicating that for the Germans in office, at least, local and political autonomy were taken seriously.

Two essays included in the volume are of particular interest and quality. An interesting if somewhat overheated chapter by Kristin Noeling (pp. 135-152) makes the important point that the federal structure (in

each occupation zone, in fact) faced strong anti-federalist forces, particularly in light of left-wing and nationalist German beliefs that their respective political goals demanded a unitary state. This tension, as Jan Foitzik shows in his chapter (pp. 171-186) was replicated in Soviet occupation practice, which employed both state administrative tools for Soviet purposes but also created centralized, especially economic, agencies. Foitzik points to a gradual shift in the Soviet position from military and occupation powers to delegation to German administrations and then later, in 1947-48, to a centralization leading to GDR (pp 172-173).

What many of the contributions to this book suggest but do not consider are the parallels both in the tasks confronting all four occupying powers and the administrative solutions employed.

Notes

[1]. Two outstanding examples of what can be done in this regard are: Norman Naimark, *The Russians in Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); and Hope M. Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

[2]. Fritz Schenk, *Im Vorzimmer der Diktatur* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1962); Heinz Brandt, *Ein Traum, der nicht entführbar ist* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1985).

[3]. Catherine Epstein, *The Last Revolutionaries* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); see H-German review at <<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=147401067024015>>; for a more nuanced view of inner-party struggles over policy in the 1950s and 1960s, see Peter Caldwell, *Dictatorship, State Planning, and Social Theory in the German Democratic Republic* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); see H-German review at <<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=292411071480520>>.

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