

**Günther Heydemann, Heinrich Oberreuter.** *Diktaturen in Deutschland - Vergleichsaspekte: Strukturen, Institutionen und Verhaltensweisen.* Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2003. 591 S. EUR 2.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-89331-482-9.



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## The Limits of Comparative Historical Analysis

This volume addresses directly the advantages and the dangers of comparative historical analysis, which have become particularly apparent in the period after German unification in 1990. One of the most valuable parts of this collection is the theoretical introduction, written by Günther Heydemann and Detlef Schmiechen-Ackermann. The authors trace theories of dictatorship and totalitarianism and how they have changed over time; they also identify the strengths and weaknesses of the comparative approach. They make clear that they distance themselves from the totalitarianism theories of the 1950s and 1960s, which had in any case lost in influence by the 1970s (only to be revived in the 1990s). They are, however, firm in their view of the GDR as a dictatorship when compared with western democratic societies. They therefore consider it worthy of comparison with the Nazi state. But they are equally clear that there is a limit beyond which these comparisons should not go: "Zunächst einmal ist völlig unbestreitbar, dass der SED-Staat keinen Genozid begangen und auch keinen Rassen- und Vernichtungskrieg geführt hat" (p. 10). They deplore any attempt to use comparisons between the Nazi state and the GDR to minimize the crimes of the Nazi regime.

imimize the crimes of the Nazi regime.

So what then are the advantages of the comparative approach? The authors of the introduction identify two major levels of comparison: the macro approach, which attempts to highlight areas of difference and similarity at an abstract level. This exists above individual actions, structures and sets of behavior in society—the micro level. The volume's editors have opted for the micro approach and brought together eighteen contributions in six different areas: the establishment of power and the attempt to maintain power over everyday life; the justice system and instruments of repression; the education system; trade unions and the workplace; the media; and, finally, the Church and middle-class institutions.

Of central interest in any study of dictatorships is the extent to which the ruling group/party is able to establish and maintain control of the central state and the administration at lower levels. This area is covered well in a number of contributions in the first section, which point to the clear differences between the two historical situations. The authors come to the general conclusion that there was a more radical break with the past

in 1945 than in 1933. It does, however, seem strange for Mike Schmeitzner and Andreas Wagner to use the term *Machtergreifung* in the title of their piece to denote the two processes of assuming control over the administration in Saxony after World War II. Because of the particular international situation in 1945-50 and Soviet policy in Germany, it took the best part of five years for the SED to gain control. It is difficult to describe this gradual process as a *Machtergreifung*. The other major area of interest—the methods used by the two dictatorships to maintain control—is less well served in the volume. Hermann Wenter provides a thorough comparison of the justice systems in his contribution. But the next section on the *“Staatssicherheitsdienst,”* by Ruth Bettina Birn and Jens Gieseke, concentrates on the biographies and careers of the ruling elites of the two secret police forces. As a result, a comparison of the way in which these two organi-

zations functioned is missing from the volume.

The other contributions to the volume provide some interesting examples of comparison. The study by Georg Wilhelm of the different tactics used by the Protestant Church in Leipzig in both the Nazi era and in the GDR shows how the Church learned from its mistakes in the 1930s. Internal divisions within the Church allowed the Nazis to have a significant influence on Church policy; in the SBZ and the GDR the Church could preserve its integrity to a greater extent by maintaining stronger intra-Church unity.

Overall, however, there must still be some doubt about the ultimate value of the comparative approach. In many instances it is the difference between the two historical situations which is most striking.

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