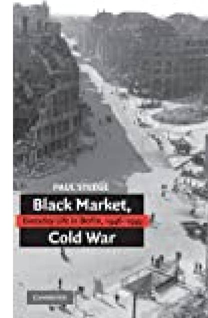

Paul Steege. *Black Market, Cold War: Everyday Life in Berlin, 1946-1949.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 348 S. $85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-86496-1.

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Hamsterfahrten im Schatten der Rosinenbomber

Postwar Berlin is perhaps the ideal subject for illustrating the relationship between daily life and "big politics." With this volume, Paul Steege has written such a history of everyday life in the early years of the Cold War–or vice versa, a history of the Cold War "from below." Steege's Berlin is marked by a trial of strength between competing visions of the future world order. More than just the distant events at conferences of foreign ministers and in nuclear weapons laboratories, the conflict extended to things of a more quotidian and practical nature as well: the daily commute to work through wartime rubble, for example, or the question of where to get hold of a day's supply of coal briquettes, potatoes, or milk for one's child. Steege writes, "Offering a history from the inside out, this book explores the relationship between Berliners' day to day struggles in the midst of wartime devastation and their part in shaping Berlin as the symbolic capital of the Cold War" (p. 4).

Steege has chosen the supply of food and other basic commodities as the central thread in his juxtaposition of personal experiences with big politics. The title's reference to black markets is therefore somewhat misleading, because black markets in the narrow sense, that is to say, as meeting points in the center of Berlin, play only a marginal role in his study. Rather, the term "black market" is used as a synonym for the whole of activities involved in the private provision of goods and for the Berlin economy in general, both of which extended well beyond the bounds of official rationing policies and other regulations issued by the Allies and the Berlin Senate, especially when it came to the supply of goods from the surrounding countryside. The timeframe given is also not entirely accurate. Despite a detailed argument for beginning with the year 1946, Steege's narrative begins more conventionally with the Soviet occupation of Berlin in 1945, and for good reasons. Indeed, the behavior and attitudes of Berliners, particularly the city's female inhabitants, in later Cold War struggles would be utterly incomprehensible without considering the initial days and weeks of Soviet occupation. This principle goes for the many instances of rape and excessive violence committed by Soviet soldiers–a topic that resurfaced in 1948 during

the famed SED propaganda campaign "About the Russians and About Us"–as well as for the emergence of highly improvised and chaotic survival techniques that persisted till the end of the decade along with an essentially habitual state of emergency.

Using food supplies as an example, Steege describes the progressive split of respective departments in the city administration and police authorities, which ultimately resulted in dual administrative structures, western and eastern, across the board. Berliners certainly tried to take advantage of these divisions whenever the opportunity arose. An initial turning point in the loyalties of city residents came with the municipal elections of October 1946. Despite all the campaign freebies in the form of additional supplies, the elections ended disastrously for the SED, which garnered less than 20 percent of the vote, while the opposing Social Democrats took almost half. The event was rather striking because in Berlin, unlike the other German states in the Soviet zone of occupation, the SED and SPD campaigned as separate parties. As Steege emphasizes, these meager results were due not least to the "schizophrenic" policies of the SED, which consistently presented itself as the true representative of the people's interests while in fact paying scant heed to those interests in its battle for national supremacy. In this respect, the October elections of 1946 were "a powerful rejection of the Soviet occupier's presumed dominance in the city" (p. 5). Thus, for all their illusions, the Soviets and their German allies found themselves with no more support than they had had in the 1920s. The hope of Soviets and SED for a political "zero hour" had proved an illusion.

It becomes evident that during this phase, the inhabitants of Berlin viewed the municipal administration and its official regulations as just "one among many variables" (p. 103) in the daily struggle for scarce goods. In other words, the scope of big politics in a period of "social collapse" should not be overestimated. This insight applies, in particular, to the critical situation in Berlin in which precisely these factors–the confrontation of the great powers and the question of supplying the city's population–came to a head, namely, the blockade of access routes to the city by the Soviet Union and the western Allies' airlift in response. This first major confrontation of the Cold War is unsurpassed in terms of its symbolism for the battle plans that lay ahead: on the one hand an attempted economic strangulation of the western half of the city, on the other the transformation of military air power into a veritable lifeline buttressed by the heroic self-determination of the city's population. Steege deconstructs the surrounding myth with an analysis of various supply strategies and their effectiveness. He concludes that the airlift alone was far from sufficient to keep West Berlin's supply chain and economy alive. In fact, well-established informal supply lines from the hinterland that had been created in the meantime played a far greater role than one might suspect, despite the total blockade of West Berlin. To put it pointedly, the vast majority of Berliners were clearly not prepared to bow to Soviet blackmail and make use of its rationing system. And yet, they were not simply motivated by an idealistic sacrifice for the "free West," either. Instead, they carried on with the "gray" methods of procurement they had resorted to out of desperation since the end of the war to try and improve their food situation: stealing coal from ships and train cars, going on "foraging jaunts" to the countryside, and smuggling at checkpoints and through the (literally) porous landscape of ruins in Berlin. All of this activity took place beyond the official supply policies of a splitting city administration and was therefore less dependent on the crises of a nascent Cold War than the system of ideological blocs would suggest. It gave rise to "an alternative form of social organization–'antistructure'–that contained, at least potentially, a threat to the symbolic structures that would sustain the emerging Cold War" (p. 293).

Steege backs his analysis of these "gray" trade channels largely with a broad variety of reports from police and municipal authorities, as well as with press reports about behavioral patterns and moods among the city's population. It would be interesting, parenthetically, to know if these trade channels could be reconstructed quantitatively in relation to the overall food supply chain. It would also be of interest to see Steege's approach to the history of everyday life and experience be applied beyond the realm of food supply. Apart from the elementary role played by the question of physical survival, the period was also marked by a spiritual rethinking, by attempts to deal with wartime suffering, by the lessons learned from the collapse of National Socialism or, in contrast, by pragmatic silence about all of these psychological and spiritual burdens.

Steege's book is an impressive work, taking as its basis one of the most mythologically charged periods of postwar history and underscoring the potential of everyday history to elucidate the problems of "big international politics." For all of its merits, however, the work is marred by one particular flaw. The tone Steege uses in the attempt to set himself apart from the existing body of research clearly overshoots the mark. His claims to "re-

locate ... the narrative landmarks that generally demarcate Berlin's emergence as a Cold War flashpoint" (p. 4) and thereby outdo the "most innovative new approaches to Cold War History" (p. 6) cannot help but raise a few eyebrows. While it may be true that Cold War history is still dominated by big politics and diplomacy and views of competing ideological systems, it is somewhat audacious to pretend that the history of postwar Germany and Berlin from an everyday perspective has not been the subject of numerous works already, and this for quite some time now. Beginning in the 1980s, Christoph Klessmann and Dietrich Staritz offered (in works Steege is well aware of) detailed depictions of the sobering realities of the "Zusammenbruchsgesellschaft." What's more, in the historical consciousness of German society, the lean years in the aftermath of the war have always been much more present than big politics (not least because such views enable Germans to view themselves as victims of the Nazi era).

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