



George Last. *After the "Socialist Spring": Collectivisation and Economic Transformation in the GDR.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2009. 250 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-552-1.



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Grassroots Resistance Down on the Collective Farm

In this impressive work, George Last makes an important contribution to GDR studies. Historians have devoted relatively little attention to the agricultural and rural history of postwar eastern Germany, and most of what they have produced focuses on the tumultuous decade that followed the collapse of National Socialism.[1] Last takes a different approach, by examining the dynamics of the GDR's agricultural policies over a longer history. In so doing, he both examines an understudied topic in East German rural history and provides a useful contribution to analyses of the "totalitarian," or "Stalinist," or "modern" nature of the East German dictatorship.[2]

Last's focus is *Bezirk* Erfurt, a region in the southwest corner of the country well suited for this narrative. Unlike Mecklenburg and Brandenburg, before 1945, this area had few of the large estates that Soviet occupiers transformed into small farms for the so-called new peasants. Instead, farmers in the Erfurt region traditionally practiced a mixed agriculture of grain crops and livestock, and they typically worked on smaller, indi-

vidually owned farm operations. Moreover, rural areas near Erfurt had a mix of Protestant and Catholic residents, absorbed relatively few immigrants from the eastern lands lost after World War II, and offered strong support for political parties, especially the Democratic Farmers' Party of Germany (DBD), that stood nominally independent of the Socialist Unity Party (SED). As a result, the East German regime had relatively little success creating large collective farms (*Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaften*, or LPGs) after the turmoil of 1953; in 1958, LPGs controlled only 18 percent of the district's farmland.

Thus the more dramatic events in Last's narrative began in 1960. In that year of the "socialist spring," GDR officials applied more intense pressure to convert rural residents into adherents of socialism and members of LPGs. As Last makes clear, however, this process was not so simple around Erfurt. Many local farmers, clergymen, and political officials thought such pressures were but a temporary phase and that reunification with the FRG remained a possibility. Even social-

ist pub owners learned that promoting the collectivization campaign would drive off customers. Party officials sent troubleshooting brigades into the district to address conversion issues, although they lacked enough ideologically committed functionaries to complete the task easily. Many local residents resisted passively—by not answering knocks on their doors, disappearing into fields, or assuring officials they planned to join later. Others employed more extreme forms of protest that ranged from fleeing to the West to committing suicide. Like other scholars, Last finds a clear correlation between the time and place of collectivization campaigns and East Germans' flights to the West.

Continuing the narrative into the 1960s and 1970s, Last describes efforts to turn LPGs into generally stable and productive institutions. Especially after the GDR's western border closed in 1961, the absence of alternatives was generally enough to make those who stayed behind join LPGs. (However, many joined the "types" of LPGs that demanded less commitment to socialist agriculture and allowed them to maintain some control over their herds, machinery, and work crews.) Even members who lacked ideological commitment to socialism learned to redistribute private plots, assign labor duties, and allocate production goals out of a sense of fairness to their neighbors and a desire for a predictable income. The longer the LPGs survived, the more they became part of both everyday farming and the fabric of village social life. Reluctantly, rural residents began to accept the norms of socialist agriculture.

Although it focuses only on the Erfurt district, Last's research also presents valuable insights on the limitations of agricultural production for the GDR as a whole. Many problems hindered farm productivity: removing hedges and ditches that had separated private fields harmed long-established drainage patterns; party leaders' enthusiasm for maize and other monocultures destroyed traditional practices of mixed farming; locating centralized, shoddy livestock stalls far from villages meant that animals were poorly tended; and use of urban laborers in harvests disrupted local social relationships. Nevertheless, pressures to collectivize continued relentlessly. Under the New Economic System of the late 1960s, central planners in Berlin took an even greater role in shaping agricultural production goals. Pressures mounted for local LPGs to increase in size and cooperate with one another through centralized feed mills, shared machinery, and collaborative use of labor brigades. A new system emerged in the 1970s that aimed to separate animal-producing and crop-producing LPGs, but this

measure amounted to an "overindustrialization" of farming and again caused production breakdowns at the local level.

Last also effectively describes the mood in local villages. Residents grew increasingly frustrated with their isolation, austere shops, poor housing, and lack of entertainment outside the village pub. A 1968 study conducted by the SED's Institute for Research into Popular Opinion found that only 5.5 percent of members in one area LPG considered their work more enjoyable than before collectivization. Rural East Germans also became increasingly frustrated by environmental troubles—deforestation, contaminated groundwater, sewage removal and fertilizer runoff, and brown-coal pollution. Declining soil fertility and shortages of machinery, fertilizers, and especially fuel signaled that GDR agriculture had entered a state of perpetual crisis. Despite the SED's efforts to improve access to consumer goods, Last finds that "seeds of material discontent" (p. 199) were emerging.

The GDR's farmers were only minor players in the revolution of 1989, and Last does not dwell explicitly on the causes of the GDR's collapse. Nevertheless, his book does a fine job of exposing the regime's fundamental flaws. Repeatedly, Last points to the "limits of the state's apparatus" (p. 147), the "failures" (p. 117) of bureaucrats, the "complexity of authority as social practice" (p. 224), and the ability of grassroots farmers to shape and manipulate East German agricultural policy, albeit gently.

Only a few weaknesses deserve mention. The work is meticulously researched in the local sources, but could have benefited from a few more glances at circumstances beyond the borders of its geographical subject. The author also might have done more to analyze works of other scholars of the GDR, to consider the impact of farm policies upon villagers and other non-members of LPGs, and to include photographs, propaganda pieces, or other materials to illustrate and lighten a rather dense narrative. These caveats aside, the book remains a valuable study of GDR ideologies as they played out on the local level. It fills a gap in the literature, and it provides another illustration of the complex relationships between state and society in the GDR.

Notes

[1]. For instance, Jonathan Osmond, "From Junker Estate to Co-operative Farm: East German Agrarian Society, 1945-61," in *The Workers' and Peasants' State:*

Communism and Society in East Germany under Ulbricht, 1945-71, ed. Patrick Major and Jonathan Osmond (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002); Arnd Bauerkämper, *Ländliche Gesellschaft in der kommunistischer Diktatur: Zwangsmodernisierung und Tradition in Brandenburg 1945-1963* (Köln: Böhlau, 2002); and Gregory R. Witkowski, "On the Campaign Trail: State

Planning and *Eigen-Sinn* in a Communist Campaign to Transform the East German Countryside," *Central European History* 37 (2004): 400-422.

[2]. For instance, see Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of the GDR* (London: Arnold, 2002).

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