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Jan Palmowski. *Inventing a Socialist Nation: Heimat and the Politics of Everyday Life in the GDR, 1945-90.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xv + 342 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-11177-5.

Reviewed by Peter C. Caldwell (Rice University)

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Commissioned by Benita Blessing (Oregon State University)

Socialism, Heimat, and East German Legitimacy

In 1949, Bertolt Brecht, newly arrived in East Berlin and making the transition from critical playwright to cultural apparatchik, complained of “the stinking breath of provincialism” that seemed to pervade East Germany.[1] The brilliance of Jan Palmowski’s book lies in the way he puts this “provincialization” into the center of the history of the GDR. Unlike the other states of Eastern Europe, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) could not easily appropriate the language of nationalism; after all, its existence was predicated on the division of Germany. Yet, the abstract ideals of socialism, despite the best efforts of the party, did not create a stable, emotional identification for East Germans with their state. Beginning in the 1950s, and increasingly after Erich Honecker came to power in 1971, the party made the “socialist heimat [home]”, i.e., the province, into an ersatz site of identification.[2] But heimat stood in an unstable relationship vis-à-vis the party, state, and socialism. Like so much in East German life, the socialist heimat itself rested on a bundle of contradictions.

Palmowski uses a variety of approaches, most importantly the framework of James C. Scott, to get at this unstable, developing relationship between state and heimat. Palmowski uses Scott’s theory that multiple “transcripts” exist of the same event: On the one hand, there is a public transcript, which reflects the goals and values of the state, deemed an inescapable context by participants. On the other hand is a hidden transcript consisting of ambi-

guities, occluded meanings, and behind-the-scenes manipulations that have significance for a specific community. Communities themselves, of course, are not stable and homogenous; Palmowski’s account reveals a complexity and level of collaboration not always apparent in Scott’s work, which tends to set a communal “us” against a “them” that imposed power from the outside. Scott’s model does, however, prove useful for understanding the GDR and in particular the role of party and state in public transcripts. Blunt, public criticism of the party or state thus appears only in a few places—in explicit political graffiti in one village, for example, or at the extraordinary moment when party and state disintegrated in 1989-90. Otherwise, criticism existed only within the system, either appropriating official language for a community’s own goals or calling on the state to follow its own rules. Palmowski argues that the slow disintegration of East German state authority took place from within the socialist heimat—the very program that the party had adopted to shore up its own legitimacy—and not through external critique.

At stake was indeed legitimacy: not just the willingness of citizens to obey the state, but their identification with the aims of the state. The party used images and rhetoric of the heimat—including the local community and landscape—in electoral campaigns, in nature organizations, and in village life. These images played a role in the party’s attempt to justify remilitarization as

early as the 1950s. The patrols on the border with West Germany were thus defending the *heimat*. By implication, West Germany was an enemy state under the control of evil outsiders, like fascists and Americans. By the end of the 1960s, GDR popular media were stressing local sights, local songs, and local sausages. But the values of the *heimat*—community, intimacy, emotional attachment—contrasted sharply with the socialist ideal of the resolute, dynamic and modernizing construction of a new environment. The political goals of creating industry and transforming the countryside stood opposite a defense of the built structures and environment of the *heimat* that was depoliticized—localized and separated from central, state goals. The austere culture of German classicism and party republicanism existed against a culture of romantic sensibilities, sentimentality, and emotion. For example, GDR television programming remained in constant competition with that of West Germany, succeeding only with light fare, primarily with programming that explored the many examples of local culture, music, and cuisine throughout the GDR. Attempts to rally the people in mass volunteer efforts struggled with the same contradiction: they succeeded where they reinforced community goals, such as beautifying villages, but were a flop where they were undertaken to supplement grand, nationalist goals. Through interviews and other sources, Palmowski finds that few people associated Honecker’s “Mach mit!” (Join in!) campaign (designed to improve community life) with the party. Political plans designed to bind nation and state together failed: communities simply forgot about the state (except when the state failed to provide adequate materials to carry out the work).

Palmowski’s analysis explains, for instance, how environmentalism developed in the GDR, eventually becoming a threat to the state itself. The environmental movement responded to the growing environmental crisis in East Germany, but it also grew out of the socialist *heimat* idea itself. The party praised local volunteers who worked to beautify their *heimat*. Within towns, these improvement campaigns often meant preserving local architecture. The state, meanwhile, diverted scarce building materials and skilled labor to the capital of Berlin, so that grandiose claims by the party did not correspond with the limited possibilities of local *heimat* projects. Attempts to defend old town centers from the wrecking ball, thereby preserving a specific beauty implied by *heimat*, challenged Honecker’s plans for new, socialist urban centers like Marzahn as well as for the replacement of old housing stock with new, mass-produced units. The state

thus translated citizens’ concern for the environment, including the natural beauty of the environment, into threats to the state. Such fears increased in the 1980s as local activists demanded from party officials that they provide reliable and detailed information about environmental damage, moreover demanding that the state follow its own environmental laws. As Palmowski demonstrates, citizens had learned the public language of state socialism and used it to further their own aims. Nonetheless, they continued to suffer from party caprice. The effect was to underscore the enduring chasm between party-state and local communities.

Palmowski’s first six chapters lay the groundwork for the final two, which look closely at two small towns: Holungen, located to the east of GÅ¶ttingen, and Dabel, near Schwerin in Mecklenburg. Here Palmowski’s theories highlight delightfully the weapons of the weak: public and hidden transcripts; the socialist *heimat* and local traditions; the contradiction between socialist modernization and socialist provincialization; and *Eigen-Sinn*. The tensions in Holungen revolved around a Catholic town’s religious identity, as expressed in public displays of religiosity, carnivals, and commemorations. There, the development of local history and culture related to the *heimat*; meanwhile, the towering slag heap from the local potash mine threatened the town’s existence. In Dabel, the tension between expellees from Eastern Europe and the existing population colored discussions about culture, the self-presentation of the town, and, later, about the nearby army base. These local studies show in detail how difficult it is to divide the population into a clear “us” and “them”: a person may be a thorn in the side of the party at one point but work with the Stasi at another, seeking in both cases to be at the center of things. People on all sides learned to use the official transcript to press their own interests: the overt resistance displayed by the graffiti found in Dabel in the 1950s and 1960s thus gave way to a more complex, covert resistance that also involved collaboration with authorities.

Palmowski paints a complicated picture of communities filled with grudges, but also of people able to articulate precisely a different view of the future when the change came. The book’s conclusion, “From Citizens to Revolutionaries,” makes clear just how ready East Germans were for meaningful and enduring transformation. The director of the Boizenburg *heimat* museum, for example, became an articulate spokesperson for change in 1989. Similarly, the citizens of Holungen quickly made use of the expertise of Catholic communities in nearby West Germany as East Germany collapsed. The idea of a

socialist heimat may have helped solidify party rule for forty years; it also enabled a language of radical change and adaptation. Palmowski has brilliantly captured the complexities of the GDR, including the juxtaposition of the combination of dictatorship and control of language against social development and subversion of language. He has written a remarkable book indeed.

Note

[1]. Bertolt Brecht, January 6, 1949, cited in Committee for Cultural Freedom, *Encounter*, vol. 49 (1977): 36.

[2]. Palmowski writes “heimat” without capitalization or italics. This review will thus follow the author’s usage.

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