



Franz Oswald. *The Party That Came out of the Cold War: The Party of Democratic Socialism in United Germany.* Westport and London: Praeger, 2002. xix + 174 pp. \$77.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-97731-3.



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More on the PDS

What accounts for the continued fascination of scholars with the German Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS)? It can hardly be the party's triumphant electoral record: in four national elections, the PDS's *Zweitstimmen* total has never exceeded 5.1 percent, nor has the total of successful *Direktmandaten* candidates exceeded four (both in 1998). While this performance is slightly better than that of many minor German parties (only slightly, the NPD got 4.3 percent in 1969), it does not rank the PDS with either the FDP nor the Greens.

Of course one can (and should) point to the much stronger electoral showing, both in federal and state elections, in the former GDR: the five re-constituted eastern states of Sachsen, Thuringen, Sachsen-Anhalt, Brandenburg, and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (plus eastern Berlin). In these regions, the PDS raised its vote totals from initially low levels in 1989-90 to somewhere between a fifth and a quarter of the vote. (In the eastern districts of Berlin, the party did better still, coming close to half the vote in the state elections of 2001.) This rise in PDS strength, coupled with the practical extinction of the FDP and the Greens in eastern Germany, has helped

to bring about a "regionalized pluralism" in eastern Germany; here the party system has become a three-party affair (CDU, SPD and PDS). This development, as Oswald rightly emphasizes, has led to an important shift in possible governing coalitions. Whereas in the early 1990s this party landscape forced the CDU and SPD into grand coalitions, more recently it produced PDS toleration of a minority government in Sachsen-Anhalt and coalitions at the state level in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (since 1998) and Berlin (since 2001).[1]

However, the PDS's performance in these elections must be compared to those of other post-Communist parties in eastern Europe and some republics of the former USSR. Elections in Poland, Hungary, Lithuania and others have seen post-Communist parties reach majority or dominant plurality levels. By contrast, the PDS has never—aside from East Berlin—achieved a dominant position in the eastern states. Despite being the one party committed explicitly to an articulation of eastern German—as opposed to pan-German—interests, its appeal has been rejected by between three-quarters and four-fifths of the eastern German electorate. Nor can the im-

portance of the PDS derive from its record in governing. The PDS—whether “tolerating” or participating—has been a serious and diligent coalition partner. It has not, however, transformed the politics of the three states where it has shared governmental responsibility.

That the PDS has, nonetheless, generated a large bibliography in several languages is most likely due to two factors: there are many more scholars fluent in German who can move into eastern German research topics than there are those capable of research in East European languages; and, more importantly, there was, especially among scholars of and from western Germany, a widespread expectation that the PDS, as a successor party of the SED, had no political future in a united Germany.

Such an expectation clearly was born of the underlying Western assumption that the GDR was an artificial construct. Its former citizens would therefore, after perhaps a brief initial transition period, behave politically like western Germans. This perspective ignores the history of “successor parties”—ranging from neo-Napoleonic groups in nineteenth century France to the post-Fascist MSI in Italy to neo-Nazi parties (NPD, *Republikaner*) in Germany and, of course, the many post-communist “Communist parties” in Russia and Eastern Europe. Indeed, there would surely have been an overtly post-Nazi party in Germany after 1945 had such a development not been banned by the occupying powers.

Franz Oswald’s book on the PDS falls within this tradition of “explaining” the unexpected success of the PDS in establishing itself firmly within the party system of eastern Germany and, more marginally, in German politics at the federal level. Oswald maintains that the role of the PDS in the German party system “can best be understood by tracing the trajectory traversed by the PDS” (p. vii). He therefore details the struggles within the PDS to adapt to a role as an oppositional party within the German party and state system from the winter of 1989 to early 2002. He does this by citing published statements of party leaders and oppositional figures, primarily on the PDS’s left fringe. In addition, Oswald ties the development of the PDS to the stance taken toward it by other parties. He rightly stresses the crucial decision of the SPD in 1989-90 not to admit SED members without individual vetting at the local party level as making possible the survival of the PDS as a mass party (pp. 28-31).

For Oswald, the PDS successfully made itself a credible actor in German politics by instituting important reforms; these include permitting (indeed, encouraging) party factions, organizing basic units on a locality and

not workplace basis, and an acceptance of positive value in formal democracy, leading to an ideological break with “Stalinism.” The author sees these changes as a generally successful series of leadership initiatives, which were only slightly constrained by a dogmatic opposition centered on the “Communist Platform.” In Oswald’s view, the importance of this group was greatly overblown by hostile West German observers; he declares (without evidence) that the Stalinists’ leader (or at least symbol), Sarah Wagenknecht, received up to a third of delegates’ votes at the 1995 PDS congress (in an unsuccessful bid for re-election to the party *Vorstand*) because “[m]any delegates merely felt that she had been unfairly singled out by party leaders” (p. 83).

The general thrust of Oswald’s argument is unexceptional, if overly optimistic. The book was evidently finished in early 2002; little in it prepares a reader for the PDS’s poor showing in that fall’s general election. The book is, in important ways, both too narrow and too shallow. To begin with, Oswald devotes an inordinately large part of the book to arguing with and triumphantly “refuting” German conservative critics of the PDS, most notably Patrick Moreau. Oswald seems somehow to believe that this viewpoint dominated scholarly discussion of the PDS and shaped western German policy toward it. While it is true that scholars such as Moreau reflected CDU/CSU perspectives on the PDS, they were hardly the only German perspective—as Oswald’s own references to such scholars as Heinrich Bortfeldt, Richard Stoess and Gero Neugebauer shows. Moreover, Oswald ignores most English-language scholarship on the subject (although a few are listed in the bibliography).[3]

Furthermore, by concentrating so much on formal party statements (and critical commentary), Oswald misses the chance to place the evolution of the PDS in a meaningful context. No use is made of survey research findings—which could have provided a foundation for such plausible but unsubstantiated assertions as the claim that the PDS’s recovery around 1993 was because it “was anchored in East German society” (p. 49). Such findings would also shed light on the connection between eastern German attitudes (toward, say, democratic politics) and PDS policy. Oswald mentions the tension between party members and voters, but he pays little attention to the social and generational composition of the party, or its fluctuating membership. Strangely, Oswald makes surprisingly little use of the wealth of PDS material on-line, beginning with the essential *Pressedienst*. Although Oswald rightly points to the acceptance of the PDS in eastern state governments as an important devel-

opment, there is no discussion of the actual record of the PDS in, say, the *Mecklenburg-Vorpommern* coalition after 1998. Finally, although Oswald specifically thanks “numerous others in Germany who gave their time for interviews and discussion” (p. viii), I found no instances of interviews referred to as specific sources. As much scholarship has demonstrated, the (inter)views of PDS officials can be very useful in understanding PDS actions.

Such flaws prevent Oswald’s book from being an important addition to Western scholarship on the PDS.

Notes

[1] David Patton, “Germany’s Party of Democratic Socialism in Comparative Perspective,” *East European Politics and Society* 12 (Fall 1998): pp. 500-526.

[2] See among others, Thomas A. Baylis, “Institutional Destruction and Reconstruction in Eastern Germany,” in *After the Wall: Eastern Germany since 1989*, ed. Patricia J. Smith (Boulder: Westview, 1998), pp. 15-31;

John T. Ishiyama, “The Communist Successor Parties and Party Organizational Development in Post-Communist Politics,” *Political Research Quarterly*, 52,1 (March 1999): pp. 87-112; Anna M. Grzymala-Busse, “Reform, Efforts in the Czech and Slovak Communist Parties and their Successors, 1988-1993,” *East European Politics and Societies* 12 no. 3 (Fall 1998): pp. 442-471.

[3] Jonathan Olsen, “Seeing Red: The SPD-PDS Government in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania,” *German Studies Review*, 23 (2000): pp. 557-580; Jennifer Yoder, *From East Germans to Germans? The New Post-Communist Elites* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); Henry Krisch, “Searching For Voters: PDS Mobilization Strategies, 1994-97,” in Peter J. Barker, ed., *The Party of Democratic Socialism in Germany. Modern Post-Communism or Nostalgic Populism?* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998); *ibid.*, “The PDS: Left and East,” in Russell Dalton, ed., *Germans Divided: The 1994 Bundestag Election and the Evolution of the German Party System* (Oxford: Berg, 1996).

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