



Werner M  ller, Fred Mrotzek, Johannes K  llner. *Die Geschichte der SPD in Mecklenburg und Vorpommern.* Bonn: Dietz, 2002. 271 pp. EUR 14.80 (paper), ISBN 978-3-8012-0329-0.

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Social Democracy in the Province

This book traces the origins and evolution of the German Social Democratic party (SPD) in the northern provinces/state of Mecklenburg and West Pomerania from the mid-nineteenth century through the 1990s. Because the SPD in this agricultural region was relatively small, it has been understudied, in contrast to the Social Democratic movement in the large cities and industrialized areas of Germany. The book tells Mecklenburg Social Democracy's story in five chronologically arranged sections, each written by one of the study's three authors. Johannes K  llner examines the SPD during the Imperial era; Fred Mrotzek takes the story through the Weimar years; and Werner M  ller's three sections cover the Third Reich, Soviet Zone of Occupation (SBZ), German Democratic Republic (GDR), and post-reunification era. Despite having multiple authors, the book's tone and style remain coherent and clear throughout. The volume is handsomely produced, including evocative photographs of Social Democratic leaders, meeting halls and press offices, cultural events, and political demonstrations as well as facsimiles of banners, newspaper pages, and political flyers.

One cannot be as uniformly positive about the book's content, methodology, and argumentation, as about its style, organization, and presentation. Let me begin with the good news. The authors offer a thorough institutional history of a Social Democratic regional party across almost 150 years of extraordinary fluctuations in its fortunes: birth under politically inhospitable conditions; rapid growth before World War I, followed by contrac-

tion during the war; flowering, then foundering, in the Weimar Republic; suppression by the National Socialists; re-emergence in the SBZ; forced merger in 1946 with the Communist party (KPD); second renaissance in 1989-90. As M  ller explains in the book's introduction, it was not easy to reconstruct this history, for the primary evidence is sparse. As the footnotes and bibliography show, he and his co-authors energetically searched state and party archives, combed through the relevant Social Democratic publications, and plumbed the extensive German-language literature on the political history of the national SPD. Using this material, the authors detail the development of party organizations and sub-organizations, newspapers and other publications as well as describe the organizational and legislative efforts of party leaders/politicians and recount their interactions with state officials and other political parties. All this is situated in the context of national and regional political events. A theme of the book is the strength of the SPD in Mecklenburg's two largest cities, Rostock and Schwerin, in contrast to its difficulty in penetrating the world of rural laborers, despite the fact that they suffered under miserable working conditions and a low standard of living on the large estates that dominated agricultural production in Mecklenburg/West Pomerania. In Rostock and Schwerin, K  llner shows, as the membership of the SPD expanded in the 1890s, so did that of affiliated trade unions, fraternal societies and cultural groups such as athletic leagues, nature clubs and youth groups. The SPD in Rostock and Schwerin became, he maintains, the po-

litical center of a vibrant sub-cultural milieu, comparable in variety and intensity of commitment, though smaller in size, to the movement in Berlin and other big cities. Even more surprising, before 1919 and again in the early Weimar elections, the Mecklenburg SPD's Reichstag delegation polled quite well, including out in the countryside.

The overall shape of the story up to 1945 will be familiar to scholars of the SPD, for the Mecklenburg SPD's political history does not appear to have deviated significantly from the national pattern. Less familiar and thus most interesting are the events of the postwar era covered by MÄ¼ller in chapter 4. The rebirth of the Mecklenburg SPD was robust and by late-1945 its membership had swelled beyond the numbers of the Weimar years. Despite numerical superiority to the KPD, the SPD's position was fraught, however, due to scarce funds and the favoritism shown by the Soviet occupiers toward the KPD. Social Democrats reacted variously to Communist pressure to merge into the Socialist Unity Party (SED). Suggestive of broad unhappiness with the merger, MÄ¼ller suggests, is the fact that 20,000 of 81,000 Social Democrats did not turn in their membership cards for SED cards in 1946. Former SPD leaders who had opposed the merger continued initially to occupy administrative posts in Rostock and Schwerin. As the Cold War camps hardened in 1947 and the Stalinization of the SED accelerated in 1948, these men were charged with sabotage and imprisoned for, in several cases, years.

The authors, then, have reconstructed a significant story from scarce sources. As told, though, the story is a somewhat old-fashioned one, approached from a methodological perspective that is narrow in several ways. Every chapter focuses lopsidedly on party organizations, institutions, and leaders, and has little to say about the mentality, ideology, or even social composition of the membership of the SPD or its affiliated groups. KÄ¶llner, as mentioned, describes the expansion of the Social Democratic movement. He conveys, however, little sense of the content of its culture, of its social, mental or discursive *Alltag*. What was its language of class? Which occupations and skill-levels were represented, and which not? What was the relationship between Social Democratic cultural organizations and the SPD, between the SPD and socialist trade unions? What ideological countercurrents coursed through the SPD in Rostock and Schwerin?

As these questions suggest, analysis and argument are underdeveloped, relative to description. In the case

of the social make-up of membership, the only variable that the authors systematically address is gender composition. We learn from KÄ¶llner and Mrotzek that women were underrepresented in the party before 1933. MÄ¼ller tells us that in Mecklenburg's post-reunification SPD, however, the membership is disproportionately female. No author explores why women shied away from the party earlier or why they now favor it. The shift in women's representation reflects, presumably, changes in East German women's political participation and in the SPD's message to women. The authors do not, however, explore the message and language of the SPD's appeals to women or to any social group. Nor do they deconstruct the Social Democratic milieu's symbols, festivals or rites from either a gendered or other point of view.

In the case of party institutions and leaders—the main foci of the book—the reader misses a critical evaluation of the organizational structures or ideological tendencies of the Mecklenburg party, especially before 1933. The representation of party leaders is not hagiographic but also not probing. About the SPD press, we learn when newspapers were established and banned, who edited them and what the run was, but discover little about what topics were covered and how they were handled, where the Mecklenburg press stood within the spectrum of SPD politics or what kind of cultural world was reflected in its pages. In a single paragraph, KÄ¶llner disposes of Eduard Bernstein's revisionist challenge to Marxist orthodoxy, the national executive's politically passive Marxist "centrism" and the split over the vote for war credits in 1914. Of the Mecklenburg SPD's stand on these questions, we learn only that the majority followed the national party's endorsement of war credits, although a Mecklenburg Reichstag member opposed the war.

More effective is the discussion of the crucial "agrarian question." Both KÄ¶llner and Mrotzek refer to the Marxist position on the "agrarian question" that, by calling for the socialization of agriculture, made it difficult for the SPD to attract rural support. Especially interesting is Mrotzek's description of a district party conference in 1925 that discussed efforts to organize rural laborers. He quotes from a speech in which the leader of the Rural Workers' League in Mecklenburg analyzed why Social Democratic influence among land laborers had declined in the 1920s after surging in 1918-19 (p. 143). These passages are fascinating, as is his brief discussion of SPD rural work in the 1920s, the revision of its agrarian program in 1927 in a more farmer-friendly direction and the "inconsistent" implementation of this program in Mecklenburg (pp. 144-45). Again, though, one wishes for

a sustained critical evaluation of *internal* determinants of the SPD's failure in the countryside. Instead, he and Köllner emphasize external factors such as the persistent efforts of landowners to keep Social Democrats off their estates and to fire laborers of Social Democratic inclination. The effects of the Depression and mass unemployment, according to Mrotzek, made "the rural population" susceptible to the *Blut-und-Boden* politics of the National Socialists. The implication is that the SPD was helpless to counter that susceptibility.

The book lacks, finally, a systematic comparison between the Mecklenburg SPD and the national SPD. Certainly, some significant comparisons are drawn. Missing, however, is an overall assessment of how the specific history of the SPD in Mecklenburg/West Pomerania diverged from the general path. A conclusion, which the book does not have, might have provided such an overview.

The source deficit goes far, no doubt, to explain these lacunae. One cannot help but wonder, though, if the authors might not have used the *Mecklenburgische Volks-Zeitung*, local pamphlets and posters, police reports or interviews with older Social Democrats to address some

of these issues. The authors also do not cite an entire genre of secondary literature on Social Democracy and German workers that, for years, has creatively submitted the extant sources (which are deficient for Social Democracy as a whole) to methodologies ranging from statistical to discourse analysis. This literature has, with some success, reconstructed and interpreted the social composition, gender relations, political debates, and cultural mentality of, depending on the study, the national SPD, one of its local or regional organizations, or a particular working-class milieu. To name just a handful of authors whose research might have proved inspiring: Ursula Böttner, David F. Crew, Richard J. Evans, Karen Hagemann, Gerd-Rainer Horn, Alf Lütke, Mary Jo Maynes, Mary Nolan, Jean H. Quataert, Adelheid von Saldern, Julia Sneeringer, and Jonathan Sperber.

In sum, this book effectively introduces the reader to the rich institutional heritage, dedicated leaders, and tough political fiber of the Mecklenburg SPD. Every chapter includes information and observations that contribute to our understanding of Social Democracy as a whole. The book's restricted methodology and interpretive reticence may, however, disappoint the scholarly reader.

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