

Dissolution; The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany, Charles Maier, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997

The Politics of Economic Decline in East Germany, 1945-1989, Jeffrey Kopstein, University of North Carolina Press, 1997

Varieties of Transition; The East European and East German Experience, Claus Offe, Cambridge: Polity, 1996

On 7th October 1989 East German leaders gathered at the 'Palace of the Republic' to celebrate the fortieth birthday of their state - one which Charles Maier describes as (xii) 'a repressive little state built on public self-congratulations and pervasive policing.' Despite the pomp and pageantry, all was not well. Gorbachev was in town, and his name was chanted by demonstrators outside, as a symbol of hopes in political reform. The first open signs of division in the politburo had just appeared. The assembled guests were nervous. Some exchanged dark jokes. One went as follows: after the sinking of the Titanic, three countries began to work on its salvage, each with a keen motive. The USA was after the gold in the safes. The USSR was interested in the technology of the machinery. And the GDR? Its leaders were desperate to discover which pieces had been played - so bravely - by the orchestra as the ship went down.

The three books reviewed here address some of the key questions concerning the sinking of the GDR. Why did its leaders refuse to change course? Why did much of the population mutiny? What was the historical significance of the uprising?

Each author brings a distinctive angle to these issues, as reflected in the questions asked as well as the answers given. Jeffrey Kopstein focuses on the interaction of structural constraints with the strategies of the ruling elite; his main theme is the mediations between economic decline and political strategy. Beginning from the constraints on policy - in the shape above all of workers' resistance, Soviet domination, and East Germany's insertion into the world economy - he demonstrates how the SED leadership's strategic choices, though rational in the short term, proved ultimately irrational. In attempting to explain why the 'irrational' course was maintained, his analysis illuminates the structural preconditions of the 1989 revolution. His theme is not the revolution as such - not the process, nor the actors, nor the outcome. For Kopstein, the protestors are simply assumed to be driven by the desire for a Western lifestyle, as a result of their experience of 'relative deprivation'. German unification is implied to be the cardinal outcome of the revolution, and is assumed to be inscribed in the sheer fact of the East's material poverty. The pathway from revolutionary situation to actual outcome requires no distinct elucidation.

Charles Maier, by contrast, has a sharp interest in crucibles of expanding historical choice, as exemplified in revolutionary situations. If Maier has won deserved esteem for his many profound and wide-ranging studies on the making of the modern world, this is surely due not only to his acute historical

sensibility but also because his guiding standards are informed by the spirit and ideals of the American revolution, against which the modern world seems so terribly corrupt. 'As a citizen of the United States', his discussion of 1989 begins (xx), he is 'proud that the values which my country has represented - at least in its best moments - proved so contagious.' For Maier, the 'Citizens Movements' of Eastern Europe are worthy inheritors of the values of liberty, equality and fraternity - those 'founding principles' of the USA, which 'will hopefully retain their attraction' in years to come.

Though sharing Maier's commitment to the ideals of bourgeois society (particularly the 'rule of law'), Claus Offe's account of 1989 is decidedly different, being strongly marked by fatalism and pessimism. Although only hinted at in this volume, the background to this tone is Offe's pioneering development of the 'new social movement paradigm' in the 1980s.¹ For Offe, these movements (42) 'focus on overcoming some of the built-in biases, deficiencies and blind spots' of the major political and economic institutions. New social movements, he argued, would arise on the ashes of 'old' labour movements; they promised to become beneficial buttresses to the pillars of bourgeois democracy. Since the mid-1980s, however, Offe's hopes have been dashed, and the 'NSM paradigm' referred to the museum of curious conceptions. With hindsight he writes that (197) 'At the beginning of the eighties ... on the occasion of the marriage of the new social movements, the general prediction [i.e. Offe's prediction] was for a trend towards a post-industrial society in which the significance of "materialist" realms of politics geared towards guiding values such as growth and [social security] would recede', giving way to 'postmaterialist' movements based on issues such as peace and ecology which should 'lend a strong impetus to a "post-industrial Left".' Thus, Offe wrote the volume considered here after becoming aware that his 'speculative position [had] proved to be completely erroneous.' The impression given by this volume is that his disappointment in the stillbirth of the Western 'postindustrial Left' applies equally to the 'postmaterialist' Citizens Movement organizations of 1989, as they floundered in the face of political crisis, before being rapidly marginalized by the 'materialist' movement for German unification.

The constraints of SED rule

I begin with Kopstein's geometry of 'confining conditions'. He concentrates on three spheres which constrained the strategic choices available to the SED: industrial relations, military rivalries and alliances, and economic competition.

On industrial relations, Kopstein's book fills something of a gap, at least in the English literature. In his account, East German rulers, following WWII, faced a working class which had gained a considerable degree of control over

¹ See Offe 1985, 1987. For a critique of the NSM paradigm, see Barker and Dale.

much of industry and, to a surprising extent, resisted the competitive culture demanded by the imperatives of accumulation. Especially where 'enterprise councils' were strong, the prevailing shop floor ethic was (21) 'egalitarian, cooperative, defensive, and geared toward survival rather than the maximization of gain.' As economic growth resumed, the labour market tightened, and was exacerbated by booming demand from West Berlin. 'Such market conditions', with workers 'chang[ing] jobs relatively freely', notes Kopstein, 'gave the working class a power of sorts' (156-7) - and presented managers and officials with major headaches. Their response, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, centred on intensive efforts to undermine solidarity and improve productivity by raising differentials and introducing 'a rigorous Taylorist labor regime' (18). Labour market competition was complemented by the granting of differential rewards related to performance (piece work etc.) and political loyalty. Schemes of 'socialist competition' were introduced in which workers (and work brigades) were pitted against one another (and were obliged in the process to commit themselves ritually to 'the party and its production goals.' (164))

The employers' offensive faced widespread and tenacious resistance, which Kopstein illustrates with many examples. For example (27), '[w]here management stiffened its resolve to increase wage and consumer good differentials, workers often spontaneously evened out the differences by purchasing goods for each other.' According to SED reports (29), 'many foremen could not be stopped from putting all the piecework tickets in a common urn in order to ensure equality of reward.' 'Workers and enterprise councils spontaneously eliminated piecework and often removed time clocks at plant entrances as symbols of work speedups and other distasteful aspects of capitalist (and Nazi) [sic] industrial life.' (27). Those who did go along with managerial ideals of 'activism' and norm-busting 'tended to be despised and isolated by the rank-and-file employees' (33).

It is at this point in the story that the second of Kopstein's 'confining conditions' - geopolitics - intervenes. In his opinion (35), '[t]he cat-and-mouse game' of industrial struggle might have continued as a war of attrition 'had the cold war not taken a new turn.' In its earliest phase East Germany had existed as a paradox and a problem for the USSR. Raising its flag over the *Reichstag* in Berlin marked the historical high-watermark of the Kremlin's power; yet the territory occupied, being a small fraction of pre-war Germany, was not envisaged as a viable entity. It was intended by Stalin simply as a bargaining chip to be exchanged for the neutralization of Germany. The Soviet zone was substantially weaker than its western twin: its economy was especially dislocated by the division of Germany, and, rather than receiving Marshall Aid it was subjected to years of intensive plunder by Moscow. Far from being the triumphant outcome of a German revolution, it was nothing but naked geopolitical (and geo-ideological) rivalry - the developing antagonism between the USA and Russia - which, in Maier's phrase (23) 'locked the Russians into reinforcing East Germany's national status.' Part of this process involved cementing it into a keystone of Soviet empire. In emulation of the economic model of the conquering power, a substantial heavy industrial base was reconstructed beneath a sturdy military machine.

In 1952, in Kopstein's words (35), '[u]nder Soviet orders the East Germans committed themselves to building up their armed forces and defense industry at a cost of 1.5 billion marks, to be financed from reductions in social spending coupled with higher taxation.' The upshot of this austerity was a rapid deterioration of living standards for much of the population. Together with deepening divisions in the Soviet leadership, which catalysed U-turns and vacillation amongst their counterparts in the GDR and generated confusion throughout the ruling institutions, a revolutionary situation developed, culminating in a mass strike and uprising in June 1953.

The uprising, though eventually crushed by Soviet troops, starkly reminded the SED of its limited room for manoeuvre on the industrial front. As Kopstein remarks (37) it 'effectively crippled the regime on the shop floor', and forced it to proceed more cautiously. In the following decades (18), 'fearing a repetition of the June events, labor peace could be bought only at the price of long-term stagnation in labour relations, wage structures, and productivity incentives.' Except for the construction of the Berlin Wall, which 'tourniqueted the flow of skilled labor and stabilized the political situation' (Maier 87), the SED scored few major successes in its battle to weaken what Kopstein describes as workers' substantial 'tacit power'.²

Organizing stability

By crushing the 1953 uprising and backing the building of the Wall Moscow demonstrated a 'fraternal solidarity' with its German creature that was set to grow in strength.³ These acts of brute intimidation doubtless helped to promote attitudes of deference (or 'legitimacy'). They represented a determined assertion of class power which, by securing domestic and international stability, promoted a growing recognition of the GDR as a sovereign state. However, the grammar of rule is invariably more elaborate than simply the guttural sounds of concrete and lead. Maier's distinctive take on this is what he calls the 'corruption of the public sphere'. His use of this term is broad, and not unlike Gramsci's (80): 'Between consent and force stands corruption [which aims to] sow disarray and confusion', for example by 'procuring the demoralisation and paralysis of the antagonist'. Maier applies the concept liberally - for instance to familiar phenomena in 'advanced' societies such as (41) 'the growing role of private wealth for political participation, the replacement of debate with simplified slogans and images of personality' as well as other symptoms of media power such as the increasing prominence within political discourse of 'the interaction of television audiences and

² 'It was not the power to strike, organize or bargain collectively, but as the [high] rates of absenteeism illustrate, it did entail the power to withhold services.' (157)

³ 'Paradoxically,' Maier suggests (23), 'uncertainties within the Soviet bloc strengthened the Soviet commitment to the East German state. Any notion of trading it for neutralization of a united Germany became far too adventurous for even the reformist Khrushchev, once the Polish and Hungarian upheavals shook Eastern Europe in 1956'.

interpreters of public opinion.'

In the East German case, corruption of the public sphere entailed the state exploiting its command over resources so as to insert its interests into the nooks and crannies of everyday life. Far from establishing legitimacy through ideological conviction it sought to govern through private bargains with citizens. Citizens were treated as clients in a relationship that promoted amongst the latter attitudes of needy subordination. Above all, the distribution of resources was used as an instrument of division. Although nominally based upon solidarity (39), 'the regime survived precisely by undermining solidarity with differential rewards such as travel and education, even by dividing up its supposedly loyal proletarian supporters into competitive work brigades, and by rewarding snooping.' In Maier's depiction, the public sphere was pork barrel politics writ large: those who bowed and scraped gained privileges, with the regime hoping to reap loyalty in return.

Even the Stasi's activities, Maier argues, are best understood as corruption rather than repression. The Stasi (47) 'wove large numbers of East Germans, over 1 percent of the whole population, probably over 10 percent of the adult "intellectual" population, into a network of corrupting complicity, [making] complicity a key principle of governance.' Its officials saw themselves (48) 'as much as social workers as policemen', often sincerely believing that the 'objects of investigation should be grateful for the tutelage provided.' Its true function consisted less in the specific information gleaned and the uses to which it was put than in the general opaqueness created for the regime - a power of mystification and secrecy upon which the ability to corrupt independent action and stifle dissent depended.

Economic reform

The third basis of SED rule - apart from force and corruption - was economic growth. Given the intensity of geopolitical and geoeconomic competition (above all versus the FRG), and given the wage pressure from what Kopstein describes (157) as 'a highly skilled and mature labor force', competitive productivity growth was the key priority of the *nomenklatura*. Even a casual glance at SED documents, Kopstein suggests (1), 'reveals how obsessed the leadership of the SED was with improving economic performance and how focused it was on comparisons with production and consumption levels in the West.'

In the 1950s and 1960s, Maier notes (81-8), growth was rapid, especially in the spheres of investment and rearmament. More significantly, 'growth rates from the 1950s through the 1960s and into the 1970s were comparable with those in the West'. Such indicators of success, however, concealed a widening productivity gap with the FRG which, Kopstein registers (4), was uniquely painful and politically sensitive. Worried by this productivity slippage, sections of the ruling class developed plans for major economic reform. Against the background of detente - in which a relaxation of orthodoxy became more thinkable - and drawing on Soviet reform ideas and recent

Western texts on management (Kopstein 49), plans were drawn up to introduce market mechanisms and to grant greater autonomy to firms. SED leader Ulbricht even came close to endorsing the mechanism of bankruptcy. Over seven years some of these plans were put into practice, in what was known as the New Economic System (NÖS).

The results of NÖS were hardly promising. They ran up against problems of three sorts. The first, Kopstein argues (11), was opposition by workers and managers. Following years of resistance to Taylorization and in the wake of the 1953 uprising the SED had been forced to give workers 'a virtual veto power over wages, prices, and work norms', thereby conceding to them a degree of ability 'to restrict the range of plausible reforms at a later period.' One plank of NÖS, due to begin in trial form in 1966, involved a shift to profitability as the determinant of investment decisions; as such it would necessarily entail closures and lay-offs. Kopstein relates how in one trial scheme (62) '[t]hose threatened with transfers to new work put up stiff resistance. Coal miners and their managers in Zwickau brought the situation to the edge of revolt. In the face of these prospects, plans to close down certain parts of the coal mine were quickly dropped.' The trial scheme was effectively scuppered.

The second problem was that reform decreased the ability of the central planning authorities to ration demand, giving rise 'to bottlenecks and stagnation of consumer goods ... energy crises ... and an unavowed inflation.' (Maier 92). More significantly, economic devolution, through attenuating the state's control over the economy - for example by allowing enterprise managers to engage directly in foreign trade - raised the spectre of centrifugal forces undermining the power of the central authorities and, by extension, of the power of the Kremlin's hegemony over Eastern Europe. The fate of the reformist government in Czechoslovakia highlighted the latter question. It is this constraint which led to intervention against Ulbricht by Brezhnev, and which leads Maier (89) to explain the termination of NÖS in 1970 as reform falling 'victim to the logic of imperial control.'

Economic decline

For Maier the termination of NÖS was a pivotal mistake. Despite the (hardly promising) example of reformist Hungary, he suggests that market reforms could have rescued East German profitability. Whereas (79) most 'Western economic analysts' - including Kopstein - 'have maintained that the final crisis of communism merely culminated its insoluble long-term contradictions', Maier sticks his neck out and 'proposes an alternative scenario, namely that socialist policy makers might have evolved toward more flexible production in the 1960s, but then put off reforms for a fateful decade or more.'

Whatever the merits of such speculation, it is certainly true that the early 1970s mark a watershed in East Germany as well as elsewhere in the Soviet bloc and beyond. For one thing, these were the years when '[c]apitalism and

communism together left behind the period of rapid and relatively easy capital accumulation that marked the quarter century after World War II to enter a far more troubled era' (Maier 81). But more significantly, although 'many of the difficulties of communism also assailed the West' - where 'painful' restructuring was attempted - in the East, relative decline evolved into drawn-out and worsening crisis.

Why was this? Maier's explanation centres on the relation between the peculiar structures of the Soviet economies and the world economy. The USSR had become locked into a particular complex of structures - economic, political, geopolitical - that had in mid-century been innovative and singularly conducive to capital accumulation, enabling it to achieve regional hegemony, recover from war, rearm, and rebuild an industrial base, but these (now replicated throughout Eastern Europe) were becoming fetters on further growth. 'Mobilized' societies aiming to overtake western rivals became 'siege' societies stuck in a vicious circle of decline. In the East German case, being relatively small and advanced, the contradictions were felt especially painfully.⁴

Maier develops his thesis in two different ways. The first is rather conjectural. It suggests that command economies have a natural affinity to the stage of development which characterized the industrialized world from 1930 to 1970, 'because the preponderant technology of the era seemed to be based on large productive units and heavy industry' (97) where efficiency was conceived in terms of the 'mechanized output of standardized products.' Communism subscribed to 'the romance of coal and steel', a type of product which is, Maier presumes, peculiarly amenable to central planning.

In advancing this case Maier points to real phenomena - the ecologically disastrous commitment of the SED to expanding lignite production, the extreme emphasis on heavy industry, and the 'soft budget constraints' which enabled once-competitive sectors to be maintained when world conditions had long rendered them obsolete. But do such 'inefficiencies' emanate from an affinity of central planning with an outdated (simple and heavy) stage of technological development? And has the world economy really shifted to a new 'flexible' phase based upon smaller units and greater complexity? By some criteria the opposite would seem to be the case. The size of firms in most sectors is nowadays larger than in mid-century, and make East German 'giants' seem like dwarves.⁵ Meanwhile the developing division of labour continues to underwrite tendencies to greater standardization of mass production, and to simplification of processes at the micro level.

Maier's second angle relates to the international division of labour. He highlights how the Comecon economies were structurally organized to resist

⁴ Kopstein's figures (198) suggest that by 1980 East German per capita income, of all the Eastern European countries (except Yugoslavia) had advanced least when compared to the pre-war level.

⁵ In the vehicle industry, for example, the largest East German players employed under one tenth as many workers as General Motors; the gap was larger still if measured by turnover.

'the encroaching world market' (104). In order, however, to benefit from the possibilities of international trade and production, and forced by the imperative of matching the scale, resources and reach of the world's leading firms, intensive engagement in the world economy was all but inevitable. The longer resistance lasted, the greater would be the pain of restructuring when integration came. In Maier's version of this thesis the world market operates essentially as a selection mechanism. His case would be stronger, however, if he posited the difficulties of integration into the burgeoning international division of labour as itself the chief cause of the relative decline which underlay the process of 'deselection'.⁶

'Westwards pull'

Although the cessation of NÖS and the replacement of Ulbricht by Honecker in 1971 were both linked to what Honecker himself described as the need to beware the "'pull to the West'" (Kopstein 71), and were followed by a recentralization of decision-making, these shifts by no means resulted in an end to closer integration into the world economy. Trade with the 'non-socialist abroad' continued to grow. Import-export firms were set up in the West to sell East German commodities, to speculate on stock markets, and to channel proceeds back to the hard-currency-starved domestic economy.

Western imports comprised consumer goods, but also capital goods required to upgrade production. Import-led growth was a strategy that Ulbricht had already championed during the economic crisis of 1970, in the following terms (Kopstein 68): '[I]t is straightforward: We get as much debt with the capitalists, up to the limits of the possible, so that we can pull through in some way. A part of the products from the new plants must then be exported back to where we bought the machines and took on debt.' Under the sign of detente and *Ostpolitik* the expansion of trade and debt was striking. Net indebtedness to OECD countries, according to Kopstein (84), increased during the latter half of the 1970s by more than 20% *annually!*

If the low cost of borrowing in the 1970s encouraged the strategy of import-led growth (and thus the deferral of restructuring and austerity), its rise as the decade ended provoked a major crisis - in East Germany as in Mexico, Poland, Peru and elsewhere. Investment geared to western markets was devalued when those markets slumped; accumulated levels of debt proved unsustainable when interest rates soared. As Nigel Harris has put it (192): 'the whip to speed growth could as easily turn into a noose to strangle.'

Under the pressure of crisis and the pull of the world market, Comecon began to fracture. By 1981, notes Kopstein (92), 'the Soviets were no longer in a position to do what they had always done when necessary - bail out the SED.' From effectively subsidizing its allies with cheap oil, the Soviet oil price began to approach world market levels and its supply became less assured. The

⁶ For an exposition of such an approach see Harris (1983) and Harman (1989).

grave - or perhaps tragicomic - political effect of this was exemplified when Moscow diverted oil from East Germany to Poland in 1981. Honecker, painfully aware that over a billion DM had been invested in equipment to refine Soviet oil on the assumption that it would remain cheap and on tap, complained to Brezhnev (Kopstein 92) that the reduction 'undermines the foundation of the GDR's existence.'

East Germany, like the rest of Eastern Europe, was in a double-bind. It was torn between closer integration into the world market (spelling debt and politically dangerous dependency), and retrenched orientation towards the Comecon bloc (which promised stagnation). Greater integration with the world economy exacerbated the GDR's vulnerability to fluctuations of world demand, interest rates, and to the dictates of 'hard' world standards and prices which exposed its seriously lagging productivity. Integration could therefore, paradoxically, tend to worsen the trade prospects of weaker, sheltered economies such as the East German, pushing them back towards 'soft markets' and autarky.

These smouldering economic contradictions and crises of the 1970s and 1980s highlight Kopstein's reasons (12) for positing the 'international political economy' as the third imperative, or 'confining condition' (after workers' resistance and geopolitics) which delimited the strategic choices of the SED leadership. Inevitably, these broader imperatives which competed for political priority contradicted one another. For example, even as the 'social contract' of the 1970s was being prepared, in order to maintain peace on the labour front, the state planning commission produced a report which insisted that such measures could not be afforded. 'The effect, the paper argued, would be increasing indebtedness to the West and a ballooning domestic monetary overhang, as well as declining rates of capital accumulation.' (Kopstein 82). Of course, such clashes over priorities are the everyday currency of politics. But as underlying contradictions accumulate, political conflicts tend to become sharper. Maier highlights a dramatic case in 1988: when the Chief Planner proposed austerity measures (with his eye on ballooning debt) he was sharply attacked by Mittag, the Head of the Economy, (whose eye was on social stability). Maier reports that in the aftermath of the clash, the Stasi's economic unit 'warned how demoralizing an effect Mittag's attack was exerting on economic debate within party ranks' (Maier 72).

In microcosm this dispute symbolizes a sea-change within the *nomenclatura*. Whereas in the 1960s leaders exuded confidence, and Ulbricht could even assert (Kopstein 67) that the GDR could 'succeed politically' by overtaking its Western rivals 'on the economic front'; by the 1980s a growing awareness that the confining conditions were closing in led to general demoralization. The *nomenclatura*, notes Maier (57), began to '*lose faith*'; they began to 'share their critics' sense that the economic and social stalemate could not continue, but they did not know how to extricate themselves or devise decisive reforms.'

With this cascade of contradictions in mind, and the resultant diminished room for manoeuvre experienced and perceived by policymakers, one can get to grips with the question as to why the iceberg was not avoided, why contradictions were not quietly resolved, why the SED leadership was driven

to make what with hindsight appear to be 'mistakes', and why 'the political elite return[ed] time and again to the same solutions that did not work' (Kopstein xii). In contrast to Maier, who sees the (94) 'renewed wager on orthodoxy' of the 1970s as a serious mistake, Kopstein provides a shrewd explanation of why ruling classes are driven to make such 'mistakes'. His emphasis is on the constraints upon policy, and how choices (105) 'may be rational in the short run but irrational over the long run.' In the case of the GDR the constraints on reform included - apart from the lack of regularized regime change and the sheer inertia and complacency that may imbue any successfully established regime - the 'pull to the West', dependence upon the USSR, as well as the close interlocking of economic, political and cultural institutions, and the adhesion between economic structure and geopolitical alliance which meant, given its precarious economic and national status, that even piecemeal reform might catalyse the dissolution of the GDR. By the late 1980s, then, (Kopstein 104) 'even if Honecker and company had wanted to "reform" the economy ... they would not have had an easy time of it. They were hemmed in by the choices both they and their predecessors had made at critical junctures in their state's history.' To recap, these included the Kremlin's decision to build East Germany as a front-line state, which required a massive rearmament programme which, in turn, catalysed the 1953 uprising. This, together with East Germany's front-line situation, heightened the imperative of pacifying the working class, which, in turn, entailed measures that were to lower the chance that NÖS would succeed. This failure further limited Honecker's room for manoeuvre in the 1970s.

This was the (domestic) context in which the revolution of 1989 occurred. From Maier's perspective (38), it was characterized by a ruling elite feeling 'overwhelmed by social complexity'. In fact it was not complexity that overwhelmed, but rather their weakness and lack of cohesion in the face of ever more aggravated contradictions. As the revolutionary crisis deepened, demoralization palpably increased. With details emerging of unprecedented levels of debt (Maier 59), and with Gorbachev making contradictory pronouncements on the fate of East Germany (Maier 156), the SED's confidence crumbled. The only plausible reaction to such paralysing circumstances was, it seemed, to sit tight. In Kopstein's words (104) '[t]he SED elite believed that it faced an extreme version of the Tocquevillian paradox: unpopular governments become unstable when they start to reform themselves.' Though none may actually have read Tocqueville, 'their conversations in the final years reveal an intuitive understanding of their predicament. Reform seemed to be both necessary and unimaginable.'

Accidental breakdown?

What sense should be made of this breakdown of the SED *ancien regime*? On this subject Offe makes a headstrong claim. He argues (24) that the 'breakdown of the GDR cannot be explained in terms of ... a coming to a head of long-inherent crisis tendencies, but must be accounted for in terms of a contingent and rather "accidental" chain of events'. '[W]hat was involved was

not a process of crisis and conflict that had long been on the cards and in the final instance was intrinsically ineluctable, but rather a configuration of economic, political and international affairs related to specific persons that appears improbable retrospectively, and at best to have had a certain inevitability about it.' (135). Elaborating this theme elsewhere (Elster et al., 2), he writes that 'the events of 1989-91 were essentially triggered by contingent and erratic personal decisions at the top level of the Soviet elite that followed no known rule or pattern whatsoever and in the absence of which the system might well have survived for some undeterminable span of life.'

While Offe is certainly correct to deny any automatic progression from economic crisis to revolution, his case for contingency is untenable, and rests on two misconceptions. The first, empirical, is the claim that the East German economy displayed 'an immunity to crises' (141). In fact, as Naumann and Trümpler demonstrate (5), serious crises occurred in 1948/9, 1953, 1956, 1961, 1970/1, and 1979/80, not to mention 1989.⁷ The second problem is methodological. Offe's absolute separation of determination and contingency makes little sense when applied to actual historical processes. That Hungary opened the iron curtain may be 'contingent', but that it did so was surely linked to the 'pull to the West' outlined above. It seems to me that a more helpful conception of the role of contingency is indicated in Trotsky's intriguing formulation: '[t]he entire historical process is a refraction of historical law through the accidental. In the language of biology, we might say that the historical law is realized through the natural selection of accidents.' (in Carr 102). Although each particular revolution may seem to be the outcome of a chain of accidents, the prevalence of revolutions and other sharp ruptures of political form is surely connected to the general processes whereby changes in productive forces and relations of exploitation take the form of, and are conditioned by, changing complexes of economic and political organization. These structures comprise an uneven and combined, and intrinsically competitive, global capitalism. When economic contradictions, and/or conflicting imperatives upon states, develop into economic, social and/or geopolitical crisis, and are interpreted as and acted upon as such, established structures become 'audited', subject to intense scrutiny.⁸ At such times leaders and supporters of failing institutions are liable to come under fire from challengers; the strategic scope for the latter, what Maier calls the 'aperture of historical spontaneity', swiftly widens.

It is, then, especially when old orders become subject to internal scrutiny and serious fracture that the potential for collective action 'from below' broadens. For the imperatives that determine policy - and/or the 'confining conditions' that occupy centre-stage in structuralist analysis of the Kopstein kind - are not externally articulated but internally related. Capitalism is best understood as a system with a symbiotic pair of core relations: as simultaneously

⁷ Related to Offe's empirical misconception is the outlandish belief, which he shares with currents of thinking amongst Greens and the SED (though demonstrably not East German workers), that (18) '[t]he supply of consumer goods has been adequate and even relatively good since the 1960s'.

⁸ 'Audit' is adapted it from Corelli Barnett via Colin Hay.

competitive and exploitative accumulation.⁹ The heart of the accumulation process is the continuous extraction of surplus labour, a process fuelled by the competitive relations existing among the various units of accumulation and constantly resisted by those subjected to it. Units of accumulation are classically conceived of as individual firms, but these can only operate if plugged into the other structures that shape the terrain upon which accumulation occurs: national currencies, nation states, geopolitical alliances, empires, etc. When the 'elites' that profit from and organize the process of accumulation and/or the political structures that regulate it are faced by crisis, the interests of the exploited are directly affected; and conditions become more conducive for mass collective action. It is to this that we now turn.

Was it a revolution?

In what sense was 1989 a *revolution*? The three authors give very different answers. Kopstein's is Skocpol-esque. His lens is sharply focused upon structural contradictions, but lacks the flexibility to bring agency into view when its role moved to centre stage as the revolutionary crisis broke. The outcome of revolution is assumed to be inscribed in the determinants of the revolutionary crisis. Accordingly, Kopstein proclaims his framework as an *alternative* to one that highlights the 'mobilization of civil society'. Mobilization, he implies, is nothing but the steam that rises from the heat of structural clashes; it is merely 'one stage in the revolutionary process, and one that appears relatively late in the game.' (13).

If Kopstein is dismissive of mobilization *per se*, Offe directs his fire specifically at arguments that champion the mobilizations of 1989. His case is that '1989 was not a "revolution" ... but just the crumbling of an old regime', and for two main reasons. First, revolution is defined exceedingly strictly. To qualify, a political transition must evince the novelty of a virgin birth combined with militaristic precision in planning and execution. A proper revolution, he asserts (187) entails 'the construction of a new order built upon new ideas'. It can only occur (30-1) *after* the elaboration of a set of theoretical assumptions and normative arguments which address the questions of who should do what, at which time, and in what manner. 'In all of the revolutions of the last two centuries some kind of answer to these questions had been available before revolutionary action was undertaken.' In true revolutions the participants form (134) a 'revolutionary elite' whose actions are informed by a theory of revolutionary progress, and gain power by 'non-institutional means'. The historian can discern a 'premeditated sequence' of events, as well as 'proven principles, interests, and organizational forms about which the participants were clear.' In East Germany, by contrast, there was 'no counter-elite, no theory, no organization, no movement ... according to whose visions, instructions, and prescriptions the breakdown evolved.' (in Elster et al., 11).

⁹ For a fuller exposition of these thoughts, see Barker and Dale.

Instead, all that Offe perceives are 'individuals and their discoveries of the moment.' For Offe, revolutions are executed in the manner of recipes. Unfortunately, such a definition is incapable of apprehending the messiness and fluidity of actual revolutionary situations. Even where highly organized movements are prominent, the complex cross-cutting of different social interests, backing competing suggestions as to the means and ends according to which the crisis should be resolved, generates clashes both between and within social movements, and dramatic twists and turns in the course of events. Where such ruptures lead to situations of dual power and the stimulation of major innovations in the institutional basis and legitimizing principles of power on the part of contenders, as in 1789-94 France and 1917 Russia, Offe's criterion of 'new ideas' is likely to be met. But if these advances provide the platform for organized revolutionaries to mobilize mass popular support towards clearly proclaimed ends, this stage is invariably reached as a *consequence* of the radicalization of an already present 'spontaneous' revolutionary situation. Theoretical innovation is stimulated by (and furthers) the radicalization of revolutions, but there is no reason to see it, with Offe, as a defining feature of revolution. Moreover, even the 'great' revolutions of 1789-94 and 1917 are not autogenic, but develop through the appropriation and application of ideas from elsewhere. Conversely, revolutions that are more squarely imitative, such as Mao's struggle to inaugurate Stalinism in China, contain innovative moments. The movements of 1989, which generated peculiar (if recognizable) ideas blended from liberal, romantic, utopian socialist, and Christian sources, belong in the latter category.

A second, related, problem with Offe's theorization of 1989 as a non-revolution is that, in interpreting the 'crumbling' of the regime, he accords sole explanatory force to institutional change and none to social movements. In the case of the Soviet reform process his reference points are purely institutional, and never those agents of collective resistance - from Solidarnosc to the Mudjahedin - which expedited the Kremlin's turn to reform. In his account of East Germany (12), the implosion of SED authority occurred essentially because the ruling elite had lost confidence in the economy, followed by the raising of the iron curtain, Gorbachev's indications that Soviet military support could not be counted upon, and the consequent immobilization of the repressive apparatus. 'The demise of the regime was thus caused', he insists (20), 'by the loss of repressive pressure, not the rise of counter-pressure.' Evidence for this is that mobilization occurred only *after* 'the collapse of the regime's ability to use repression was already well underway, and thus the citizens' movement could unfold in a relatively risk-free way'. 'It was not the movement that brought about victory', Offe concludes (21), 'It was just the opposite: the obvious weakness of the state apparatus encouraged and triggered the growth of a democratic movement.'

This sort of one-eyed, deterministic thinking is discussed perceptively by Maier, who is worth quoting at length. He inveighs against his (xiv) 'West German colleagues [who] have talked of an "implosion" of East Germany as if some worn-out machine finally just broke down.' They 'argued that no revolution had occurred. Instead, they claimed that the GDR had collapsed as a result of its inner difficulties; it had suffered "systems failure" or "imploded."

These judgments were occasionally condescending. To a degree, the East German popular movement seemed actually embarrassing to some West German social scientists [who] were used to thinking in terms of abstract processes, and the powerful intrusion of crowds and demonstrations seemed vaguely threatening ... The East German protestors were like obstreperous children at an adults' dinner party.' (119).

From Maier's more dialectical perspective, the weakening of the state and the burgeoning of social movements were mutually enhancing processes. Far from being a walk-on part, (xiv) 'at each critical juncture, the East Germans' collective action - no matter how hesitant at first, and how filled with doubts later - impelled decisive accommodations or allowed new initiatives.' He describes several of these critical junctures. First were the demonstrations by would-be emigrants. These culminated in early October when trainloads of westward-bound emigrants passed through Dresden, and 15,000 people besieged the station in an attempt to get on board. The police managed to thwart them in this aim, but failed to stop them regrouping to form a permanent demonstration (of fluctuating size) which wound through the city, periodically scuffling with police, for a marathon eighty hours. A few days later in 'Plauen, also on the route of the emigration-trains, 10,000 demonstrators took to the streets and barricaded the mayor in his city hall' (145). The thrill of these days consisted in the dramatic and unexpected demonstration of the potential of collective mobilization to resist suppression. The state's omnipotent image was decisively punctured.

Second came the demonstrations for political change, initially culminating in Leipzig on October 9th. On that day bloodshed seemed inevitable, with thousands of army and police deployed, many of them armed. But the sheer scale of the demonstration, which overawed and demoralized the local SED leadership and security forces, undermined any inclination to open fire. Of all the critical junctures this was a breathtakingly close call. No blood was shed, but had it been the course of the revolution could have been entirely different. Even if the fall of the Wall was the most memorable event of the revolution, the Leipzig demonstration was the closest parallel to the storming of the Bastille. It was only now that the old regime truly began to 'collapse', i.e. only *after* a showdown with an already highly mobilized movement. It is considerations such as this that lead Maier to judge that (120) 'at a critical instant, the crowds of Leipzig and Berlin pushed the process of Communist concession and erosion beyond the point of return.' Despite Offe, the movement did make a difference. It struck fear into the SED leadership, reconfigured the political agenda, and accelerated the pace of the crisis and collapse of the Soviet order, and later the pace of German unification. Moreover, Maier insists that the crowds 'were revolutionary': at least in the first month of protest they 'were bonded by a vision of an alternative public sphere; they shared a fraternal identity ...; they demonstrated the exaltation of will that social theorists such as Durkheim and Victor Turner have emphasized; they helped bring down a regime' (166).

Dynamics of Revolution

A common narrative of 1989 is that the protest movement was united for the first month or so, after which it began to divide - between the original organizers of protest (the 'Citizens Movement') and a nationalistic movement for unification. The former is seen as radically democratic - in Žižek's words, 'authentic' - the latter as inauthentic, conservative, and motivated chiefly by the 'seduction' of Western commodities. As to the regime, its backbone was cracked by the protests, after which it gave in to popular demands - replacing the head of state, opening the Wall, and paving the way for elections and unification. In short, both regime and state 'collapsed'.

This interpretation is, as I shall indicate, as simplistic and misleading as it is ubiquitous. The Citizens Movement (CM) was in fact only one of the early organizers of protest in 1989, the other being the emigration movement. Its leaders' attitude to protest was ambiguous; many, such as Rainer Eppelmann (Maier 175) 'viewed the mass demonstrations in Leipzig with some uneasiness and called for their end once representatives of the regime were willing to talk.' They were reluctant to call the SED's monopoly of power into question; their goal was not to force the regime from power but to pressure and persuade it to reform, within the framework of an SED-CM 'dialogue'. But as Maier points out, this was a strategy that sought as much to brake as to mobilize protest: (176) "'dialogue" set limits on the protestors. Although the presence of tens of thousands of demonstrators on the streets made the situation volatile, to appeal for dialogue was to accept for the short-term a self-limiting role for the crowd and to renounce any seizure of the state.' A classic justification by one CM leader, Jens Reich, is cited by Maier (169): 'We never wanted power. It would have conflicted with our commitment to legality.' 'Self-limitation' was the order of the day. When delegations from major workplaces approached CM leaders to propose strike action in support of democratic demands the response was negative. When demonstrators sought to occupy SED and Stasi buildings, CM groups organized to prevent entry. When popular pressure brought down the Wall, many CM leaders were shocked. One 'suggested that what remained of the Wall should "exist a bit longer"' (Maier 199), while another even considered appealing for its reconstruction.

Nor was the 'collapse' as straightforward as is often imagined. When Maier proclaims that (120) '[p]ower passed to the streets' he is voicing a common misconception. In fact, neither regime nor state simply 'collapsed'. It is certainly true - and was glorious to witness - that the supposedly omniscient Stasi was unable to contain mass emigration or protest. However, all the key institutions of power remained intact, even if some heads rolled. Some sections of the nomenclatura, led by Hans Modrow, quickly came to realize that transformation was unstoppable, but saw that if reforms were made and the CM were courted revolution might be restricted to the 'passive' kind, with limited popular protest and only minimal changing of the old guard.¹⁰ Under

¹⁰ The fear of radicalization of protest was not restricted to the East German ruling class. Helmut Kohl assured SED leader Krenz that in this respect, if no other, they were shoulder to shoulder (cf. Dale 108).

Modrow the SED set about wooing CM leaders, offering them a morsel of 'responsibility' in return for their complicity in dampening protest. The olive branch was accepted. Accordingly, when popular mobilization built towards its zenith - not, as usually assumed in October, but in December and January - CM leaders entered a 'crisis-management' alliance with the regime, at first around a 'Round Table', and subsequently in government.

Maier describes the round tables as the institutional expression of 'self-limitation'; they aimed to realize 'an armistice between protesters and state', and served as 'a surrogate for the constituent assembl[y] that the transition process never convoked' (184). However, this ghostly surrogate was practically powerless. Moreover, it lacked legitimacy, so failed even to conclude the 'armistice'. Rather, it came to be seen as symbolizing the CM's complicity with the SED, and thereby exacerbated the gap between the CM and the bulk of the protest movement. The demands of the latter now became directed more and more towards the corruption and greed of the *nomenclatura*, the shameless persistence of the Stasi, and the demand for German unification. The growing force and militancy of this movement, combined with continued emigration, underwrote what Maier describes as (255) 'the sudden erosion of credibility for the East German government in mid-January'.

This was the second highpoint of the revolution: protestors were emboldened by success; they now raised demands which directly challenged the rule and institutions of the SED and even the existence of the state itself. It is also the point at which the sympathy of liberals tends to expire - as exemplified by Maier's depiction of angry protestors storming a Stasi headquarters (164) as 'ugly and on a rampage'.

How, though, should the split in the movement be assessed? Maier (374) refers to 'the divergence of two streams of protest: the one emanating from dissident groups and the church-oriented; the other based on the ... working class, fed up with urban overcrowding and material and ecological privation.' As we have seen, the former tended to prioritize 'dialogue' while the latter relied exclusively on public protest. Regarding goals, the latter generally supported German unification. But, as Offe argues (16), the nationalism displayed was hardly that of an 'emotionalized *Volk*', but was essentially 'instrumental' in nature, aimed at eliciting economic support from the FRG. It was the combination of seeing the quality of life in West Germany and hearing revelations of the extent of economic crisis and ruling class hypocrisy and corruption that 'produced a feeling, especially amongst older workers, that for years they had been betrayed of the fruits of their labour.' (Hoffman and Rink 120).¹¹

For such groups, Maier suggests (118) 'absorption in West Germany was precisely the guarantee of liberty and welfare they craved.' West Germany seemed to offer a definite, gilt-edged promise of civil liberties, democracy, and

¹¹ Evidently, motives for demanding unification were strongly linked to perceptions of exploitation, thus refuting Kopstein's suggestion that the (192) 'revolutions of autumn 1989 ... were largely political actions of dissatisfied consumers, not, as Marxian social theory would have us expect, of dissatisfied producers.'

a decent living standard. The CM, by contrast, offered little. Its leaders refused even to consider the possibility of taking power, seemed to consider austerity to be a virtue, were ambiguous in their attitude to the Wall, and even entered into alliance with the SED - just as revelations of the latter's mismanagement and corruption were being greeted by resounding popular anger and a growing clamour for an *emphatic* break with the ruling class - party, state and all. This was the basis of the movement for unification. It was certainly nationalistic, but that should not imply that the divergence was between nationalism and internationalism. Rather, it expressed a choice of nationalisms. Some prominent currents of the CM defended the existence of the GDR and identified with it as the valid nation; an identification that, in turn, spurred the growing diversion of mass support from CM to the FRG.

The split in the movement was also reflected culturally. In one of the most vivid sections of his book, Maier reflects upon the linguistic aspect of the divergence. Despite a preoccupation with 'communication' between 'state and society', CM intellectuals often spoke the same language as state spokespeople. An abstruse and systems-theoretical jargon was, on the one hand, (134) 'invoked both by the regime and by the intellectuals who would transform it. On the other hand, a rhetoric of primeval popular assembly - the language of "antistructure," of shoulder-to-shoulder community - arose anonymously from the crowd. This second language was the more potent; like Joshua's trumpets it brought down the Wall.'¹²

Why was the CM like this? Why did its rhetoric converge with that of the regime and diverge with that of the crowds on the streets? Offe offers a perceptive insight here, suggesting that the CM's predecessors, the opposition groups of the 1980s, had effectively been (141) 'sealed off from the rest of society'. In this context, they had developed in a 'new social movement' direction, which rendered them (21) 'unable, with their issues and strategies, to gain support or sympathy from within the industrial working class'. Offe's case here is strong. If little else, the SED had mastered the techniques of the management of dissidence. Oppositionists had been fairly successfully quarantined within the walls of the church, with extra-church activity heavily repressed. The church acted as a container, in both senses of the word - functioning as a host to dissidence but also as a severe steward of its boundaries. Both church officials and undercover Stasi agents acted to theologize and individualize dissent, and to smother political activity, ensuring that if organized opposition could arise at all it was heavily skewed towards pious moderation.

The outbreak of revolution revealed that the organized opposition had internalized the limits of the *status quo* more deeply than most of the popular movement. Their disorientation in the face of rapid political change, their readiness to engage in 'dialogue' with a despised regime, their defence of a state that had clearly lost all popular support, and their astonishment that 'apathetic' workers would rise up *en masse*, were all products of an internalization of those narrow limits to action and thought which had

¹² 'But' he adds 'it would have been too much to expect that it might become a durable hegemonic discourse.'

sedimented into tablets of stone over the long years in which gradualist pragmatism had seemed the only viable strategy for social change. It is a poignant irony that the former oppositionists, despite years of courageous defiance in the face of repression, ultimately placed greater trust in the SED than did the bulk of the protest movement.

Where now for Germany and the Left?

With the dust of battle now cleared, how have the revolutions of 1989 altered prospects for democracy, for the Left, for Germany? For Offe, 1989 represented the closing down of alternatives. With the end of the Cold War prospects for the Left are worse than ever (190). His book reads as a phlegmatic affirmation of the inevitability of actually existing capitalism which, in its liberal form at least, has the virtue of embodying a civilized mode of social regulation based upon constitutionalism and the rule of law.

Maier's case is crisper. Whereas Offe bases his fatalism on a diagnosis of communism that emphasizes its opposition to capitalism, Maier insists (329) 'that it advances our understanding to compare the problems of late communism with the contemporaneous difficulties faced by the advanced capitalist countries.' From this viewpoint, the breakdown of communism represents not the closing of historical alternatives but a salutary reminder of the sorts of contradictions that also confront otherwise more successful regions. 1989 did not simply represent the triumph of democracy but closed a decade which had seen an immense upwards transfer of wealth, a saturnalia of inequality and exploitation which (201) 'might yet prove as corrosive to democracy as the fall of communism was beneficial.' His concluding chapter, 'Anschluss and Melancholy', ends with a cautionary juxtaposition (329): 'The harsh pressures of relative backwardness brought down the Soviet system in the 1980s and helped to liquidate the East German state that incorporated Russia's claim to have shared post-1945 leadership with the West. The pressures encroaching on the capitalist world from the 1970s to the 1990s led to the end of full employment, ... increasing inequality, and increasing dissension over economic integration. Thus the unease that East Germans brought to united Germany came to be increasingly matched by the malaise emerging in the wider society.'¹³

¹³ If Maier's concluding chapter ends with a warning of malaise and portending crisis, his epilogue - which centres on the avant-garde artist Christo's wrapping of the *Reichstag* - is bizarrely upbeat. Wrapping the German parliament in Berlin, he reckons, has (332) 'liberated the building's parliamentary potential from the incubus of earlier failures of representative government. Unveiled, it might be born anew.' The born again building - released from its 'heavy legacy' of associations with Nazism - symbolically seals Germany's transition from a tortuous *Sonderweg* to liberal normality. As if that is not achievement enough, 'the wrapped Reichstag suggested' to Maier 'that these diverse Germans could be friendly as well as challenging.' Quite apart from the condescension of this statement, and leaving aside what 'normality' means for refugees or for the future victims of German participation in NATO offensives, it is striking that an author with such insight into the severity of Germany's current social contradictions can come up with sanguine speculation that bears as scant relation to German reality as the 'Diana effect' did to Britain.

For this reviewer, Maier's comparison of crises East and West is a welcome antidote to the familiar 'End of History' refrain. Since 1989 Western Europe, especially Germany, has witnessed a marked increase in instability and social polarization. One product of this was an electoral 'pink tide' which culminated in the best general election result ever achieved by parties of the German Left. In this light, Offe's despondent predictions of disaster for the Left seem not merely false but quaint. With the connections between revolution in the East and turbulence in the West in mind, one might reread 1989 as a source of inspiration and invaluable insights into the algebra of revolution. Although the movement in East Germany was fairly successfully contained within bourgeois limits by established and reformist political forces - from Modrow to Kohl to the CM - it nevertheless furnished a glimpse of the potential that arises when established order breaks down in the face of collective protest. Despite the deadweight of the decades in which open resistance had been unthinkable, within a few weeks all was transformed. Breaking the power of the security forces opened up manifold possibilities for meaningful intervention 'from below'. In the face of one of the most extensive security apparati in the world, demonstrations were organized, democratic space forced open, and Honecker's regime overthrown. These things were done with growing wit and panache, displayed on countless placards, and in countless confrontations with advocates of 'law and order'. Aims and strategies were proposed, developed, defended and rejected; organizations were initiated, built, or abandoned; all during a four month-long conflagration of popular democratic debate and initiative. In short, ordinary East Germans seized the political agenda, and even shook the international sphere - forcing rapid unification and knocking any remaining diplomatic cards out of Gorbachev's hands.

In the process, and particularly during the radicalization in December and January, a glimpse was given of the potential displayed by movements in revolutionary crises to radicalize, accelerate, and change direction, and to reveal in the process hitherto unsuspected collective capacities. Amongst the many outcomes of 1989, then, we may include not only the achievement of democratic rights, and the liberating blow to Stalinism, but also the timely reminder that social change does not just proceed gradually, but also through revolutions, those switching points when collective organization and political consciousness may come to the fore as key determinants of the course of history.

[FINAL DRAFT]

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