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Does Everyday Resistance Matter? Lessons from the Two German Dictatorships

Using the example of workers under Nazi and Communist rule in twentieth-century Germany, this chapter assesses the conditions under which everyday resistance can exercise significant influence on dictatorships. Because dictators cannot determine whether or not low-level resistance is a prelude to a large-scale rebellion, "the weapons of the weak" yield to the powerless a veto power in all sorts of policy realms. Ruling elites in both cases were hemmed in by tacit agreements made with their workers in matters of prices, wages and social policy. In the case of the Nazis, these social and economic tensions were alleviated through external war. In the case of communist East Germany, under the pressure of a bipolar and nuclear world order, the same kinds of resistance could not be displaced through external aggression and led instead to long-term economic decay. The East German dictatorship could therefore fall from within, while the Nazi dictatorship could only do so from "without".

In the historiography on Nazi Germany and the rapidly developing historiography on the GDR, one finds frequent use of what might be called the "everyday resistance hypothesis." This hypothesis maintains that the everyday, mostly non-political, acts and attitudes of ordinary people exercised an important influence on policies ranging from wages, prices, investment, and even such foreign policy matters as peace and war. This hypothesis is highly controversial and only a minority of scholars subscribe to it; nevertheless, its plausibility is worth investigating for two reasons. First, at a general level it is important to explore the comparative historical "record" for its power to adjudicate disputes about the importance of everyday resistance and the conditions under which it might matter for politics. Second, and at a more concrete level, such a comparison might be useful for allowing the contradictory evidence from the two German cases to speak to each other. In the case of Nazi Germany, for example, the everyday resistance hypothesis is highly contested: new scholarship stressing the centrality of race (as opposed to class) has led many scholars to reject the hypothesis outright. What can the trajectory of scholarship on the Nazi case tell us about possible pitfalls in our study of similar kinds of behavior in East Germany? And how might the East German experience influence our thinking about the National Socialist past?

The main argument of this chapter can be summarized as follows: although everyday resistance does not matter in "direct" ways that earlier
structuralist accounts maintain, it does matter, especially in modern dictatorships that possess formidable surveillance apparatuses and care about popular opinion. In many ways the effects of everyday resistance in the two German dictatorships were remarkably similar: leaders in both regimes feared that amorphous discontent might lead to a “general strike.” The differences, however, in the effects of everyday resistance on economic, social, and ultimately military policies had as much to do with the international position and intentions of the two dictatorships as they did with differences in behavior at the grass roots level. Both were militarized societies that were constrained by popular opinion as mediated through everyday resistance. In the case of the Nazi dictatorship, political rule was stabilized and everyday resistance negated, or at least muted, through racism, war, and plunder. Nazism could therefore only fall from “without.” The East German regime did not have the “luxury” of war, extreme nationalism, or conquest to act as internal stabilizing factors and was thus paralyzed by everyday resistance, ultimately becoming susceptible to revolution from “within.”

In such a short paper, these arguments can only be made in an introductory form. I tender them not in order to test them in a “rigorous” fashion but rather for the purpose of generating novel and provocative hypotheses. Beyond hypothesis generation, however, the comparison is also useful for highlighting the similarities and differences in the two German dictatorships; it is through analogical thinking that social reality is put into perspective. Even here, however, any complete catalogue of similarities and differences between the two twentieth-century German dictatorships must remain beyond the scope of this paper.

The Hypothesis and its Critics
In a fascinating series of books and articles, James Scott has maintained that everyday resistance (defined as everything, from shirking, grumbling, work to rule, jokes, machine breaking, but short of collective action) often constrains elites in unexpected ways.1 Malay paddy farmers, for example, in a region where Scott has done intensive field work have long resented paying the official Islamic tithe. It is collected unfairly and unequally, the proceeds are sent to the provincial capital, and not a single poor person in the village has even received any charity back from the religious authorities. Quietly and massively, the Malay peasantry has managed to nearly dismantle the tithe system so that only 15 percent of what is formally due is actually paid. There have been no tithe riots, demonstrations, protests, only a patient and effective
nibbling in a multitude of ways: fraudulent declarations of the amount of land farmed, simple failures to declare land, underpayment, and delivery of paddy spoiled by moisture or contaminated with rocks and mud to increase its weight.

It is easy to see why social historians of modern dictatorships might be attracted by the study of everyday resistance. First, aesthetically it is pleasing to put people other than tyrants at the center of our analysis. It would be nice if the true *dramatis personae* of history were somehow the powerless and not the powerful. Second, the thesis is pleasantly ironical and counterintuitive. Everyday resistance is akin to the “anthozoan polyps” that form the “reef” on which ships of state founder. Social historians cast their eye on the polyps (cause) while political historians, so the argument might run, concentrate—wrongly or superficially—on the shipwreck (effect). Third, and perhaps most important, by connecting what goes on at the bottom of society to politics, such an approach responds to some of the criticisms frequently made of social historians by political historians and political scientists: social historians often fail to connect their social narratives to narratives of political domination. *That* would be an interesting story—a narrative of socialism’s rise, existence, and ultimate demise that found its focus somewhere other than in a study of party elites, dissident intellectuals, and those who mobilized politically in the final months of 1989.

There is another aspect to Scott’s argument that also merits attention. His discussion of the “hidden transcript”—what people say and feel in the absence of their superiors—suggests that subalterns are not as fooled by the words and philosophies of their superiors as might usually appear to be the case. For students of totalizing dictatorships, the idea of a hidden transcript that acts to break down the hegemony of rulers over a long period of time is especially appealing, because rebellions against authority in such situations frequently appear to come out of nowhere. The search for the hidden transcript in the East German case, for example, may provide insights into the big bang of 1989 in a way that studying mobilization of the last months can not.

But it is precisely at this point that social scientists have criticized Scott. In a recent joint effort by three “heavy hitters” of social movement theory, Scott is subjected to a withering attack. While acknowledging the value of his earlier work that sought to explain the factors underlying collective action, they argue that the newer work on resistance has “provided little purchase on the question of when these low level resentments would lead to mobilization
and collective action and when they would remain at the level of individual resentment. In other words, they question whether everyday resistance matters. To be fair to Scott, his argument is not that everyday resistance needs to move to mobilization for it to matter. Quite the contrary: his notion of “nibbling” suggests that the real events leading to state failures and crises frequently come well before the mobilization even starts. Even so, the question of the conditions under which everyday resistance matters remains an empirical one, and one that should interest students of state socialism’s existence and demise.

The German Dictatorships
A parallel, if not identical, pattern of theorization has taken place in the historiography on Nazi Germany and the place of working class “resistance” within it. The study of resistance under the Nazis has become a subindustry of sorts within German history. Few historians or social scientists, however, seek to identify the ways in which this resistance influenced policies. The reason for most resistance studies is more to show which groups of Germans acted ethically under the most extreme circumstances than to show how it affected policy. As interesting as this literature is, from the standpoint of social science it misses the opportunity to say just how resistance actually mattered.

There are exceptions. The most consistent and bold statements on the role of everyday resistance among the working class in the Nazi period were penned by Tim Mason. Mason’s arguments are intricate and often subtle. For the purposes of this essay, however, they can be boiled down to a few simple propositions. First, the ideology of Nazi social policy, conceived at the broadest level as a Volksgemeinschaft (a racial, national community) in which notions of class would no longer inform either working-class consciousness or state policy, were received highly skeptically by the working class. Second, during the 1930s, policies designed to speed up work, weaken working-class institutions of representation, and increase national rates of accumulation and investment at the expense of wages, met with “resistance” in the form of shirking, high rates of absenteeism, the occasional and isolated strike, and consistent grumbling – all of which was assiduously reported and sent upwards by the political police. Third, Mason argued that this resistance reached a crescendo in 1938-39, as the Nazi leaders were pumping unprecedented sums of money into armaments. Such high rates of investment created labor shortages, pushed up wages, and yielded to the working class a
form of power – to withhold their services on an individual basis – that threatened the rearmament program. The Nazi leadership, according to Mason, feared turning the terms of exchange against the working class more strongly than it already had because workers had demonstrated in 1918 their capacity to bring down an authoritarian government. The leadership was therefore cornered. Fourth, and this is his most controversial point, Mason maintains that the constraints imposed on the leadership by workers’ resistance forced Hitler to go to war earlier, three or four years earlier, than he would have preferred because he believed that Germany could not increase its military output further without risking industrial unrest and in that case could not wait any longer because that would mean allowing Germany’s opponents time to increase their own military output. These social constraints ultimately determined not only the timing of the war but also shaped the kind of war that Hitler fought. “Blitzkrieg” was not merely a type of tactic, but also a strategy that corresponded to the Nazis’ precarious domestic situation. The Nazis needed a war but they did not want a long one and especially not one that would demand sacrifice from the population.

In a nutshell, this summarizes Mason’s *oeuvre*. It is an original, unified, and, in many ways, powerful argument. And nobody buys it anymore. His arguments have been attacked from multiple sides. First, the new emphasis on race and biological thinking among scholars of Nazi Germany, and especially their work documenting the significant public support for the various aspects of the *Volksgemeinschaft* ideology, has tended to render Mason’s picture of working class resistance as a kind of quaint, romantic Marxism. Even if it can be categorized as resistance, however, such resistance may simply have functioned as an outlet for frustrations, and in many ways may have stabilized the system by precluding more organized forms of action. Second, to the extent that workers remained immune to Nazi ideology and developed their own sense of identity and personal space outside of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, it remains far from clear that such attitudes and behavior can be understood in any meaningful sense as “resistance.” It can just as easily be thought of as “acquiescence” if not support. Third, Mason’s argument that the system faced an economic crisis in the late 1930s has confronted devastating criticism from both social and economic historians as “objectively” wrong. Fourth, the notion that the crisis led to war and specifically “Blitzkrieg” is a conclusion that even people who otherwise buy much of what he has to say almost unanimously dismiss as not grounded in facts (other factors, especially
foreign policy appear to explain the timing of the war much more parsimoniously) and at best speculative.

It is important to note that Mason’s interpretation changed in subtle ways over time. Whereas his early work was a straightforward structuralist explanation for the origins of the war – workers constrained leaders and forced their hand – his later work contained an important cognitive component (though this too was not completely absent in the earlier writings) that did not deny the power of the Nazis to crush working-class resistance. His work did, however, continue to maintain that working class attitudes, as they filtered their way up to the leadership, influenced just how far Hitler and his cronies were willing to go in forcing savings, suppressing consumption, and the like.

What East Germany has to say to the Nazi Case
The volume of social history on the Nazi period, and more specifically on workers, is so large that it is far from clear who is right. Often the same documents and statements (especially Hitler’s) are read in different ways. If one were to judge the matter from the sheer weight of scholarly opinion, there would be very little left of Mason’s enterprise. What I want to do here is outline why elements of the East German case might lend a renewed credibility or plausibility to Mason’s story, or at least provide a form of “replication” for part of it.

Obviously there are crucial differences between Nazi Germany and Communist East Germany, especially regarding ideology and behavior, and it is not my intention to play them down. Yet there are also some striking similarities. I have been continually impressed by how the internal interpretations of working class attitudes, everyday resistance, and a general fear of unrest that are to be found at every level of the archives, from factory reports to the monthly reports of the Bezirksleitungen, to Central Committee Department reports, to Politburo Meetings, reflect important continuities in political judgement in the two German dictatorships. Like the Nazi leadership in Mason’s story, the East German leadership from very early on found itself hemmed in by shop floor resistance of the most elementary sort and, especially after June 1953, feared a mass uprising. It was always prepared to make concessions to rather than confront the working class.7

It is important to note here that Mason’s Marxism and his putative romanticism in regards to the role of the working class need not be adopted in order to accept much of his structuralism. It is true that implicit in much of
Mason’s work is the hope that the working class could indeed become the true driving force of history; he had very high hopes for workers, especially German workers. Ultimately, of course, these hopes were dashed not only in Germany but also in Great Britain and the rest of the world. Yet the essentially non-normative components of his essays may remain intact and the East German case may help us salvage (if only in modified form) the kinds of things that Mason was getting at.

I have elsewhere argued that resistance to the reintroduction of piece work, labor competitions, and the activist movement during the late 1940s prevented the SED from gaining complete control of the shop floor. The archival evidence on this point is quite overwhelming. A cat-and-mouse game between the workers’ state and the working class ensued that was never resolved successfully in one direction or the other. In the one instance where the state did seriously attempt to suppress wages through norm and price increases, in mid-1953, the working class rebelled en masse, and the regime quickly retreated after the protests were put down with Soviet assistance. Never again did the regime try to “tame” the working class through central policies. The few attempts to increase output or lower the overall wage bill through central policies were always subverted at the enterprise level with the tacit acquiescence of the leadership. The one genuine venture into reforming the socialist economy, the New Economic System of the 1960s, was in no small measure prevented from full implementation because of Ulbricht’s fears that price increases and “socialist” unemployment might lead to a repeat of June 1953. Such constraints ultimately left Honecker with little alternative when he came to power but to pursue a sort of socialist consumer populism that led to under-investment, rapidly rising foreign debt, infrastructural decay, and ultimately political revolution.

One could argue, however, that such a structural – even ouveriste – approach is flawed in the East German case too. Again, the potential criticisms are reminiscent of the critiques of Mason’s work launched by labor historians of Nazi Germany: Nazi workers were encouraged, often successfully, to take pride in their work for the regime. The same, it appears, was true in East Germany. Rebellious impulses could easily be deflected by segmenting the labor force into groups of more and less loyal, enthusiastic, and productive workers. Between 1953 and 1989, not one instance of collective protest occurred of a magnitude large enough threaten the regime. Indeed, without too much difficulty one could find groups of workers and ordinary East Germans who benefited from the regime’s policies and who
most likely supported it for material and "ideal" reasons. Furthermore, the ubiquity of concern with mass public support emanating from the lower levels, as both scholars of Nazi Germany and East Germany have found in the archives in two different eras, could simply reflect bureaucratic strategies for increasing resource allocation from the center. ("Give us more or we run the risk of unrest" might have been the logic presented by factory directors and Bezirk party secretaries to their superiors in Berlin). In a similar vein, it is worth recalling that some of Mason's critics argued that his evidence was drawn disproportionately from Nazi sources, especially political police sources which, for the obvious reasons, had the tendency to cast all attitudes and behaviors in a political light (either pro or anti regime), even when they did not reflect tendencies that could easily have been translated into collective action. In short, so the argument runs, objectively the Nazis and the Communists need not have worried very much about the working class and neither should we.

But any analysis of the ebb and flow of wage policy, piece rate policy, price policy, housing policy, and consumer goods policy suggests very strongly that both the Nazis and the SED did worry. And it is the discrepancy between the objective political capacities of the state and the society, and the perceived potential for conflict that is most interesting. It is true that the "hidden transcripts" of everyday resistance may not amount to very much when elites are not aware of them, when they remain hidden. But the one thing we know about totalitarian regimes is that very little does remain hidden. The leadership in these societies had unprecedented access to the hidden transcript of subaltern groups, including workers. Perhaps the most we can say for everyday resistance in both Nazi Germany and Communist East Germany is that it fostered a culture of disrespect for authority in the work place and in the society at large. But while such a culture of disrespect may never, on its own, have overthrown the regime, it did lay the ground work for a potential overthrow, and the leadership of both societies were acutely aware of this. This, I think, is what Mason is really getting at and I see no reason to discard his approach.

Everyday resistance matters in a totalitarian dictatorship in a way that it does not in a democracy, or even in a traditional dictatorship. In a democracy, everyday resistance is marginal because the culture that it nurtures can be expressed quite openly in participatory behavior. In a traditional dictatorship, where rulers are satisfied simply to demobilize the population and foster political passivity, everyday resistance is expected and even accepted.
Modern totalitarians, however, because they wish to mobilize their populations, to politicize them for instrumental purposes, constantly keep an ear to the ground for signs that their projects might be rejected en masse.

It is wrong and ahistorical to argue that once the June 1953 strikes occur, the rest of the GDR’s history is essentially one of a coercive state over a cowed society. But it is true that the events of the years running up to and culminating in mass unrest in June 1953, and the skirmishes of the class war in the work place that occur continuously after that, nourished the sentiment in the leadership that the whole operation was far more precarious than it probably was. Like Hitler, Ulbricht and Honecker lived with a “myth of the general strike” that threatened to bring the whole enterprise crashing down. In the communist case, since a general strike really did occur, the fear of working class unrest was probably more well-founded, though it is difficult to say whether it was more feared. Here, too, I think, Mason’s model provides us with some very important insights. As in the Nazi case, the communist leadership found this dilemma paralyzing in the realm of economic policy.

What the Nazi Case Says to the East German Experience

The differences between the two cases, as noted above, are crucial. Perhaps the most important difference: one made war and committed genocide and the other did not. Indeed while the East German regime, after some flirtation with Khrushchevian utopianism in the 1960s, settled into a conservative, if rather drab, consumer socialism in the 1970s and 1980s, it is difficult to conceive of something similar happening in the Nazi case. War and planning for war was the glue of the Third Reich. Consider, for example, the counterfactual put forth by Robert Harris in his novel (and later-to-be TV movie) _Fatherland_.

The year is 1964. Germany has won World War II. Churchill and his “warmongers” have long ago fled to Canada. Europe is now under Nazi control and all that remains of the fighting is a few guerilla skirmishes in the hinterlands of Siberia. The scene in the novel is set for the US President Joseph Kennedy to visit Germany to make detente with Hitler. Germany itself has become stable, a bit shabby, and very conservative. Its officials have become cynical and more than slightly corrupt. Its youth long for jazz, travel, and an end to militarization.

The reason that Harris’s Brezhnevite/Honecker-like post war Nazi Germany does not ring true is that it is terribly difficult to imagine a peaceful Nazi Germany, a country satiated and contented to end the “struggle.” It is
this constant need for struggle, for outward expansion — for war — that historians have placed at the center of their analyses.

Mason’s most bold claim, that Hitler started the war in 1939 because he needed to, may be moving beyond what his evidence might warrant. But even if the causal logic here is flawed, the functional logic remains powerful. War helped the Nazis. It increased national integration, gained new adherents for the party among the working class, provided new sources of wealth in the form of plunder, and brought “inferior” foreigners to Germany as workers who could preform functions that Germans would have had to and allowed German workers to occupy a place on the social ladder relatively higher than where they had previously been. To some extent, racism and anti-semitism were equally integrative.

The depressing part of the comparative story is that Mason is only partially right and on crucial issues he missed something terribly important. For while Hitler may have “needed” the war, once he started it there was no reason why war would not increase his popularity. One need only read the *Sopade Berichte* for a taste of the pessimism that pervaded Social Democratic thinking on the willingness of Germans to resist Nazi war plans. Indeed, once the war had started the German working class appears to have supported the Nazi state, at least no less strongly than other segments of the society. Their everyday resistance was diminished or at least muted by the glories of war and the decadent pleasures of conquest and racism. That war has an integrative capacity should surprise neither the historian nor the social scientist. We have known this since Thucydides. It is disappointing, however, that the one class from whom history had hoped for the most — the German working class — supported the very people who were determined to destroy them as a class.

Why this was the case, why the working class supported a regime that was committed to destroying them as a “class,” is intriguing, especially when we consider the other irony of the comparison. Everyday resistance among workers intensified in the eastern half of Germany once it was clear that the SED, a nominally working-class party, had taken over. Involved in a cat-and-mouse game with the working class from 1947 until 1953 and thereafter paralyzed by the specter of rebellion, a fear reinforced in the millions of words that flowed upward on the disrespect shown by ordinary people for “socialism,” “peace,” and the SED, the East German leadership ultimately had very little power. Unwilling or unable to engage in real combat, the party had to settle for an endless series of phoney, ritualized “combat tasks” or
what I have called elsewhere the "campaign economy" (with such unconvincing, even laughable militarized slogans as "mein Arbeitsplatz ist mein Kampfplatz fur den Frieden") in which the disciplining virtues of real war were substituted with the metaphorical language of an organizational struggle for something as abstract as socialism. Ultimately the people knew the difference.

Conclusion
What does this comparison tell us about the role of everyday resistance and the dispute between Scott and McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly? Does everyday resistance actually matter? Does it have any political impact or is it something that we study out of phenomenological curiosity (how did people understand their situation?), ethical reconstruction (who resists tyrannies?), or plain empiricism (history as it "actually happened")? Why should we care?

The history of the two German dictatorships yields some tantalizing clues about everyday resistance: precisely where we might expect everyday resistance to matter the least, it may matter the most. The greater the Machtanspruch of the ruling group, the stronger the capacity to infiltrate and monitor the hidden transcript of the oppressed, the more ambitious the transformative plans of the leadership – the more leaders may actually care about and react to what ordinary people are thinking as expressed in their everyday acts. Hard as they may try (and the East Germans certainly tried) tyrants can never really know what people are thinking, how far they can be pushed, and what might lead to rebellion. In the language of rational choice, dictators always suffer from the problem of preference falsification. Here democratic leaders have a genuine advantage. Since Plato we have known that the tyrant has no true friends. For this reason, everyday resistance may matter most in a totalitarian dictatorship – a counterintuitive finding in light of how we normally think about the idea of totalitarianism.

On the other hand, it is important to note that everyday resistance probably does not matter in the way more optimistic students of resistance hoped that it might. The lessons of the Nazi period are sobering ones. Whereas people cannot be easily mobilized to build abstractions such as socialism, they can be seduced by the possibilities for plunder or glory inherent in war. Seen in this way, the nuclear deterrent of the cold war years begins to loom much larger in our thinking; with the communist world unable to transform its militarized impulses into real war, it had to substitute an
ersatz productivist war that it was destined to lose. Everyday resistance may have played no small part in this defeat.

Notes


2 Scott, 1990


5 Lichbach and Zuckerman, p.120


