

If the Nazi state and the Communist East German state can be compared at all, one meaningful dimension of the comparison is the paradox of total power. Ironically, in both cases, the unprecedented scope of authority claimed by political rulers over the lives of ordinary people nurtured a relentless fear among both Nazi and Communist rulers that the whole edifice of state authority could come crashing down at a moment's notice. For this reason, in retrospect both states appear at once totalitarian in aspiration and brittle in self-perception. Enemies lurked everywhere, not only from without but also from within. The Nazi and Communist Party elites felt constrained and even threatened by their own populations. They feared them.

It is true that these parallels in the dynamics of political authority say very little about what are surely crucial differences between the Nazi and Communist regimes: one launched a global war and committed genocide and the other did not. Do these differences render the comparison trivial or immoral? I do not believe they do. In this essay I argue that the comparison is worth pursuing precisely because of these differences. In fact, it is by examining the points of divergence and convergence in the two German dictatorships that we stand to learn the most about authoritarian politics in the twentieth century.
One obstacle to a satisfactory comparison is the imbalance in the historiography of the two regimes. If scholars are to learn from comparison of the two cases, then it is important to have comparable kinds of evidence. Yet one look at the stacks of any library will be enough to prove that such evidence does not yet exist. Whereas the literature on the foreign and domestic politics of the twelve years of Nazi rule has grown to the point where there is hardly a feature of the regime that has not been thoroughly explored several times over, scholars have enjoyed little more than a decade of access to the archives of the defunct GDR. If the imbalance is to be remedied, scholars have their work cut out for them. The two books under review here constitute important examples of the kind of work that can be done with the archives of regimes that no longer exist. Just as we know more about bankrupt businesses than we do about those still operating, so too shall we one day know a great deal about the GDR, much more than we will ever know about the Federal Republic. Both of these books illustrate just how constrained the East German leaders were in reshaping their societies and the broader international environment in which they operated. Although neither attempts to do so explicitly, both go a long way in providing us with the kind of evidence necessary to construct a meaningful comparison with the Nazi case and to understand the dynamics of power in the twentieth century.

The Total State and Resistance

Gareth Pritchard’s book is a study of politics and society under the Soviet occupation and German Communist rule in the GDR up until the June 1953 uprising. His research is drawn primarily from the archives of Saxony and Thuringia. Rather than concentrating on the high politics of the big decisions that were made at this time on land reform, the nationalization of industry, the rise and demise of grass roots antifascist committees, the forced unification of the Social Democratic and the Communist Parties into an ultimately Stalinized Socialist Unity Party (the SED), Pritchard focuses in on the relations between the provincial level political elites and a highly fractured society as each of these policies came down from on high and had to be implemented.
His story is a simple but highly illuminating one. In the hungry years after 1945, the SED at the local level was caught between their sponsors, the Russian army (whose soldiers and officers, as Norman Naimark shows in his masterful study of rape under the Soviet occupation, behaved atrociously by any standard) and a population who viewed the SED as little better than German speaking Russians.¹ Try as they might, Pritchard tells us, the SED was unable to convince the East German population that they had brought this catastrophe upon themselves through their support for Hitler to the bitter end.

Along the way, Pritchard questions some of the orthodox interpretations of the period. Especially interesting is the evidence he mounts that the rank and file Social Democrats did not completely reject the forced unification with the Communists in 1946 and many may have even considered it necessary. The picture propagated by SED historians of the union of the two parties as voluntary is clearly false, but, as Pritchard maintains, “western historians who argued that the creation of the SED came about purely as the result of a forced union are also wrong, for the same archival records which disprove the official GDR orthodoxy clearly demonstrate that only a minority of the SPD was opposed in principle to unification.” (132). Instead, Pritchard shows us, the truth probably lies somewhere in between, with the elements of both force and consent playing an important role in accounting for the outcome.

Pritchard’s chapter on the guerre de la position between the regime and the working class that culminated in the uprising of June 1953 also deserves close reading by historians. Starting in 1947 the Soviets and the SED decided to get serious about flagging labor productivity and poor morale in the workplace. Their solution was to transfer the entire institutional structure of the Soviet workplace to East Germany. Piecework and the apparatus of Soviet Taylorism were reintroduced in a systematic fashion. Shock workers and East German versions of Soviet Stakhanovites soon made an appearance, all with the intent of segmenting the labor force and breaking the egalitarian ethos that had dominated the shop floor since the war’s end. The ceaseless drive to increase output had mixed results at best. Product quality suffered and increased production in one sector often led to shortfalls in other sectors. In short, it did not take long to reproduce
all of the well-known pitfalls of Soviet style planning in one of the
more advanced European economies.

The working class for its part resented all of this, especially the
renewed status of the same “technical intelligentsia” that had run fac-
tories under the Nazis, and engaged in acts of what political scientist
James Scott would call “everyday resistance.” Pritchard cites many
examples of workers and managers resisting policies coming down
from higher administrative levels. “On numerous occasions, the bit-
ter opposition of workers to developments in their factories and
workplaces spilled over into covert or open resistance. Most com-
monly, working class opposition to the regime and its policies did
not go beyond the defacement of posters or the writing of graffiti.
Often, however, workers resorted to more violent or threatening
measures, such as writing threatening letters to SED functionaries or
the hated ‘technical intelligentsia.’”

Pritchard maintains that this resistance may not have amounted
to much in the short run but over the years it evolved into a series of
strikes that increased in frequency, especially after 1952 and in the
run up to uprising in June 1953. A month before the June 1953
uprisings, spurred on by deteriorating economic conditions and ris-
ing output norms, “a whole series of strikes” (202) took place that
illustrated just how alienated the working class had become from the
regime that purported to rule in its name. His analysis goes a great
distance in helping us understand the long-term sources of the June
events and their aftermath. Pritchard’s discussion of the June upris-
ing is less a blow-by-blow account of the events than a fascinating
analysis of how the documentary record in Saxony and Thuringia
stacks up against the three dominant interpretations in the scholarly
literature: the East German theory that it was a “counterrevolution-
ary putsch” led by Nazi and bourgeois elements, the western inter-
pretation of it as a “people’s uprising,” and a radical anti-Stalinist
interpretation of it as a “workers’ uprising.” He rejects the East Ger-
man explanation as not in accord with the facts. The strikes were not
well organized and, had it really been a western-inspired coup, one
would have expected some evidence of arms from the outside. But
the strikers and protesters were not armed. Pritchard also rejects the
western interpretation of June 1953 as a “people’s uprising” on the
grounds that the numbers of strikers and protesters were not large
enough to qualify the events as “popular.” This argument is less convincing than his rejection of the East German approach. After all, even if a mere 3 percent of the East German population participated in strikes, this number amounted to 500,000 inhabitants, and in the context of Soviet occupation that many people walking off the job at once amounted to a general strike. Still, Pritchard is right to note that the vast majority of strikers were workers and their demands were primarily economic in nature, even if such mundane demands ultimately threatened the very viability of the regime itself. The June uprising was less a dress rehearsal for 1989 than a repeat of 1898, 1910, and most importantly 1919. While Pritchard finds most support for the interpretation of June 1953 as a working class struggle against an exploitative state, he also recognizes that not all the protesters were workers nor were all workers against the regime. In sum, while seeing elements of all three approaches at work, no one model can explain the strikes and protests.

Pritchard concludes that, while the SED regime was very good at manipulating many East German’s antifascism in the initial postwar years, it was very bad at building upon this sentiment. Indeed, going beyond Pritchard’s treatment, June 1953 marked a watershed in East Germany’s history. After 1953, the regime never again attempted to “turn the screws” (194) on the working class and retreated whenever it appeared that peace in the factories might be disturbed. 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 SED leader Walter Ulbricht’s fears that price increases and “socialist unemployment” might lead to a repeat of June 1953. Such constraints ultimately left Ulbricht’s successor, Erich Honecker, with little alternative when he came to power but to pursue a sort of socialist consumer populism that led to underinvestment, rapidly rising foreign debt, infrastructural decay, and ultimately political revolution.

Before questioning this way of thinking about East German history (which, to be fair, Pritchard probably does not entirely share), it is worth noting that it does give us a nice point of comparison to a related literature on resistance among workers in Nazi Germany. The study of resistance under the Nazis became a subindustry of sorts in the 1970s and 1980s within German historiography. The pur-
pose for most resistance studies, however, is more to show which groups of Germans acted ethically or even heroically under the most extreme circumstances rather than to show how this resistance actually 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 our purposes, 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 community) in which notions of class would no longer inform either working-class consciousness or state policy, was 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 armament 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 Nazi 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 capabilities. 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 work. 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 the work documenting the significant public support for 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 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 support much of what Mason 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 convincingly) and at best speculative.  

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. Mason's work did, however, continue to maintain that working-class attitudes, as they filtered their way up the leader-
ship, influenced just how far Hitler and his cronies were willing to go in forcing savings, suppressing consumption, and the like. Workers had to be “tamed.”

Obviously there are crucial differences between Nazi Germany and Communist East Germany, both ideological and behavioral, and it is not my intention to play them down. Yet there are some striking similarities. One cannot help but be 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 the factory reports to the monthly reports of the Bezirksleitungen, to the Central Committee department reports, to the Politiburo meetings, reflect important continuities in political judgment 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 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.

It is important to note here that Mason’s Marxism and his romanticization 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 Mason’s essays may remain intact and the East German case may help us both salvage the kinds of things he was getting at in addition to identifying shortcomings of his model.

One could easily argue, however, that such a structural—even ouveriste—approach works no better for the East German case. Again, the potential criticisms are reminiscent of the critiques of Mason’s work by labor historians. 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 work force into groups of more and less loyal, enthusiastic, and productive. Between 1953 and 1989 not one instance of collective protest occurred of a magnitude large enough to threaten the regime. Indeed, without too much difficulty
one could find groups of workers as well as East Germans from other social groups who benefited from the regime’s policies and who most likely supported it for material and “ideal” reasons. Indeed, Pritchard shows quite convincingly that this was the case. Furthermore, the ubiquity of concern with mass public support emanating from the lower levels that scholars of both Nazi Germany and East Germany have found in the archives in two different eras could simply reflect bureaucratic strategies for increasing resource allocation for the center. (“Give us more or we run the risk of unrest” might have been the logic presented by factory directors, Gauleiters, and SED first 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 that, for the obvious reasons, had the tendency to cast all attitudes and behaviors in a political light, even if such attitudes and behaviors could not easily be translated into collective action. In short, so the argument runs, objectively the Nazis and the Communists need not have worried very much about resistance coming from the working class and other social groups, and therefore 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 that both the Nazis and the SED did worry. They worried a great deal. 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 what Scott calls the “hidden transcripts” of everyday resistance may not amount to much when the elites are not aware of them, when they remain hidden. But the one thing we know about modern twentieth century dictatorships is that very little does remain hidden. The political authorities in these societies had unprecedented access to the hidden transcripts of subaltern groups, including workers. Perhaps the most we can say for everyday resistance in both Nazi Germany and 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 groundwork for a potential overthrow, and the leadership of both societies was acutely aware of this. This, I think, is part of what
Mason is really getting at, and the East German case suggests that it may be premature to discard his analysis completely.

Of course it would be wrong to maintain that once the June 1953 strikes occurred, the rest of the GDR’s history was predetermined. But it is true that the events of the years running up to and culminating in the mass unrest in June 1953, and the skirmishes of the class war in the workplace 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.

**From Domestic to Foreign Constraints**

If the similarities in the relations between workers and the regime in the Nazi and East German cases are striking, equally striking are the differences in the broader international environment and its impact on the fate of both regimes. Nazi Germany was what the international relations theorists would call a “system maker.” Hitler’s vision for Germany in the broader European context was for it to be the core power of a new empire. By the mid-1940s, much of the design had been implemented, and it was only Germany’s military defeat in World War II that brought the new order to an end. Communist East Germany’s position could not have been more different. It was a system taker. Its location on the western periphery of the Soviet empire and its origins as a cold war Teilstaat rendered it politically and economically dependent on Moscow.

The main problem for East Germany’s leaders was the existence of West Germany. Not only did West Germany’s economic and political success exercise a strong influence over the East German populace, it also made it an attractive political and economic partner in the west for the Soviet Union itself. Try as they might, East Germany’s leaders never fully freed themselves of the nagging (and not unjustified) suspicion that one day, under the right conditions, the Soviet Union would sell them out and agree to a unified Germany.

Ulbricht’s response to this chronic insecurity was a series of desperate attempts to make his country’s economy and society an attrac-
tive one, not only to his own population but also to West Germans. The construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 was an admission that this attempt had failed in the 1950s; but even after the wall, Ulbricht understood that West Germany would continue to threaten East Germany’s existence as long as the East Germans’ standard of living remained below that enjoyed in the west. This led Ulbricht down the road of economic experimentation and to the attempt to create a high growth East German model in the 1960s.

Mary Sarotte’s important book on Ostpolitik and détente shows, however, just how thoroughly East Germany’s dependent status in the international system constrained Ulbricht. Sarotte’s book is based primarily on extensive archival work in SED, Stasi, and private archives, as well as interviews with some of the key players. Sarotte shows that the impetus for Ostpolitik came from two sources outside of East Germany. From the West German side, Chancellor Willy Brandt and his advisor Egon Bahr had decided that the Adenauer strategy of ignoring the East had reached its limit and opted instead for a strategy of engagement with East German leaders in the hopes of sustaining contact among Germans. From the Soviet side, concerns about West German power, growing antagonism between the Soviet Union and China, and fears about a potential Sino-American rapprochement inclined Leonid Brezhnev and the Soviet leadership toward some sort of normalization of relations with West Germany in the hopes of consolidating their European empire at a time of uncertainty in Asia.

Confronted with this new international reality, Ulbricht decided that he would also attempt to strike a deal with the west, so as to structure it on terms that he believed would not harm the GDR’s long-term interests. Ulbricht’s plan basically amounted to a much closer trading relationship with the Federal Republic in order to obtain the technology and capital that his economy so desperately needed. Fairly quickly, however, Ulbricht confronted resistance not only from Erich Honecker and others in the East German leadership who worried about too close a relationship with the Social Democrats but also from the Soviets who worried that Ulbricht was ignoring the larger strategic picture. Ultimately, as we know, in 1971 Ulbricht was unseated, with Soviet acquiescence, by Honecker.

Sarotte’s book brings a great deal of clarity to an otherwise very confusing era. The conventional (pre-1989) interpretation held that
the Soviets wanted Honecker in and Ulbricht out because of the latter's opposition to east-west détente and the series of treaties that led to the defacto normalization of relations between East and West Germany. This view changed radically after the opening of the archives in 1989. The new documents showed that it was Ulbricht in 1969 and 1970 who advocated closer relations with West German and Honecker who opposed him. These revelations convinced a number of scholars, including the author of this review, that the Soviets wanted to be rid of Ulbricht not because he opposed détente but because he supported a much stronger version of it than the Soviets wanted. Sarotte argues convincingly, however, that most likely neither interpretation is correct. The sad fact is that what the Soviets wanted was an East German leader who would sometimes oppose closer relations with the west and at other times favor closer relations, depending on what was needed. They wanted a leader who would bend to their needs whenever necessary in order to pursue the broader diplomatic goal of shoring up their European empire. Ulbricht's sin for the Soviets then was not his advocacy or pursuit of any particular policy but rather his desire for consistency, something that the Soviets neither desired nor needed. Brezhnev required an East German leader who would help them by running hot and cold with the West Germans during bilateral negotiations, as needed, in order to secure West Germany's assent to a peace treaty with the Soviet Union. In short, the Soviets wanted a puppet and Honecker fit the bill. Although Sarotte's evidence does not prove that Ulbricht's domestic opponents opposed him for the same reasons the Soviets did, her analysis of the timing of the policy changes in the East German elite when tracked against those of the Soviets represents an exemplary piece of historical interpretation.

Sarotte's book also shows that any talk of the East German tail wagging the Soviet dog, at least in the late 1960s and early 1970s, needs to be rejected. At each turn global considerations trumped local ones. Brezhnev and his emissaries operated with much more complete information than their East German counterparts and had little trouble manipulating them. Even when they could not, the Soviets easily applied enough pressure to coerce Honecker and East German negotiators to accept many of West Germany's demands in bilateral negotiations, the most important one being that any nor-
malization would not include full legal and diplomatic recognition. In the end, the four power agreements on Berlin, along with the series of treaties between East and West Germany, created a fairly normal diplomatic relationship between the two countries, even without embassies and ambassadors. More importantly, Honecker and the East German leadership found new potential sources for legitimacy in the opening of diplomatic relations all over the world. Gone was all talk of unification with the west or of resolving the national issue through economic competition. The East Germans even went so far as to begin speaking of two separate nations. On the surface at least, this was a victory for common sense.

What would Ulbricht have thought? He never commented on these events after his departure from the scene, but it may be worth speculating on what his thoughts would have been. Although the Soviet-West German rapprochement created the framework for normalized relations between East and West Germany, such normalization never addressed the long-term sources of political instability in East Germany. West Germany continued to thrive and act as a powerful draw on ordinary East Germans. Without some form of economic policy to close the gap in living standards, to prove to ordinary East Germans that they had indeed defined a better way of life, how would East Germans ever stop feeling just plain German? The peace between the two Germanies after 1973 simply put off any consideration of what, for Ulbricht, always remained the central question of East Germany. Honecker's error was to believe that peace alone, without prosperity, could bring stability to a dictatorship.

Hitler intuitively understood that this was not possible, which brings us back to the question of comparison with Nazi Germany. Just as the evidence that Pritchard has uncovered may help us with a broader comparison with the Nazi case, so too may Sarotte’s. As noted earlier, the differences between Nazi Germany and the GDR are crucial: one made war and committed genocide, and the other did not. Indeed, while the East German regime, after its aborted experiment with a high-growth economic model 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 having happened in the Nazi case. War (and planning for war) was the glue of the Third Reich. Consider, for example, the counterfactual plot put
forth by Robert Harris in his novel (and subsequent television 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 and make détente 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 postwar 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 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 perform 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 antisemitism 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 not 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 no less strongly than other segments of 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 his-
torian nor the social scientist. We have known this since the time of 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 anti-class is intriguing, especially when we consider the other, ironic side 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 and by 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 phony, ritualized “combat tasks” and economic “campaigns” with such unconvincing, even laughable, militarized slogans as “mein Arbeitsplatz ist mein Kampfplatz für den Frieden” (“my workplace is my battleground for peace”), in which the disciplining virtues of real war were substituted with the metaphorical language of an organizational struggle for something as abstract and boring as “socialism.” Ultimately, the people knew the difference.

Although the two books under comparison here do not attempt to compare the two German dictatorships, they provide exactly the kinds of evidence that would make an extended comparison possible and meaningful. I have illustrated some of these possibilities using everyday resistance. What does this comparison tell us about the role of everyday resistance? Does it matter? Does it have any political impact on dictatorships or is it something that we study out of phenomenological curiosity (how did people understand their situation?), ethnical 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 the impact of everyday resistance. 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 lead-
ers may actually care about and react to what ordinary people are thinking as expressed in their everyday acts. Hard as they 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.

On the other hand, it is important to note that everyday resistance probably does not matter in the way that more optimistic students of resistance hoped that it might. The lessons of the Nazi period are sobering ones. Whereas people cannot be easily induced to sacrifice for the construction of mundane abstractions such as socialism, they can be seduced by the possibilities for plunder, glory, and the negative empathy inherent in war. Seen in this way, the nuclear deterrent of the cold war years takes on a new significance. With the communist world unable to transform its militarized impulses into real war on the European continent, 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