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## Introduction: The Puzzle of Stability

All good history writing begins at the end. However artfully it may be disguised, however unthinkingly it may be assumed, the end of the story is there at the beginning. Where the end is judged to lie in time, what its character is, how it is defined – in taking these decisions about any piece of work, historians necessarily make their judgement about the general significance of their particular theme or period.

–Timothy Mason<sup>1</sup>

When exactly did the story of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) end? On November 9, 1989, the day the Berlin Wall fell? On October 3, 1990, the day the two postwar German states were officially unified? Or could it be argued that its story still continues and will only come to an end when the scars of division finally heal and the many social, cultural, and economic disparities between the eastern and western halves of the new Federal Republic are finally overcome? Whatever the answer to this difficult question, and for reasons that will become readily apparent, the following study of the GDR chooses an entirely different endpoint: 1971, the year that Erich Honecker succeeded Walter Ulbricht as head of the East German Socialist Unity Party (SED). Even if one dismisses the bold suggestion that Ulbricht was one of the “most successful German statesmen” of the twentieth century, the GDR was in many respects a success story the year he fell from power.<sup>2</sup> The economy and

<sup>1</sup> Timothy Mason, *Social Policy in the Third Reich: The Working Class and the “National Community,”* ed. Jane Caplan, trans. John Broadwin (Providence, RI, 1993), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Quotation from Sebastian Haffner, *Zur Zeitgeschichte: 36 Essays* (Munich, 1982), 122. For contemporary assessments of the GDR’s development under Ulbricht, see, e.g., Joachim Nawrocki, *Das geplante Wunder: Leben und Wirtschaften im anderen Deutschland* (Hamburg, 1967). On the fall of Ulbricht, see Monika Kaiser, *Machtwechsel von Ulbricht zu Honecker: Funktionsmechanismen der SED Diktatur in Konfliktsituationen, 1962 bis 1972* (Berlin, 1997); Peter Przybylski, *Tatort Politbüro* (Berlin, 1991). On tensions in divided Germany and the challenges of reunification, see Mike Dennis and Eva Kolinsky, eds., *United and Divided: Germany since 1990* (New York, 2004).

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infrastructure had largely been rebuilt following wartime ravaging, and the living standard of those who had chosen to remain had improved considerably since the end of the Second World War. Though still behind its West German rival, the GDR had the strongest economy in the Soviet bloc and was on the verge of gaining widespread international recognition beyond the iron curtain.<sup>3</sup> But most important, and for the purposes of this study, the GDR still *existed* in 1971.

Since the opening of the archives more than a decade ago, many investigations of the GDR have understandably focused on the dysfunctional nature and ultimate collapse of the postwar socialist state in light of the dramatic events of 1989.<sup>4</sup> The following examination tries, instead, to account for regime stability by focusing on its early decades – and, in so doing, avoids the sort of teleological approach that has characterized so many studies of the Weimar Republic. The implicit point of departure for much recent work on the GDR was that it was similarly doomed to fail, that its history was a “decline by installments” – an “*Untergang auf Raten*.”<sup>5</sup> Yet the East German regime lasted for more than forty years, i.e., considerably longer than the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich combined. In fact, one of the most striking aspects of the GDR was its remarkable stability: From the outside, it appeared to be one of the most stable states in Eastern Europe and its population among the most docile. After the well-known mass uprising of June 1953 and before the fall of 1989, there were no major challenges to the regime from below – even though, as this study will show, many of the same social, economic, and political grievances that had led to the earlier upheaval remained pervasive. What, then, despite overwhelming evidence of widespread discontent, held East Germany together and accounted for so many years of domestic stability? This is a puzzle, and it is the question that has driven the following investigation: an attempt to explain the longevity of the GDR and, by extension, the Soviet bloc as a whole.

Coercion and consent, as Mary Fulbrook has pointed out, are two of the most common explanations used to account for the stability of a given political system. Both reflect traditional assumptions about successful forms of domination

<sup>3</sup> Good overviews of the GDR during the Ulbricht era include Christoph Kleßmann, *Die doppelte Staatsgründung: Deutsche Geschichte, 1945–1955* (Bonn, 1991); idem, *Zwei Staaten, eine Nation: Deutsche Geschichte, 1955–1970* (Bonn, 1997); Dietrich Staritz, *Geschichte der DDR* (Frankfurt am Main, 1996); Klaus Schroeder, *Der SED-Staat: Geschichte und Strukturen der DDR* (Munich, 1998); Hermann Weber, *Geschichte der DDR* (Erfstadt, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of the vast literature on the collapse, see Beate Ihme-Tuchel, *Die DDR* (Darmstadt, 2002), 73–89; Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of the GDR* (London, 2002), 126–48.

<sup>5</sup> See Armin Mitter and Stefan Wolle, *Untergang auf Raten: Unbekannte Kapitel der DDR-Geschichte* (Munich, 1993). Wolle has similarly suggested elsewhere that the GDR went through forty “last years.” See his *Die heile Welt der Diktatur: Alltag und Herrschaft in der DDR, 1971–1989* (Berlin, 1998), 244. Along similar lines, see Rolf Steininger, *17. Juni 1953: Der Anfang vom langen Ende der DDR* (Munich, 2003). For a critical assessment of the teleological approach to the Weimar period, see Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity*, trans. Richard Deveson (New York, 1992), xii.

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and authority: that they hinge on the ability of those in power to ensure obedience, either by using – or threatening to use – force to discourage and penalize deviant behavior, or by convincing those who are ruled to believe in the legitimacy and advantages of an existing political order.<sup>6</sup> With respect to the GDR, one of the most popular arguments along these lines holds that the Berlin Wall, the state security apparatus – the infamous Stasi – and, above all, Soviet tanks and bayonets were the keys to quiescence and acquiescence. The collapse of East Germany was a foregone conclusion, the argument goes, once backing had been withdrawn from Moscow and the threat of repression had more or less vanished: “In the end it was tanks and nothing but tanks that held Stalin’s empire together thirty-six years after his death.”<sup>7</sup> Such claims are sometimes complemented by another popular explanation that focuses on national character and revisits the myth of the “unpolitical” or “passive” German: an obedient subject conditioned by history and without civic courage. The GDR, according to this view, was “typically German,” a state where “the sins of the oppressors were . . . complemented by the sins of the oppressed.”<sup>8</sup>

A more subtle approach to this question argues that the ruling SED managed to maintain stability because of the various and supposedly successful ways in which it sought to legitimize its rule and thus win over large segments of East German society. The regime’s antifascist rhetoric and the promise of a future socialist utopia devoid of inequality, insecurity, and social conflict supposedly resonated, for example, with the workers and farmers in whose name the party claimed to rule. And the specific policies adopted to that end – above all the vast array of social benefits that allegedly assured East Germans affordable housing, inexpensive goods, and a modicum of social and economic security – all helped to ensure stability by procuring some degree of loyalty toward the regime. So, too, did wide-ranging job security as well as the supposedly unprecedented opportunities for education, professional advancement, and social mobility made available to members of previously disadvantaged social groups.<sup>9</sup>

The various strands of this argument have at least one important element in common: the belief that large numbers of East Germans came to support or at least accept the regime. This was “the glue . . . that held the state together,” according to one study that claims, moreover, that the “system functioned” for

<sup>6</sup> Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship: Inside the GDR, 1949–1989* (Oxford, 1995), 271–4.

<sup>7</sup> Hannes Schwenger, “Immer wieder Panzer,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, June 26, 2000. For a now classic statement on the stabilizing role played by repression, see Mitter and Wolle, *Untergang*.

<sup>8</sup> Fulbrook, *Anatomy*, 11. For claims about supposedly apolitical East Germans, see Sigrid Meuschel, *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft in der DDR: Zum Paradox von Stabilität und Revolution in der DDR, 1945–1989* (Frankfurt am Main, 1992), 15–22. On the extent to which East Germans supposedly followed the “special path” of their forebears, see, e.g., Jürgen Kocka, “Ein deutscher Sonderweg: Überlegungen zur Sozialgeschichte der DDR,” *APuZ* B40 (1994): 34–45; Stefan Wolle, “Die DDR in der deutschen Geschichte,” *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 50 (1999): 396–411.

<sup>9</sup> See the essays in Christoph Boyer and Peter Skyba, eds., *Repression und Wohlstandsversprechen: Zur Stabilisierung von Parteiherrschaft in der DDR und der CSSR* (Dresden, 1999).

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more than four decades “because of the involvement and active participation of the majority of the population.”<sup>10</sup> Others have remained highly skeptical of this and similar claims that such acceptance lay in widespread support for the regime’s humanitarian rhetoric and goals<sup>11</sup> – or that the stability of the GDR rested on the energetic involvement of most East Germans. As Mark Allinson has argued, most “failed to identify with their state” and “did not particularly support their political system...” Yet they were “by and large prepared to accept [their] lot for the foreseeable and perhaps unforeseeable future.” All of this translated into pervasive “apathy,” which supposedly lay at the heart of the regime’s “stable instability.”<sup>12</sup> In a sense, this argument represents a throwback to the idea of a “niche society” originally formulated in the early 1980s by Günter Gaus, the Federal Republic’s first official diplomatic representative beyond the Wall. The concept, which came to represent “the dominant Western view of political stability” in the GDR before its collapse, refers to what Gaus identified at the time as a widespread “withdrawal into the private sphere” and a single-minded preoccupation with the satisfaction of personal needs.<sup>13</sup>

Another nuanced interpretation looks at the sites of everyday conflict and emphasizes the way in which the regime – and especially its representatives at the local level – endeavored to hammer out conciliatory arrangements and avoid confrontations with ordinary East Germans. This frequently involved giving in to their demands, turning a blind eye to noncompliance and insubordination, or negotiating some sort of settlement that often involved partial concessions – all in an assiduous attempt to maintain harmony at the grass roots, i.e., in the factories and communes where most conflict played out.<sup>14</sup> Yet those who have contributed most to a better understanding of this important process have not always drawn an explicit connection to long-term regime stability. In fact, some scholars even claim that such practices were themselves exactly what led to the downfall and collapse of the GDR. In a valuable study of East German industrial relations, for example, Jeff Kopstein suggests that the official leniency that came in response to widespread worker intransigence hindered the introduction of essential reforms that might have helped salvage the economy. The result was an economic decline that proved ultimately explosive.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Jeannette Z. Madarász, *Conflict and Compromise in East Germany, 1971–1989: A Precarious Stability* (Houndmills, UK, 2003), 4, 8–9.

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Rolf Henrich, *Der vormundschaftliche Staat: Vom Versagen des real existierenden Sozialismus* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> Mark Allinson, *Politics and Popular Opinion in East Germany, 1945–68* (Manchester, 2000), 163–7.

<sup>13</sup> See Günter Gaus, *Wo Deutschland liegt: Eine Ortsbestimmung* (Munich, 1987), 115–69; Ross, *Dictatorship*, 102.

<sup>14</sup> The seminal work on East German factory relations is Peter Hübner, *Konsens, Konflikt und Kompromiß: Soziale Arbeiterinteressen und Sozialpolitik in der SBZ/DDR, 1945–1970* (Berlin, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> See Jeffrey Kopstein, *The Politics of Economic Decline in East Germany, 1945–1989* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997).

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This important argument draws attention to a fundamental paradox: Many of the factors that may have accounted for the stability of the GDR were in themselves potentially destabilizing, at least in the long run. The tendency to give in to worker demands may have ensured momentary tranquility on the shop floor. But at the same time, it indirectly contributed to chronic material shortages and other economic deficiencies that only heightened the discontent and dissatisfaction with the regime. The same was arguably true of those strategies aimed at winning popular support and legitimizing the rule of the SED – especially when reality failed to correspond to rhetoric. The regime’s self-styled antifascist legacy may have struck a positive chord with those East Germans who welcomed a break with their country’s recent and catastrophic past: According to Sigrid Meuschel, such rhetoric “promoted and strengthened” belief in the legitimacy of the regime. But how widespread were the feelings of guilt and gratitude that supposedly hindered the novelist Christa Wolf and other intellectuals of her generation from criticizing leading Communist figures who had spent the war in concentration camps or in exile?<sup>16</sup> More to the point, if most East Germans perceived a distinct disjunction between what the regime preached and what it practiced, could this not have been a potential source of even greater disaffection and resentment – and, by extension, instability?

The GDR’s much vaunted social welfare policies and egalitarian rhetoric prompt similar questions. Rehearsing a familiar set of arguments, Konrad Jarausch has suggested that the “pervasiveness of . . . public popularity” lay in the “tangible social benefits” and other “non-compulsive sources of regime support,” e.g., subsidized foodstuffs, low-cost housing, cheap transportation, and free kindergartens for working mothers. He argues, moreover, that the supposed “leveling of [social] distinctions” and the “remarkable homogeneity” of East German society “created a greater sense of equality that also helped reinforce popular loyalty” – a claim also made by others with regard to the Nazi dictatorship.<sup>17</sup> Since the headlong integration of the GDR into the Federal Republic’s market economy, all of this has clearly become a nostalgic source of longing

<sup>16</sup> Meuschel, *Legitimation*, 29–40.

<sup>17</sup> Konrad Jarausch, “The Totalitarian Temptation: Ordinary Germans, Dictatorship and Democracy” (working paper, Center for European Studies, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, November 1999). In a published version of this paper, Jarausch writes that their “actual performance in providing tolerable lives . . . helped keep [the East German and Nazi dictatorships] in power.” See “Totalitarian Temptation,” in Konrad Jarausch and Michael Geyer, *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories* (Princeton, NJ, 2003), 162. On the supposed popularity of the regime, also see Heinz Niemann, *Meinungsforschung in der DDR: Die geheimen Berichte des Instituts für Meinungsforschung an das Politbüro der SED* (Cologne, 1993); Walter Friedrich, “Regierte die SED ständig gegen die Mehrheit des Volkes?” in Jochen Cerny, Dietmar Keller, and Manfred Neuhaus, eds., *Ansichten zur Geschichte der DDR*, vol. 5 (Bonn, 1994), 123–47. On the Nazi period, see Ralf Dahrendorf, *Gesellschaft und Demokratie in Deutschland* (Munich, 1965); David Schoenbaum, *Hitler’s Social Revolution: Class and Status in Nazi Germany, 1933–1939* (New York, 1980).

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for many former East Germans.<sup>18</sup> But how did they actually feel at the time, i.e., when the SED still ruled and the GDR still existed? Did the regime really deliver the goods and fulfill its lofty promises? And what were the potential consequences for stability if it did not?

Repression and obedience, legitimacy and loyalty, withdrawal and apathy, conciliation and compromise: These are some of the main explanations for the longevity of the GDR. Were they mutually exclusive or did they somehow work together – at different times and in fluctuating degrees – to ensure the stability of the regime? Or has something crucial been left out of the equation? What about the peculiarities of the GDR within the Soviet bloc, e.g., its strong prewar industrial base; the unswerving commitment of high-level Communist functionaries fiercely dedicated to preserving the antifascist state and its principles; the parameters of the Cold War and Moscow's steadfast attachment to what was arguably its most important and staunchest ally in the strategic buffer zone that it had created in Eastern Europe after 1945; the undeniable benefits of economic ties to West Germany during the latter years of its history? All of this clearly played an important role in shoring up the regime.<sup>19</sup>

To get at this and other essential issues, the following investigation looks at the GDR through the lens of Saalfeld, a provincial administrative district located on the eastern edge of the Thuringian forest near the Bavarian border. The reasons for the choice of Saalfeld, as well as the benefits and limitations of any case study, are addressed in greater detail later. But one of the most obvious and important advantages to this approach is that it allows for an intimate and immediate exploration of significant trends and developments at the grass roots that reflect and help account for larger social and political processes – in this case, the stability and longevity of a postwar socialist state. More specifically, an examination of the GDR from below sheds light on the way in which the regime actually functioned, or failed to function, on an everyday level. It reveals the behavior of ordinary East Germans and offers important insights into the way in which they reacted to high-level policies and directives, as well as to more general developments in a wide variety of areas: from the onerous political and participatory demands placed on them by the party and state, for example, to the daily struggle for scarce goods and services. Such an approach also provides a better understanding of their everyday concerns and attitudes, the often difficult choices they had to make, and their main sources

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., the essays in Stefan Bollinger and Fritz Vilmar, eds., *Die DDR war anders: Eine kritische Würdigung ihrer sozialkulturellen Einrichtungen* (Berlin, 2002). Also see Thomas Goll and Thomas Leurer, eds., *Ostalgie als Erinnerungskultur? Symposium zu Lied und Politik in der DDR* (Baden-Baden, 2004); Thomas Ahbe, *Ostalgie: Zum Umgang mit der DDR-Vergangenheit in den 1990er Jahren* (Erfurt, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> See Christoph Kleßmann, "Rethinking the Second German Dictatorship," in Konrad Jarausch, ed., *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR* (New York, 1999), 365–6; Catherine Epstein, *The Last Revolutionaries: German Communists and Their Century* (Cambridge, MA, 2003).

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of discontent. The last are especially important because they gave rise to a wide range of tensions and conflicts at the workplace and in the community that posed a latent threat to domestic tranquility. How such discontent manifested itself and how officials responded to open displays of discord consequently constitute a major focus of the following study, for they arguably provide an important key to understanding the long-term stability of Saalfeld and the GDR as a whole.

All of this inexorably leads to the thorny issue of nonconformist and oppositional activity in the GDR, another central theme of this investigation. Its motivation and sources, the question of who participated, how widespread such participation was and what it meant to those involved, how this changed over time, and the very definition and nature of such behavior, have all been the subject of considerable controversy. A number of scholars and commentators have, on the one hand, tended to downplay or minimize both the extent and effect of popular resistance and opposition to the dictates of the regime, largely limiting it to the activities of a small group of dedicated dissidents fundamentally opposed to the party and state on moral and political grounds. According to one of these dissidents, “Whoever condemns the former leadership should remember that they were covered by the groveling of ninety-eight percent of the people.”<sup>20</sup> This and similar claims that most East Germans not only shied away from conflict but also remained either actively or passively loyal to the regime stand in stark contrast to the findings of other studies that have painstakingly detailed both the breadth and depth of oppositional behavior, which supposedly “ran like a red thread” from the earliest years of the GDR to its final collapse.<sup>21</sup>

Much of this debate ultimately hinges on what one considers to be defiant activity as well as on the definitions one chooses to characterize various forms of social, economic, and political behavior that ran counter to official norms and expectations – from refusals to satisfy so-called sociopolitical obligations, for example, to outright forms of protest aimed at toppling the regime. These are issues that we will return to over the course of the following investigation. But even if the empirical evidence suggests that disobedient behavior was indeed far more widespread than Western observers traditionally assumed – which was

<sup>20</sup> Cited in Ross, *Dictatorship*, 106. Also see Ehrhart Neubert, *Geschichte der Opposition in der DDR, 1949–1989* (Bonn, 1997).

<sup>21</sup> Quotation from Hans-Joachim Veen, “Warum dieses Lexikon?” in Hans-Joachim Veen and others, eds., *Lexikon: Opposition und Widerstand in der SED-Diktatur* (Berlin, 2000), 14. On the supposedly widespread nature of resistance, also see Mitter and Wolle, *Untergang*; Karl Wilhelm Fricke, *Politik und Justiz in der DDR: Zur Geschichte der politischen Verfolgung, 1945–1968: Berichte und Dokumentation* (Cologne, 1979); idem, *Opposition und Widerstand in der DDR* (Cologne, 1984); Gary Bruce, *Resistance with the People: Repression and Resistance in Eastern Germany, 1945–1955* (Lanham, MD, 2003). For an overview of the literature on resistance, see Ross, *Dictatorship*, 97–125. On political opposition specifically in Thuringia, see Ehrhart Neubert and Thomas Auerbach, “Es kann anders werden”: *Opposition und Widerstand in Thüringen, 1945–1989* (Cologne, 2005).

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certainly the case in Saalfeld – an important question still remains: What role did all of this play in weakening or shoring up the SED regime? Did it slowly “chip away” at and help undermine the long-term viability of the GDR, or was it a mere distraction with no tangible effects, a safety valve that allowed East Germans to vent their anger and frustration so that they could otherwise toe the line in a way that ultimately helped stabilize the regime?<sup>22</sup> Or did it somehow contribute to stability in an entirely different manner: by alerting officials to potential trouble spots and allowing them to calibrate responses aimed at defusing important sources of discontent and conflict – be it through terror and repression or the adoption of more nuanced methods that involved an ongoing and increasingly refined process of give-and-take between the so-called rulers and ruled?

The following chapters will explore all of these questions in greater depth. But whatever their relationship to the central issue of longevity, the varied patterns and possibilities of popular defiance and official response raise fundamental issues about the very character of the East German regime as well as state–society relations under Soviet-style socialism. This, too, has been a major source of scholarly discussion, and one that focuses on the nature of domination and authority in the GDR, as well as on the extent to which the SED was able to control the so-called masses and reshape society as it wished. Most agree that these were its desired goals, yet the debate pits those who argue that the party more or less managed to realize its total claims and achieve complete domination in almost all areas of society against those who emphasize the supposed “limits” of the dictatorship.<sup>23</sup> In essence, the dispute boils down to a deceptively simple question: Was the GDR totalitarian in reality as well as in theory?

Those who believe it was tend to concentrate on the formal structures of socialist rule, on the various instruments of state repression, and on the general absence of political pluralism, free elections, independent representative bodies, guaranteed civil rights, and the rule of law – in other words, on all of those features that clearly made the GDR a dictatorship. According to Klaus Schroeder, who has no qualms about characterizing East Germany as a totalitarian state, the central leadership enjoyed “all-embracing and unlimited, i.e., total, power.”<sup>24</sup> Others have been somewhat less blunt, employing instead a variety of euphemisms that take into account the supposedly more salutary

<sup>22</sup> See Jeffrey Kopstein, “Chipping Away at the State: Workers’ Resistance and the Demise of East Germany,” *World Politics* 48 (1996): 391–423; Neubert, *Geschichte*, 24.

<sup>23</sup> See the essays in Richard Bessel and Ralph Jessen, eds., *Die Grenzen der Diktatur: Staat und Gesellschaft in der DDR* (Göttingen, 1996); Thomas Lindenberger, ed., *Herrschaft und Eigensinn in der Diktatur: Studien zur Gesellschaftsgeschichte der DDR* (Cologne, 1999).

<sup>24</sup> Schroeder, *SED-Staat*, 633. Also see Klaus Schroeder, “Einleitung: Die DDR als politische Gesellschaft,” in Klaus Schroeder, ed., *Geschichte und Transformation des SED-Staates: Beiträge und Analysen* (Berlin, 1994), 11–26; Eckhard Jesse, “War die DDR totalitär?” *APuZ* B40 (1994): 12–23.



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aspects of the regime but that, in the end – as Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk has pointed out – make largely similar claims about the extensive degree of party and state control.<sup>25</sup>

Without denying the basic autocratic attributes of the GDR, a number of scholars have increasingly cast doubt on such characterizations. They ground their criticism on archivally based investigations that look at life in East Germany at the grass roots and that, in so doing, supposedly get at the reality that existed behind the façade of dictatorship. What almost all of these investigations have in common are their attempts to demonstrate that the intentions and goals of the regime did not automatically translate into actual practice. In fact, outcomes were supposedly often at odds with official desires for a variety of reasons: the weight of traditional social structures, mentalities, and milieus, for example, or the supposedly immanent contradictions of the socialist project.<sup>26</sup> Just as important and along similar lines, critics of the totalitarian model highlight the everyday possibilities of autonomous action and agency on the part of ordinary East Germans, i.e., the ways in which their behavior militated against official demands and dictates as well as the ways in which they successfully looked out for their own interests and needs – what Alf Lüdtke has aptly described as *Eigen-Sinn*.<sup>27</sup> In short, this approach emphasizes the distinct limits to the SED's total claims in all areas of public and private life as well as its ability to direct and reshape society.

Such arguments fly in the face of controversial claims put forth by Sigrud Meuschel, a sociologist who argues that the destruction of independent social institutions and regulatory mechanisms in the GDR (e.g., unions and associations as well as the market and media) led to the gradual “withering away” of East German society. What this meant, in more concrete terms, was the far-reaching elimination of societal autonomy vis-à-vis the party and state – one important reason, in her view, for the very stability of the regime as well as the power of its leadership. Another, according to Meuschel, was the extensive eradication of material differences that supposedly led, very much in line with official ideology and aims, to the creation of a homogeneous, classless society. Her point is not that social inequality completely disappeared in the GDR or

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Meuschel, *Legitimation*; Jürgen Kocka, “Eine durchherrschte Gesellschaft,” in Hartmut Kaelble, Jürgen Kocka, and Hartmut Zwahr, eds., *Sozialgeschichte der DDR* (Stuttgart, 1994), 547–53; Konrad Jarausch, “Realer Sozialismus als Fürsorgediktatur: Zur begrifflichen Einordnung der DDR,” *APuZ* B20 (1998): 33–46. Also see Torsten Diedrich and Hans Ehlert, “‘Moderne Diktatur’ – ‘Erziehungsdiktatur’ – ‘Fürsorgediktatur’ oder was sonst? Das Herrschaftssystem der DDR und der Versuch seiner Definition,” *Potsdamer Bulletin für Zeithistorische Studien* 12 (1998): 17–25. Kowalczyk's comments are cited in Lindenberger, *Herrschaft*, 19.

<sup>26</sup> See Ralph Jessen, “Die Gesellschaft im Staatssozialismus: Probleme einer Sozialgeschichte der DDR,” *GG* 21 (1995): 96–110.

<sup>27</sup> On the concept of *Eigen-Sinn*, see Alf Lüdtke, *Eigen-Sinn: Fabrikalltag, Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis in den Faschismus* (Hamburg, 1993). For ways in which it has been applied to the GDR, see the essays in Lindenberger, *Herrschaft*.

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that conflicts of interest entirely ceased to exist. Yet the main “line of antagonism” in East Germany was supposedly the one that ran between state and society, between “them” and “us.” The absence of any possibilities allowing for the public articulation of competing interests – as well as the inability and failure of individuals to “join together in integrated and . . . functioning groups” that could advance their own particular agendas – meant, however, that such conflicts and tensions remained largely dormant.<sup>28</sup>

Where does the following investigation of Saalfeld fit into these debates? It clearly sides with those who reject sweeping assertions about the unlimited power of the party and state – and especially about the extent to which the regime managed to put its policies into practice. Like other recent studies, it also questions assumptions about the absence of significant social distinctions in the GDR and the creation of a classless society largely devoid of conflict.<sup>29</sup> Yet it goes a step further by attempting to draw a direct connection between such arguments and the reasons underlying the very longevity of the East German regime. To that end – and unlike most previous work on the GDR, which focuses almost exclusively on the vertical relationship between state and society – it look as well at the horizontal relations *among* East Germans themselves. That is not to suggest that the interaction between the so-called rulers and ruled – and especially between the grass-roots representatives of the regime and those immediately under their charge – played no role in accounting for the general absence of significant challenges to the SED from below. In fact, that very relationship, as well as its intimate connection to the fundamental issue of stability, will be a recurring theme in the chapters that follow. Yet a central contention of this study is that it represented only one side of the proverbial coin. How ordinary East Germans interacted among themselves, how official policies shaped that interaction, and what all of this meant for the long-term stability and viability of the GDR were the other.

Before exploring those issues, the actual subjects of the following investigation as well as the reasons for the choice of Saalfeld need to be addressed. The primary focus will be on industrial workers and farmers, the two largest

<sup>28</sup> See Sigrid Meuschel, “Überlegungen zu einer Herrschafts- und Gesellschaftsgeschichte der DDR,” *GG* 19 (1993): 5–14; also see Meuschel, *Legitimation*, 9–15.

<sup>29</sup> See Johannes Huinik, Karl-Ulrich Mayer, and Martin Diewald, eds., *Kollektiv und Eigensinn: Lebensläufe in der DDR und danach* (Berlin, 1995); Heike Solga, *Auf dem Weg in eine klassenlose Gesellschaft? Klassenlagen und Mobilität zwischen Generationen in der DDR* (Berlin, 1995); Michael Vester, Michael Hofmann, and Irene Zierke, eds., *Soziale Milieus in Ostdeutschland: Gesellschaftliche Strukturen zwischen Zerfall und Neubildung* (Cologne, 1995); Detlef Pollack, “Die konstitutive Widersprüchlichkeit der DDR: Oder: War die DDR-Gesellschaft homogen?” *GG* 24 (1998): 27–45; Winfried Thaa and others, *Gesellschaftliche Differenzierung und Legitimitätsverfall des DDR-Sozialismus: Das Ende des anderen Wegs in der Moderne* (Tübingen, 1992); Lothar Mertens, ed., *Soziale Ungleichheit in der DDR: Zu einem tabuisierten Strukturmerkmal der SED-Diktatur* (Berlin, 2002); Madarász, *Conflict*.