# PhD Thesis summary

Summary Article: Welfare State and Repression in the GDR: East Berlin 1971-1989

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## Synopsis

In 1971 the chairman of the Socialist Unity Party of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), Erich Honecker, introduced a new social and economic policy. A lack of political legitimacy had prompted Honecker to this course of action and his underlying goal was to improve the acceptance of the regime among the citizens of the GDR as well as to differentiate the GDR more clearly from its western rival, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). From the outset, Honecker intended to use welfare state policy as a tool of stability and to legitimise the rule of the Socialist Unity Party in the GDR, goals very different from the traditionally accepted view of such policy. This thesis reconsiders traditional assumptions about the role of welfare provision in dictatorships. Welfare state policy in the GDR, it argues, was not primarily a support mechanism for those who were unfit or too old to work; instead it was instrumentalised, alongside repressive measures to maintain the political status quo of a dictatorial regime. By focusing on the GDR’s capital East Berlin the question whether the strategy was successful is analysed. The dissertation comes to the conclusion that welfare measures introduced by Honecker achieved only a short-term effect of regime stabilisation in the early 1970s and that this effect of these measures declined steadily thereafter.

The central questions here are whether social policy measures can increase the political legitimacy and the support from the populace in a dictatorial regime and how this interacts with the repressive measures typical of a dictatorship. Although scholars have pondered these questions on a theoretical level, actual historical research is rare. This dissertation, as a case study, applies the theory to the analysis of the welfare state of the former GDR, focused on the capital Berlin. The city of Berlin was strongly favoured by the GDR’s leader, Erich Honecker, and received large subsidies; the goal was to make it the most modern, successful and admired city in the GDR and to show the world what East German socialism was capable of achieving. For this reason East Berlin presents a highly relevant regional case study. Archive material from major German archives and media collections has been used to this purpose; the study is based on a wide range of archive material from different sources. Together with secondary literature this allows for a very detailed micro historical approach and gives an accurate depiction of how welfare state policy/measures evolved from 1971 to 1989.

The dissertation begins with a review of research literature and a discussion of political theory concerning the interrelation between non-democratic regimes, repression and welfare policy. Most importantly, the interaction of repressive measures with welfare state measures is discussed within the theoretical framework. A brief depiction of the historical development of welfare policy under Walter Ulbricht from 1949 to 1971 follows; it outlines important events and influences on the GDR in this period. The main part, social policy under Erich Honecker from 1971-1989, is divided into three chapters. The first two chapters review the development of welfare measures in Berlin within a time period of approximately ten years. They take an in-depth look at the housing sector and the health care sector as well as the provisions for mothers and for elderly citizens. In the 1970s, both the housing sector and the health sector grew rapidly; whereas in the 1980s, only the housing sector continued to receive large-scale investment. The division into consecutive large chapters allows for a more contrastive view of the two time periods, which avoids ahistorical observations. Each chapter reviews the effect of the welfare measures on the stability of the GDR’s political system. The third chapter deals with the development of the GDR’s economy and how this affected the implementation of welfare measures. The question ‘What role did the welfare state play in the demise of the GDR?’ is central here. By comparing the welfare state costs with other costs and by putting them into perspective with the overall performance of the GDR’s economy this question can be answered. As a result, the ultimate reason for the GDR’s demise must be seen as being due to / as a result of / as caused by inefficient economic planning rather than just the welfare state expenses.

The study shows the complexity of the interaction between welfare policy and repression in a non-democratic regime, and argues for a more detailed and differentiated view of the GDR. The structures built up in the GDR had allowed it to exist for 40 years. Although the GDR relied in its last years almost entirely on repressive measures to maintain the status quo of the rule of the communist party, the welfare measures Honecker had introduced in 1971 cannot simply be dismissed as ineffective and overly costly. Rather, the GDR’s planned economy and the ‘sclerotic’ political system () caused major problems in almost every aspect of daily life. Without a well-functioning economic system the welfare measures were no longer sustainable, yet at the same time they were considered by the majority of the population to be at the core of the state’s economic and social policy. it had become a central part of the ruling party’s political agenda. The inability of the GDR’s leadership to undertake much-needed reforms in the field of economic and social policy eventually led to the demise of East German communism and consequently, when the GDR collapsed in 1989, it had become virtually ungovernable and unsalvageable.

Key words

German History

German Democratic Republic

Dictatorship

Political economy

Social policy

Andy – Firstly, this is an excellent summary. Well done!

I am not sure that you ought to be using a rhetorical question – see my comment GR4, perhaps this should be re- phrased. If this is a question that is asked in your research, it will need to be made clear that this is what you are intending to answer. If not, it looks like you are using a question to justify your line of reasoning, which is not a strong argument.

The word ‘ahistorical’ is a little confusing for me, and perhaps you should rephrase this sentence so as to avoid the term, unless it is commonly used in your field, in which case it is fine.

Notice the word order in comment GR6, I have written a new suggestion here.

The word ‘sclerotic’ seems to have been taken from an original source which should be included in the references, where did you find it from? Is it important that this term is used, and should the author be referred to?

Please get back to me if you have any questions about my comments. Thanks!

Richard