

Beate Fieseler

Stephan Merl. Politische Kommunikation in der Diktatur: Deutschland und die Sowjetunion im Vergleich. Göttingen, Germany: Wallstein Verlag, 2012. 184 pp. ISBN 978-3-8353-1153-4.

Beate Fieseler. Address for correspondence: Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf, Institut für Geschichtswissenschaften V: Geschichte und Kulturen Osteuropas, Gebäude 23.31, Raum 05.62, Universitätsstr. 1, D-40225 Düsseldorf, Germany. fieseler@phil.hhu.de.

Stephan Merl, Professor of East European History at Bielefeld University, Germany, is the author of several monographs on the history of collectivization and kolkhoz peasants, as well as essays on the Soviet policy of de-Stalinization, Soviet consumer culture, corruption as a feature of the Soviet system, and Soviet elections. He has now published a new brief study on political communication in dictatorial regimes. In this essay, as he calls it (as the text economizes on footnotes and lacks references to archival documents), the author undertakes a comparative look at Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, on the one hand, and the GDR and the post-Stalin Soviet Union, on the other. The reader should, however, expect not a systematic comparison but rather an analysis based on the Soviet case, which also offers occasional glimpses of German examples.

The analysis contributes to our understanding of how dictatorships, apart from applying instruments of terror and repression against their own populations, managed to survive for rather long periods in spite of a high degree of inefficiency. While the vast majority of researchers have focused on the violent strategies of dictators to secure and strengthen their power, Merl focuses on inclusive strategies that evoke active participation and wide-ranging tolerance in support of the regime and help to construct a collective identity. Merl is convinced that all political dictatorships he examines in his essay were based not on terror and repression (or the fear thereof) alone but also “on a substantial readiness on the side of the population to support them actively or at least to tolerate their policy as ‘silent majority’” (8). Of course, this does not mean that terror and persecution were not part of everyday experience; Merl focuses precisely on how people managed to cope with them. Everybody knew what was happening, but at the same time everybody kept silence about it. This silence was the result of certain communicative strategies, Merl argues, as communication and silence are two sides of the same coin (9). A special kind of communication enhanced the durability of the system, while it was also flexible enough to allow for a certain shifting of borders.

While chapter 2 analyses how dictatorships manage to include the overall population in its collective identity, chapter 3 is interested in the communicative strategies of political authorities, which manage to keep criticism at bay. Chapter 4 takes a special look at letters as a means of communication, which allowed individuals to

communicate “directly” with the political rulers. Chapter 5 then examines the flexibility of this system of communication. The final chapter (6) looks for the causes of the collapse of the German and Soviet dictatorships, respectively. The book closes with a summary of findings—all of them long-neglected aspects of the functioning of dictatorial regimes.

As a fundamental prerequisite for the formation of collective identity under conditions of dictatorship, Merl identifies a certain vagueness with regard to the “paradise” the regime promises to create in the distant future. Every single individual could fill this “Garden of Eden” with their own perceptions of paradise. But before the dream could become true, enemies, who were obstructing the path to this paradise, had to be destroyed. Until they had successfully been dealt with, one would necessarily have to cope with problems and shortcomings. Therefore, it was everybody’s duty to act as accomplices of the regime, to believe in the existence of enemies and help unmask them—or at least passively accept their exposure. To further construct community, every dictatorship needed an integrative vision of unity: in the German case, the concept of “national community” (*Volksgemeinschaft*) served this purpose; its counterpart in the USSR was the “Soviet people.”

Another important ingredient of political communication under conditions of dictatorship was censorship as a means of controlling communication: the regime defined what could be said and how it had to be communicated. Ritualistic forms of communication, myths and symbols, meetings, film screenings, but also elections, helped to strengthen collective identity. Old religious holidays were filled with new meaning, while masses of people took to the streets to participate in the festivities. This was not done by coercion but by the expectation of enjoying a day off, with extra food and vodka. One of the most successful socialist holidays turned out to be Victory Day, celebrated every year on May 9. It was Leonid Brezhnev who introduced the day as a holiday—according to Merl, one of his greatest achievements as head of state, since he (in contrast to Joseph Stalin) had a sense for the potential linked with this date, which helped to forcefully legitimize the Soviet regime and even today continues to construct collective identity in Russia.

Another means of inclusion was communicating one’s personal (that is, nonpolitical) problems directly to the dictator by writing a letter to him, to his office, or to one of the major newspapers. Such letters and/or petitions addressed individual experiences, like, for example, the craving for consumer goods, one’s position in life, or situation at the workplace—almost all personal grievances were admissible for confidential communication. So the obvious shortcomings of the system were given a new interpretation as singular experiences that could be fixed by holding incompetent functionaries responsible, while the dictator came across as a benevolent ruler and the system itself was stabilized. At the same time, in both the German and the Soviet regimes there were rather high degrees of nonconformity (not to be confused with opposition). But only some people were punished for deviant behavior and the majority usually got away with it, since breaking the rules could also contribute to stabilizing the system. Especially in the economic realm, official rules had to be broken to keep the system going, but one ought not to be so stupid or careless as to boast of this in public.

Under conditions of essential threat, like the German Nazi attack on the Soviet Union, Stalin proved to be flexible enough to allow for certain adjustments and corrections (appeal to patriotism instead of socialism, concessions with regard to the Orthodox Church). While Stalin and Brezhnev were smart communicators, Nikita Khrushchev and Mikhail Gorbachev were not: according to Merl, Khrushchev's promises to the population were much too concrete, always connected with himself as a person, and, as they proved unfulfillable, they facilitated his own downfall. Brezhnev, on the other hand, managed to legitimize and stabilize the regime not by creating big hopes for the future but by concentrating on the victories of the past. Under his rule, the Soviet system almost gained the appearance of eternity and could have lasted several more decades, had Gorbachev not completely changed the established rules of communication. Under glasnost the long-defended Soviet collective identity suffered a "communicative liquefaction," as Merl calls it. As a result, not only the Soviet Union passed away, but all communist dictatorships in Europe came to an end. In contrast to what Gorbachev had obviously hoped for, "openness" did nothing to stabilize the system but everything to make it collapse. This leads Merl to conclude that communist dictatorships could not be reformed. They would either continue to exist as dictatorships or were doomed to break down.

However, as Merl also stresses, the collapse of a dictatorship does not necessarily mark the dawn of democracy, so persistent are the values and attitudes produced and constantly reproduced under conditions of dictatorial communication. This, of course, is a finding of Merl's essay that is hard to swallow. Nevertheless, his sober and convincing analysis opens promising new perspectives for further research but, brief as it is, already adds a lot to our understanding of the functioning of dictatorships and the profound damage they cause to people's minds.