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Following the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), access to the crown jewels of the GDR’s archives resulted in a deluge of publications devoted to the history of the country. The waters may have crested for now, but they have not yet subsided, and it is worth wondering how and why East Germany became so exciting for so many when only a small group of specialists paid close attention to it prior to its disintegration. There are two main reasons, each with its own complications. First, the sudden availability of untapped archival sources proved irresistible to scholars who were just beginning their careers and had not yet established their credentials before descending upon the archives. Second, when a major European political, military, and economic entity disintegrates, interest is bound to be aroused. In the case of the GDR, the added element of reunification entered into the equation, and indeed much of the attention paid to the GDR in recent years has focused on issues of reunification. But these studies often manage little more than a perfunctory look backward that leaves one wondering whether the historical origins of the GDR (and before it the Soviet Zone of Germany, or SBZ) and the complexities of its 45 year history were adequately understood and duly considered when the issue of reunification first emerged. Many who are now intrigued by reunification were among those who were not paying attention to the GDR before 1989. If history matters, surely some of the analyses of collapse and reunification rest on shaky foundations.

Then again, others, like Alan Nothnagle, probably go too far in the opposite direction. They cover territory that is by now familiar terrain, and they frame their discussion of the past in terms of the ultimate outcome. Such an approach yields answers that seem a bit simplistic. Nothnagle, for example, begins by asking: “How could the GDR collapse so quickly?” and “How could it have lasted as long as it did?” (p. 1). The answers, of course, are that the GDR collapsed because the Soviet Union permitted it to, and that East Germany lasted as long as it did because it managed to seal itself off from the rest of the Western world (with Soviet protection). Nothnagle understands this—the collapse of the GDR, he says, resulted from the “overall crisis of Communism” (p. 201)—even though his book and others would gain from a substantive definition of the nature of a “crisis” that too few of these scholars, with no background in Soviet history, really understand. But he still insists that the collapse “was not the result of a faulty mythology.” This claim is peculiar if the kinds of ideological postulates that supposedly bolstered the GDR with historical legitimation—the discussion of which forms the core of Nothnagle’s book—never made actual converts of enough of the country’s inhabitants to survive once people had a choice. Nothnagle’s notion of the “blending of self-interest and idealism” (p. 10), a
blend that he dubs “ingenious,” was hardly so shrewd if it succeeded only as long as no alternative existed. Of course, a sense of at least some of the proximate causes of the collapse of the GDR—the liberalization and subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union; emerging holes in the wall—only opens the door to investigations into the processes by which states with captive populations ensure acquiescence or at least the impression of stability and a veneer of internal legitimacy. The irony is that not all scholarly investigations of these sorts of issues required the implosion of the country to stimulate them. Fewer illusions in years past would have helped; and many of the issues do not necessarily require archival materials to discuss adequately now. A sentence like the following—"This book is about some of the ways the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) retained the loyalties of its functionaries and other citizens for forty years and lost them in the forty-first" (p. 1)—has a nice ring to it, but if “loyalties” were lost in the “forty-first” year, were they ever meaningfully “retained” during the forty preceding? Aside from the East German nomenklatura (for obvious reasons), it is not at all clear that “loyalty” ever existed in the first place. Even if loyalty did exist, it is not clear what kind of loyalty it was. Certainly it was not loyalty to the GDR’s ideological presuppositions. In speaking of the “blending of self-interest and idealism,” Nothnagle probably is only half right, in many cases.

The substance of Nothnagle’s book is easily summarized:

[I]n order to retain its identity as a socialist state and guarantee its future, the SED saw little choice but to perpetuate the lived experiences of youthful enthusiasm, high culture, anti-Fascism, admiration of the Soviet Union; and German patriotism in the form of a state-supporting mythology. (p. 5)

The essence of the book is covered fully in the opening chapter. The remaining three chapters are illustrations of the basic “myths” as these evolved over time: "In Goethe’s Footsteps: The Myth of Kultur"; “‘In the Spirit of Ernst Thälmann’: The Antifascist Myth”; and “‘To be a German Patriot Means to be a Friend of the Soviet Union’: The Myths of the Great Socialist Soviet Union and of the Socialist Fatherland.” This discussion, however, does not expand much on what we already know; and to return to the question of archives, the heavy reliance on citations from materials held in former GDR party and state repositories does not redress the balance. Compilations of what often constitute the babble of party and state orthodoxy—no less devoid of content just because they boast a top-secret stamp at the top of the document—do not add measurably to our understanding of the GDR. Rather, I look forward to the time when specialists who have accumulated considerable historical knowledge and conceptual expertise in matters related to the history of the SBZ and GDR are ready to step back from the archives, no longer distracted by a sense of the need to fill pages and footnotes with citations from East Germany’s dull published and unpublished record. Instead, they will develop conceptually innovative approaches to these issues and push the boundaries of our understanding of the GDR much further.