Resistance with the People. Repression and Resistance in Eastern Germany 1945-1955

Gary Bruce

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Reviewed by Peter Carrier, Berlin

The suppression by Soviet troops of strikes and demonstrations by workers in 560 towns throughout East Germany on 17 June 1953 is one of the many remarkable events of Cold War history whose social and political repercussions continue to confound historical interpretation to this day. One of the reasons for this confusion, which Gary Bruce's book *Resistance with the People. Repression and Resistance in Eastern Germany 1945-1955* now aims to dispel, derives from the conflicting ideologies that clouded interpretations of the events of June 1953 from the very moment they took place. Within West Germany, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) claimed that the uprisings bolstered solidarity between workers on both sides of the German divide and therefore formed a basis for unification. The Christian Democratic Party (CDU) under Chancellor Konrad Adenauer saw the uprisings as a confirmation of the illegitimacy of the East German regime and therefore as a prop for liberal anti-communist convictions on the basis of which Adenauer secured the integration of West Germany within the Western post-war alliance. In short, the SPD hailed the 17 June 1953 uprisings as the precursor of unification and claimed to be the party that best represented patriotic sentiments. The CDU, by contrast, promoted the normalisation of a specifically West German nationhood by reaffirming its adhesion to the West. Yet after the end of the Cold War in 1989, both parties continued to lay claim to having supported the uprising in the name of all-German unity.

With meticulously researched documentation from local and central party archives, police reports, and the Ministry for State Security (MfS) archives, Bruce traces the history of repression and resistance in the words of the very people (party members, police officers,

and state security employees) whose livelihoods depended on the maintenance of state hegemony. He offers unique insight into the mechanisms of dictatorial nation-building, including investigations leading to 78,000 trials of political opponents in 1950 alone, to MfS directives instructing officers to 'provide cigarettes and snacks during meetings with unofficial informants to make them feel more relaxed'!

Following a historical reappraisal of modes of political resistance prevalent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and a survey of theoretical and historical writings on the subject, Bruce proposes a 'motivational' history of anti-communist resistance in East Germany, that is, one that recognises the value of resistance designed specifically to overthrow the government even though it did not achieve this goal. In this way, Bruce specifically disregards alternative forms of 'Resistenz' or 'societal' resistance that often achieved a degree of freedom for citizens by involving them in pedagogical or cultural activities, but whose political effects did not fundamentally undermine the stability of the state. Contrary to current historiography focusing on 'soft' resistance (non-conformity, watching or listening to Western television or radio, and a low level of active cooperation with the state), Bruce insists that 'fundamental' resistance alone was effective, that is, resistance initiated within liberal party institutions in the form of organised opposition targeting specific state policies. Moreover, as the title *Resistance with the People* suggests, fundamental resistance carried out by liberal party activists did not take place above the heads of ordinary people within an intellectual elite or in splinter groups. Short-term economic and social grievances were, claims Bruce, a catalyst for a popular struggle fuelled by collective awareness of the abuse of civil rights that took shape from 1945 and indeed continued until 1989.

With the benefit of hindsight, Gary Bruce argues that the events of 1953 served not to consolidate the division between the two German states by confirming the loyalty of each state to its respective eastern and western allies, but that they set a standard of political resistance which ultimately led to unification within a single democratic state founded on popular support for civil rights. Unlike party ideologists, however, Bruce presents considerable evidence of a concerted East German civil rights movement that would certainly have brought about change within the state in the 1950s if it had not fallen victim to Soviet military authority. 17 June 1953 was not merely a spontaneous uprising

against repressive working conditions or a demonstration of non-conformity, protest, opposition, dissidence or disobedience, as the historians Mary Fulbrook and Konrad Jarausch have argued, but a popular collective defense of political and ethical principles and a precursor of the *Wende* of 1989.

In the immediate aftermath of the uprisings, the West German government designated 17 June as a national holiday, the Day of National Unity, on the assumption that democratic forces in the East foreshadowed unification within a democratic state under western rule. In spite of elaborate measures taken to commemorate this day by distributing lapel badges, organising communal sporting events like cross-county walks, 17 June remained an unpopular lacklustre public holiday in memory of a failed revolution of a foreign state, since replaced by the equally unpopular 3 October as the Day of National Unity. Yet it is the very realisation of national unity in 1990 that has prompted political parties and the media to renew efforts to reinvigorate public interest in the significance of the events of 1953. Prime time television dramas, exhibitions and conferences, fiftieth anniversary commemorative ceremonies and plans for monuments in Jena and Berlin again focused public attention on this day as a focal point of Germany's national heritage industry in 2003. Bruce's timely account of popular support for civil rights in East Germany likewise rehabilitates 17 June 1953 within Germany's national commemorative calendar, albeit not by glorifying the heroism of resistance but by documenting the burgeoning of liberal party activism in the 1950s, which laid the foundations for the ultimate downfall of the regime in 1989. In short, 17 June 1953 in East Germany merits a place in the history books alongside the Prague Spring of 1968 and the Hungarian revolt of 1956. This day, claims Bruce, marked the culmination of genuinely revolutionary forces and resistance that were representative of a broad and enduring public opinion.

Some of the historiographical and conceptual claims underpinning this ‘motivational’ political history of resistance within the first decade of the existence of East Germany nevertheless remain questionable. By focusing on institutionalised party political activism, Bruce disregards the social origins of a civil rights movement within a society which, only eight years earlier, had emerged from a twelve-year long dictatorship under National Socialism. His observation that the East German state security service could set up an apparatus of informants only by coercion, whereas the Gestapo had had recourse to

a voluntary force of informants, certainly suggests that the communist regime was more repressive. However, it also raises vital questions regarding the degree of social continuity (in legal and educational, but also manual industrial professions) between the National Socialist and communist dictatorships, which the author does not develop. If anti-communist resistance in Germany after 1945 attracted truly popular grass-roots support, as Bruce claims, did it draw on residual anti-communism existent before 1945, or was it motivated rather by reaction to the ideology of the 'anti-fascist' state sustained in East Germany? And to what extent did interests and value systems acquired from 1933 to 1945 continue to motivate patterns of both repression and resistance in the post-war period? By ascribing resistance in East Germany to the pervasive influence of neighbouring West Germany and contextualising it within the modern philosophical tradition of human rights from Locke onwards, Bruce not only gives succour to the liberal party ideologists in the Federal Republic since 1989, who see reunification in 1990 as the culmination of universal human rights and commitment to the western alliance, but also somewhat overestimates the extent to which the workers in East Germany in 1953 were versed in traditions and theories of human rights. Bruce's alternate references to the claims of the workers in terms of 'basic', 'natural' or 'human' rights and even, somewhat contradictorily, of 'personal interests', do not suggest that they were motivated by ideas alone or that these ideas were concerted. The political dimension of resistance cannot be fully explained in isolation from immediate economic interests, spontaneous manifestations of solidarity, shared fears, and the lack of trust in the state. It is more likely, therefore, that the resistance of 1953 was fuelled less by clearly conceived common political goals than by a combination of economic disgruntlement, a shared sense of insecurity, and by ethically motivated claims to individual responsibility and autonomy of thought as a means to end the abuse of state power.