

BARTHA, ESZTER. *Alienating Labour. Workers on the Road from Socialism to Capitalism in East Germany and Hungary*. Berghahn, New York [etc.] 2013. 362 pp. Ill. \$95.00; £60.00. doi:10.1017/S0020859014000571

The 1989 social transformations helped spread awareness among labour historians in eastern Europe about the theoretical shortcomings inherent in crude matching of class position and social consciousness. What ensued was rising scepticism toward the very usefulness of class as an analytical concept, with many authors from the region shifting focus from the working classes to broader social movements, such as feminism, pacifism, or youth subcultures. Moreover, many adopted the idea of nations as the prime agents of history, thus flouting the working class by identifying it as the privileged ally of communist rule or downgrading periodic industrial actions to mere episodes in the larger story of national resistance against totalitarian regimes. Eszter Bartha's book confirms the perception that, after a period of standstill, there is once again a growing interest in the historiographies of former socialist states for social conditions of industrial workers under communism.

Informed by theoretical insights of the "cultural turn", the new generation of labour historians is generally wary of drawing overarching conclusions about the nature of class relations or dynamics of change in state socialism. By focusing on "micro politics" and expanding the list of life aspects recognized as essential for the forming of working-class consciousness their accounts successfully avoid the oversimplified and essentialist presentations of the working class as a homogeneous entity. The unwelcome consequence of this otherwise fruitful reorientation from the institutional expressions of class grievances to the everyday negotiations of workers in very specific localities is that the explanation of the systemic features and overall trajectories of state socialist societies has been given over to more assertive political histories inspired by the grand theme of nation-building.

Eszter Bartha's comparative research goes a step further on from much of the recent accounts of labour in state socialism standing in opposition to historiography subservient to nationalist agendas inasmuch as it is not hesitant in relating local working-class milieus to a broader context of the development of socialist Hungary and the GDR. The author sheds new light on the housing, consumption, education, gender, and community-building policies in these two countries through the in-depth inspection of carefully selected case studies (the Rába MVG factory in Győr and the Carl Zeiss manufacturing company in Jena), revealing definite limits to the institutional power of the communist-party-states on the ground. Bartha is therefore in agreement with the idea that the general mechanisms of rule and relations between the party-state and the working class are best understood at factory level. But she is also eager to reconnect these local findings to broader policies and alterations in the party line.

The book's period is indicative of the author's aim to track and explain structural change over time. Whereas much of the latest research conducted by labour historians of the region focuses on the early postwar Stalinist years, Bartha observes the factory policies of socialist regimes in their senile phase during the 1970s and 1980s. These are years in which fatigue with the project of socialist modernization started to spread among the wider population. The logical question that the study poses at this specific historical juncture is: Why had the communist parties, which claimed to rule in the interest of the working people, lost the political support of the workers?

The analytical frame, which helps the author tackle these questions, is borrowed from Konrad Jarausch's depiction of the GDR as a "welfare dictatorship".¹ Bartha argues that, faced with the increasingly vocal criticism inside the factories in the late 1960s, both Hungarian and East German communist leaderships refused to give in to pressures from below and democratize their respective political systems. Instead they chose to alter the orthodox Stalinist economic policy of favouring investments in heavy industry and to offer the workers material concessions. The following two decades were therefore marked by ever-increasing consumption levels on the part of the working class paid for in the form of political dormancy. This policy allegedly helped the regimes to consolidate in the short term, but also paved the way for their loss of popular support and ultimate demise once the increase in the standard of living was blocked by the economic crisis.

The explicitly comparative design of the study stands as the second most distinguishing feature of this book. Bartha showcases the potential of theoretical approaches, which recognize the autonomy of socialist states and treat them as alternative modernization projects with a unique logic of development. The comparison of two planned economies brings fruitful results. The author argues that János Kádár's "standard of living policy" and Eric Honecker's "unity of economic and social policy", until now treated as specific national traits in Hungarian and East German historiography, were part of the same process of appeasement of the working classes taking place after a period of heightened grievances among industrial workers in late 1960s.

The comparative frame brings interesting insights on the shopfloor level as well. A good example is the institution of socialist brigade movement. Often connected with coercive labour policies, output competition, and ideological indoctrination, the study shows how by 1970s both regimes seem to have abandoned attempts to use this institution as the means of spurring productivity from the outside and how socialist work brigades largely lost their power to immerse the workforce into the political life of the party.

The book is based on doctoral dissertation research and rests on a remarkably thorough archival research of factory and regional archives as well as a number of life-history interviews conducted in both countries. Knowledge of both languages and sensitivity to the real-life problems of the workers enable Bartha to extract the most out of her sources and present the reader with a rich description of socialist factories and their surroundings. The two case studies represent large flagship factories located in the economically most developed regions of both countries. Employing the well-paid core of the industrial working class, which enjoyed most of the benefits of socialist welfare policies, these were the sites in which the bond between the party and the workers was presumably the strongest and thus suitable for tracing the moment at which the social contract finally came to an end.

The general explanatory pattern functions well in the case of Hungary. The steady introduction of market incentives under "goulash communism" raised awareness of the problems of inequality among the workers, but it also discredited the idea of a consciously steered economy and exposed the hypocrisy of the communist leadership. With private enterprises offering higher wages and acting as the most dynamic section of the economic system, workers in state-owned industry were pushed into a race to improve their standard of living through consumerism and catch up with well-to-do farmers, professionals, and private sector workers. Under these circumstances the sources indicate

1. Konrad H. Jarausch, "Care and Coercion: The GDR as a Welfare Dictatorship", in *idem* (ed.), *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR* (New York, 1999).

that workers grew increasingly cynical towards socialist ideology and began to leave the party ranks en masse by the second half of the 1980s.

In the GDR, however, the sources do not reveal the same tendencies clearly. The number of workers joining the party ranks in Carl Zeiss was growing throughout the two decades. The descriptions of working-class neighbourhoods in Jena indicate that communal life styles remained in place with no social atomization similar to the Hungarian scenario. Bartha recognizes these discrepancies, but chooses to downplay their importance by pointing to the unreliable nature of sources written under an oppressive regime. She points out the frustration with the scarcity of consumer goods among the workforce and suggests that behind the sterile party information reports workers were just as disconnected from the official rhetoric as was the case in Hungary. This seems plausible. Still, it does not present the reader with a clear idea about the framing of dissatisfaction on the shopfloor in Jena and its compatibility with the capitalist values.

The widespread practice of watching West German television and the spread of the Intershop chain with its luxury goods are not convincingly presented by Bartha as an equivalent to Hungarian-style consumption on the market. Consumption-oriented policy, aimed to raise the standard of living in a planned economy, does not necessarily equal market-stimulated consumerism. In the GDR more consumption was connected with centrally distributed social provisions, more investment into light industry, and better planning, not the spread of the private sector. At one point Bartha even introduces different names for the two contrasting models of welfare dictatorships (“reformist” in Hungary and “collectivist” in the GDR) but never manages to follow up this theoretical insight in her case studies. More focus on dissimilarities between the two “welfare dictatorships” and careful theoretical handling of consumerism in state socialism might have contributed to a better understanding of the break between the East German workers and their respective party.

These inconsistencies should not be used as a pretext for ignoring ambitious questions and the usage of overarching models when writing the labour history of eastern Europe. Eszter Bartha’s meticulous research sets the standards high and serves as a must-read for all scholars willing to go down the same road and challenge the dominant accounts of state socialism in the region still clinging to simplistic depictions of totalitarian regimes and the relentless heroic defiance of nations caught underneath them.

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To readers of Ethiopian history, Professor Bahru Zewde needs no lengthy introduction. His lucid and masterly *History of Modern Ethiopia*¹ has been a standard volume of

1. Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855–1991*, rev. edn (Oxford, 2001).