Andrea Bahr makes a surprising assertion in her introduction to „Parteiherrschaft vor Ort“, the book version of a dissertation about the German Democratic Republic (GDR) that she completed in 2015 at the Humboldt University in Berlin: that historians have focused “nur wenig” on the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) “selbst” since the opening of the former East German archives more than a quarter century ago. The studies that do have tended to focus on the highest echelons of the party, and then only on the period up to and around the unrest associated with June 1953 (pp. 32-33). This is a somewhat misleading claim, given the large number of case studies that have looked at developments in the GDR at the grass roots, including those that took place after the iconic date of June 17:

all of them, in some way or other, pay attention inter alia to the role and actions of local party officials at the town or district (Kreis) level. Yet, Bahr is no doubt correct that a specific focus on the inner workings of the local party apparatus remains a lacuna in the literature. In fact, as she rightly suggests, our dominant picture of the Kreissekretariat of the Kreisleitung, the focus of the study, remains the one that East German journalist Landolf Scherzer depicted in his 1988 book, „Der Erste“, which attracted a good deal of attention in both German states on the eve of the GDR’s collapse: that of a beleaguered functionary trying, in the face of great material adversity and other weighty challenges, to do „das Beste“ (p. 12) for those who lived and worked in the area he - and it usually was a „he“ - administered in the name of the party.

Bahr sets out to complicate that image by focusing on the everyday activities and behavior of leading local functionaries active in Brandenburg an der Havel, a „typische DDR-Kleinstadt“ (p. 39), from 1961 to 1989. She is most interested in their „Verhaltensmuster“ and their „Management des Alltags“, in understanding why they acted as they did, how they interpreted local developments, and why certain reactions made most sense to them. All of this, she believes, will reveal „die soziale Wirklichkeit“ (p. 13) of the way in which „Parteiherrschaft“ actually functioned at the grass roots.

The study consists of three main sections. The first looks at „Strukturen“ and „innerparteiliche Praxis“ (pace the ever-popular Pierre Bourdieu), essentially describing such mundane matters as the course and content of the biweekly meetings of the Sekretariat - the „Machtkern“ of the local party organization (p. 49) - which ranged from high-level „politics“ to personnel policy to more everyday concerns such as material shortages; the duties of the various secretaries and units within the Kreisleitung; the ways in which they provided (often unwelcome) guidance to lower-level party functionaries in local factories and elsewhere. Bahr devotes a third of this section to describing the nature and nuts-and-bolts practices of „Berichterstattung“, as well as to the function that such popular opinion reports supposedly served, not least in accounting for regime stability.

The next main section provides a social profile of the individuals who presided over the Kreisleitung, i.e., the „Erste“ of Scherzer fame. Bahr pays close attention here to generational and gender issues, and especially to the tenacious grip that male members of the so-called Aufbaugeneration (those who had come of age during the Third Reich) maintained on local leadership positions from the mid-1960s to the late 1980s. Bahr is especially interested in the career paths and „Sinnwelt“ of these overworked social climbers, many of whom were woefully unprepared for their jobs. As a result, she speculates, they were forced to „learn by doing“ and thus felt a great deal of insecurity, which is why they exhibited a great deal of almost militaristic „Parteidisziplin und unbedingte Folgebereitschaft“ (p. 146), resulting in their popular image among locals as „verbortho und starrsinnige ‘Apparatschiks’“ (p. 143) - not as „fürsorgliche Stadtväter“, the self-serving self-image they cultivated of themselves.

The third main section, the most substantial one of the study both literally and figura-

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tively, offers a variety of empirical examples to bolster the more general claims that Bahr makes in the first half of the book. This is where she fleshes out the argument that local party officials relied on three main practices that they supposedly thought would help them achieve their main goal, which was to fortify the SED’s authority (*Herrschaft*), as well as their own: repression, legitimation strategies, and effective responses to everyday challenges at the local level. According to Bahr, they considered repression to be the least helpful approach because it would alienate the support of those under their charge: ordinary East Germans, as well as management officials at local factories - the most important of which was the Brandenburg steel factory, which had been at the forefront of the June 1953 protest in the so-called Stahlstadt. Memories of the statewide upheaval gave party officials „größere Sensibilität“, Bahr argues, for methods involving „Zuckerbrot und Peitsche“ (p. 190). She examines in detail the active role that the Kreisleitung played in a number of „Integrationsangebote“ (p. 196), including the construction of a public swimming pool in the late 1960s. Bahr is equally interested in „Zustimmungsrituale“, above all those related to „Herrschaftsinszenierung“ (p. 236): actions aimed at ensuring sufficient voter turn-out during staged elections, for example, as well as preparations for official visits by SED chief Erich Honecker - all with an eye to winning over the so-called masses, demonstrating the power of the party, and, last but not least, shoring up the stability of the regime.

The final part of the third major section is the most compelling one: a discussion of the local party apparatus’s responses during the waning months of the regime, including an extremely detailed and gripping description of its final days in the fall of 1989. Bahr is most interested in understanding why the Kreisleitung ultimately relinquished its power without using force or putting up a fight. She seems to argue that growing lethargy on the part of the local rank-and-file was determinative here, i.e., that the loss of the party faithful was what led, in turn, to „Sprachlosigkeit und Handlungsstarre“ (p. 313) on the part of the local leadership. Leav-
Bernard Bailyn once quipped that most doctoral students find the right answers to the wrong questions; Bahr is to be commended for often asking the „right“ questions. It is not that her responses or findings are „wrong“ - very often her arguments are persuasive, in fact, especially when she sticks to her evidence. But there is very little here that is especially novel: instead, as the previous examples suggest, she tends to confirm what other scholars of the GDR have already argued, even if she does not always acknowledge this explicitly. Whether or not the history of East Germany is „alles andere als ausgeforscht“ ¹, future students clearly need to develop new approaches that will allow them to conceive of and answer novel questions.
