

Making Sense of Dictatorship: Domination and Everyday Life in East Central Europe after 1945. Edited by Celia Donert, Ana Kladnik, and Martin Sabrow. Budapest: CEU Press, 2022. 296 pp.

On the cover of the book under review here we see children's chalk drawings on Alexanderplatz, East Berlin. This iconic square would remind us of the demonstration of the November 4, 1989, the largest in the history of the GDR. But for the children, the square had a meaning as a large concrete surface to draw on. *Making Sense of Dictatorship: Domination and Everyday Life in East Central Europe after 1945* joins the growing tide of the corpus of works reflecting on the social and cultural history of socialism. The history of everyday life under dictatorships has been widely studied, mainly by Alf Lüdtke and the cohort of scholars following him. According to their approach, the socialist regimes set the general parameters of life, but the strategies developed in everyday life enabled Soviet citizens to get by. The mutual relationship between the rulers and the ruled and the negotiation nature of the dictatorship have become the subject of a burgeoning secondary literature. The novelty of this volume is that it seeks to understand the individual actions and attitudes from the perspective of their meanings: the *Sinnwelt*. The authors seek to answer questions concerning how the citizens of socialist countries, like the children on Alexanderplatz, looked for meanings in the world around them.

Seeking to achieve a deeper understanding of perceptions of everyday life, the authors direct our attention to the “conceptual worlds” or “mental worlds” that existed alongside the official ideology, but not in isolation from it and even in interaction with it. To provide insight into the complexity of *Sinnwelts*, they devote substantial attention to the field of “pre-political acceptance.” With this term, they refer to a zone in which historical actors (re-)constructed the meaning of the existing social order and its legitimacy in everyday life. This mental conception shaped a series of social practices that were not always politically motivated. The essays in the book offer insights into the ways in which the worlds of meanings were revealed in different situations. The 13 chapters assembled in this volume are divided into four sections. In the introductory chapters, Martin Sabrow and Thomas Lindenberg elaborate on the concept of *Sinnwelt*. To understand everyday life, we need to examine how socialism's representation of reality interacted with individuals' representations of reality. In his brief overview, Lindenberg points out that the finding that *Eigen-Sinn* exists is only the first step in the research on the behavior of people living under

dictatorships, not a final answer to a question, but rather a finding that leads to a series of follow-up questions.

Following the theoretically oriented chapters, in the second part (“Authorities and Domination”), these questions are posed from the perspective of those in power. Ciprian Cîrnială shows the professional life of a policeman in state-socialist Romania. He focuses not so much on policeman Nicolae’s life but rather on its reconstruction. A joint examination of the “world of meaning” of the police and a policeman reveals Nicolae’s power-legitimizing and delegitimizing character. The main tool with which the system was legitimized was the creation of loyal worlds of meaning, for which purpose a whole reporting machinery was constructed. As Hedwig Richter points out in the next chapter, the broader layers of society were involved in report writing in East Germany, which became a bureaucratic practice of imitation. However, the reporting machinery was not able to stabilize the system. Regarding the debates that started in the 1980s, we can see the dangers that emerge if the rulers’ perceptions of reality do not match society’s perceptions of reality. Michal Pullmann’s study points out how the vision of the late Czechoslovak communist elite failed in the face of alternative interpretations that were unfavorable to the party.

The third section (“Everyday Social Practices and *Sinnwelt*”) pays particular attention to the meanings of living standards. Ana Kladnik uncovers local practices of *Sinnwelts* in Velenje in the context of Yugoslav self-management. The autonomy and decision-making given to the local government and the voluntary work of the inhabitants not only led to the construction of a new city but also fostered solidarity among local urban and rural communities. It is a good example of *Eigen-Sinn* practices that do not evolve against the official will but in harmony with it. However, this does not mean small tactics were not developed in order to shape and navigate meanings within the spaces of everyday life. The legitimacy of the socialist project was based on improved living standards in post-1956 Hungary. The mechanization of households was implemented as an important measure in the modernization campaign. Annina Gagyiova explains that, due to centralized distribution and the shortage of goods, access to washing machines required women to develop individual tactics. In the reality of everyday household life, *Eigen-sinn* was mostly about finding loopholes.

We come closer to understanding everyday worlds not only by looking at what the official *Sinnwelt* contained but also by finding what is omitted. Barbara Klich-Kluczevska examines how non-married single mothers in the People’s Republic of Poland were excluded from the official discourse of the 1970s. The

indifference of the social network and the stigma of public opinion also strongly limited these women's social coping strategies. Like unmarried women, a small group of parents in the GDR did not fit into the vision of a socialist modern world. These residents established an unofficial kindergarten in East Berlin by implementing an alternative vision of raising future generations. The short-lived initiative, as Celia Donert explains, reveals several layers of *Sinnwelt*, including the overlaps and the incongruities between the *Sinnwelt* of dissidents and the *Sinnwelt* of the East German state.

In addition to the modernization of the household and the transformation of the ground floor of dwellings into kindergartens, various other ideas have been able to dislodge cities from their traditional places. In the fourth section ("Intellectual and Expert Worlds (and (De)Legitimization"), Matěj Spurný illustrates how the project of industrial modernity and the idea of demolishing the whole historical heritage of the town of Most (in northern Czechoslovakia) became a "crime against culture" in the changed perception of reality of the local people and urban development experts. It was not only the image of the city that changed in the context of a more sensitive, European-level thinking about the relationship between people and their environment, but also the image of authentic communities. The next chapter underpins this observation with the example of Orfeo. The art group, which was linked to the new left, built a commune to create a "socialist way of life". Péter Apor's study shows that the commune, like the performances, expressed a sharp social critique. In this context, the artists saw alienation not exclusively as a problem of capitalist consumer society but also as a problem of late socialist Hungary.

Alongside the creation of countercultural worlds, the preservation of these worlds is also part of the history of alternative perceptions of reality. Jonathan Larson argues that the political role of samizdats and their relationships to identity determine the kinds of Czech samizdat we find in collections today. This study, which would make a fitting conclusion to the volume, is followed by a final chapter: an analysis by Michal Kopeček of the discourse of legalism in Czechoslovak and Polish opposition. For the regime, the party was the basis of socialism's legitimation, not questions of legality. For the dissidents, in contrast, legalism was used as a political tool not to address questions concerning the existing regime but rather as a means of positing the expected and desired rule of law.

The major strengths of the book lie in its thematic diversity. The diversity of historical actors who parade across the pages of this book offers a glimpse into

various perspectives and experiences. To uncover the practices associated with meanings, scholars map the regions, towns, blocks, flats, and sometimes even bathrooms of socialist Romania, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and Poland. The case studies draw upon a heterogeneous body of sources (party documents, interviews, printed publications, and samizdats). The systems and worlds of meaning discovered provide a tool with which we can examine the dynamics, practices, discourses, and memories unfolding in very different interactions and relationships. Despite the wide range of topics, one area is missing from the analysis. The inclusion of rural areas and the transformations they underwent as a theme would have been justified in terms of the *Sinnwelt*. For most of these countries, the creation of a so-called socialist society included a transformation from largely rural societies into increasingly urban societies. The world and its meanings changed profoundly for the people from the countryside who migrated to the cities and for those who remained in the villages alike. Furthermore, the editors have arranged the book to provide access to different perspectives on *Sinnwelt*. However, not all attempts to integrate the case studies into the *Sinnwelt* concept have been entirely successful. The chapters in which the authors have explain how they relate to the main idea of meaning-making strengthen the coherence of the volume.

A *Sinnwelt* is the world as perceived by the historical actors who inhabit it. For the children playing on Alexanderplatz, the huge concrete surface on which they could draw gave meaning and significance to the square. The world of meaning in socialist countries was every bit as colorful as these drawings. As tempting as it may have been in the past to divide the actors in these narratives into victims and perpetrators, this simplistic division hardly does justice to the complexity of the histories in question. Sometimes, an individual could be both victim and perpetrator at the same time. The volume will be thought-provoking for anyone interested in the history of Eastern Europe and everyday life under dictatorships, and it will be useful for historians, social scientists, and their students alike.

Heléna Huhák  
Research Centre for the Humanities  
huhak.helena@abtk.hu