

REVIEWS

Demshuk, Andrew. *Bowling for Communism: Urban Ingenuity at the End of East Germany*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY and London, 2020. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$39.95.

THIS is Andrew Demshuk's second book which is again centred around a building in Leipzig. After using the demolition of the university church as a magnifying glass to explore life in the GDR in the 1960s, the new book groups its narrative around the 'Bowlingtreff' — an underground bowling alley with restaurants and bars. The title of the book is not ideal, though, as it is not about bowling. 'Can Leipzig still be saved' might have been more appropriate. Large parts deal with the precarious situation of the second biggest town of the GDR during the 1980s (while the 'Bowlingtreff' makes up only one sixth of the book). Much like everywhere in East Germany, most of the old housing stock was in disrepair. The author paints a vivid, detailed picture of urban dystopia in Leipzig, before he focuses on various initiatives to save the city.

In view of plans to demolish many old city quarters and to rebuild them with concrete tenement blocks, city planners, architects and local officials sought to develop hybrid solutions. They tried to save some of the most precious parts of the town and combined them with newly built structures. This ambitious, postmodern and only rudimentarily realized architectural approach is one of the defining traits of what the author calls 'urban ingenuity'. However, this only vaguely defined notion also entails an organizational element, namely the informal mobilization of resources by local officials. In most cases, these local initiatives were initiated and carried out independent of central state planning, 'off the book'.

The amazing willingness of local architects and bureaucrats to engage in semi-legal building projects is an often overlooked aspect of late Communism. The book offers a number of astonishing examples. In stark contrast to the willful execution of central orders to demolish Leipzig's university church in 1968, twenty years later local officials tried to work around the centralized system. The 'Bowlingtreff' was the most striking example with an unplanned budget of almost 20 Million Marks. But there were several semi-legal building projects in Leipzig (including a student club and a swimming hall) and the bowling alley was just the culmination of an already existing informal practice.

Andrew Demshuk becomes quite enthusiastic over semi-legal city planning. The building of the Bowlingtreff is depicted as an exciting project that brought not just a postmodern 'touch of Las Vegas' (p. 126) to Leipzig, it was allegedly 'superior to bowling alleys under capitalism' (p. 96). Without any comparison, such praise can hardly convince a reader like me who grew up in the GDR and learned to mistrust propaganda. More importantly, the downside of Demshuk's affirmative discussion of informal local city planning in Leipzig is a rather

negative view of the socialist version of informal housing (Schwarzwohnen) which he considers as 'perhaps the ultimate form of theft' (p. 47). I might be overly sensitive here due to my own research on that topic but I wonder why someone who occupies an empty, derelict flat and makes it habitable at her/his own expense can't be considered a grassroots version of 'urban ingenuity'?

Another consequence of Demshuk's laudatory view of local authorities is that he downplays the involvement of his 'heroes' in the state apparatus. The 'Bowlingtreff' was a local prestige project which emulated, and perhaps even surpassed, comparable prestige projects of the SED in the capital. Its realization was a participatory dictatorship *en miniature*, with a governing body 'Aufbaustab' and practices of volunteer mobilization which were common in the GDR. After its completion, the SED used the 'Bowlingtreff' to gain legitimacy for the party dictatorship with a similar incorporating gesture to the people as its big brother, the 'Palast der Republik', in Berlin. Therefore, I consider the modification of Fulbrook's notion of participatory dictatorship into 'participation without dictatorship' (p. 5) not convincing. Probably, applying the concept of 'contested dictatorship' would have been better suited. Moreover, the focus on the binary of 'good' local vs. 'bad' central officials leads to a slight neglect of the deeper problem of scarcity of resources.

Overall, this a fascinating multifaceted book which explores an often overlooked aspect of urban informality in late Communism. It successfully uses urban microhistory in order to reveal characteristics of disintegrating late Communism. After the university church and the 'Bowlingtreff', I wonder what building comes next. My suggestion would be to focus on the demolished building of Karl-Heine-Str. 30. The subsidized demolition of beautiful historical building in 2004 was one out of 446 historical buildings taken down in Leipzig between 1990 and 2006. After Communist barbarism and urban ingenuity, a third book on capitalist destruction in post-socialist Leipzig would bring the topic to full circle.