Review

A. Kloiber: Brewing Socialism

Kloiber, Andrew: *Brewing Socialism. Coffee, East Germans, and Twentieth-Century Globalization,* New York: Berghahn Books 2022. ISBN: 978-1-80073-669-6; 262 S.

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Throughout 1977, coffee kept East German planners awake at night—not because of its stimulant properties but because of difficulty maintaining domestic supplies. As a cash-strapped and increasingly debt-ridden state at the margins of global markets, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was badly positioned to swallow the quadrupling of world coffee prices that followed Brazil's devastating 1975 frost. What coffee meant to GDR consumers, how the state handled the so-called "coffee crisis," and especially what this commodity's history demonstrates about the GDR's "global entanglements" are the subject of Andrew Kloiber's monograph, an expansion of his 2017 McMaster University PhD dissertation.

Kloiber begins by examining the history of coffee in everyday life in Germany, focusing in his first chapter mostly on questions of supply. Though it had been consumed across Europe since the 17th century, coffee was still a semi-luxury in Germany after 1945, having been scarce since the British blockade during World War I three decades earlier. Its shortage in eastern Germany immediately after World War II was thus largely "inherited" from earlier times rather than produced directly by communist rule, but over time coffee's presence or absence from the market became "a barometer for East Germany's broader economic, social, and cultural health" (p. 19). After supplies increased in the West following the 1948 currency reform, coffee was still rationed in the East (until 1958), sold on the black market, and increasingly imported from West Berlin or in packages from the West (*Westpakete* making up 10–15% of GDR coffee supplies in the early 1950s). As GDR planners attempted to stock up on beans for domestic consumption, their options for purchasing it remained constrained by West Germany's Hallstein Doctrine and by exclusion from the International Coffee Organization, established in 1962 to stabilize coffee prices on the global (i.e. capitalist) market.

Chapter 2 explores the consumption practices linked to coffee under socialism. Cookbooks, magazines, trade journals, and advertising in the GDR encouraged the idea that coffee could, as Kloiber puts it, "stimulate the mind and relax the person" (p. 43). Coffee in East Germany was marketed with usable pasts like the history of the Leipzig café "Zum arabischen Coffe Baum" (continuously in operation since 1711) and, less appetizingly, with racialized advertising (though official guidelines discouraged such stereotypes). For most of its existence, the GDR sold three main brands of coffee for the domestic market, ranging in quality from the cheap Kosta and Rondo to the upper-tier Mona. GDR marketing research indicated that Kosta was the most popular, but, given the scarcity of Mona, this "implied a degree of 'choice' that many East Germans may not, in fact, have had" (p.

50). Drinking coffee of any brand was usually tied to sociability, whether that involved serving it to guests in GDR-produced porcelain at home or sharing it at work in a properly decorated break room.

The book's remaining three chapters all focus on different aspects of the coffee crisis and East Germany's response to it, beginning with its domestic dimensions (Chapter 3). After first trying to wait out the supply shortage in 1975–76, SED leaders were compelled to take drastic measures to curb consumption and stretch dwindling supplies in 1977: Kosta was replaced with "Kaffee-Mix," a surrogate product whose coffee content was so heavily diluted that consumers joked that it was a mix of "half winter barley and half spring barley" (p. 97). The entire national collective's creativity was mobilized in heaping scorn upon Kaffee-Mix: Citizen-consumers submitted some 14,000 petitions (Eingaben) criticizing the product in 1977 (23% of all petitions to the Council of State that year), satirically proposing its use as a herbicide, laxative, or punishment for work indiscipline. Kaffee-Mix quickly came to represent something more than just the coffee that it was not: designed to extend limited supplies of beans, it instead wasted them on a product no one wanted to buy. At the same time, Kaffee-Mix fueled discontent over the shoddy quality of consumer goods in East Germany and over citizens' unequal access to them.

Parallel to these domestic measures, East German planners sought to procure more coffee from socialist allies in Africa and Asia. Because of the GDR's low hard currency reserves and growing foreign debt, its trade representatives turned to barter for their 1977 agreements with Ethiopia and Angola (Chapter 4). Though GDR negotiators initially hoped to develop long-term export lines from these short-term arrangements, Angolan socialists preferred trucks over the East German consumer goods on offer, and Ethiopia's ruling Derg insisted on receiving military equipment. Worse still, the deal with Ethiopia was plagued by delivery problems (on both sides), and, after winning the Ogaden War in 1978, the Derg lost interest and ended the 5-year agreement after only 14 months. By contrast, GDR cooperation with Vietnam and Laos (Chapter 5) focused on long-term development of coffee production rather than short-term supply increases. These too faced problems, owing in no small part to East German paternalism: a leading Laotian official publicly criticized East German experts for ignoring local agricultural knowledge—despite the GDR not growing any coffee itself. The agreement with Vietnam was larger in scale, less acrimonious, and arguably more successful. East Germany provided equipment, fertilizer, and infrastructural support to develop some 10,000 hectares of land for coffee production, which Vietnam was to repay with coffee deliveries that were expected to continue until 2001. Of course, the GDR's demise brought the arrangement to a halt well before then, but Vietnamese coffee trees continued to bear the fruits of East Germany's prior investment well after 1989. Kloiber thus argues forcefully in favor of situating GDR history within a broader timeframe and not simply reading it backwards from the country's collapse.

"Brewing Socialism" makes a number of other historiographic arguments, such as that East German actions were not always motivated by competition with the West, that its coffee agreements came about largely independent of Soviet supervision, and that the Cold War itself needs to be interpreted within the framework of increasing globalization. Such claims have been made by others before, and many of the book's arguments will be familiar to readers versed in GDR history, the literature on consumption, or recent work on socialist globalization. However, Kloiber does a particularly good job using a commodity history of coffee to link together East-West conflict and North-South relations, domestic and international politics, state policies and citizen responses, and the GDR's four decades of existence with pre-1945 and post-1989 continuities. This concise, engaging monograph thus manages to be both broad in range and tight in focus, offering an accessible introduction to GDR history for undergraduates, interested non-specialists, and coffee lovers alike.

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