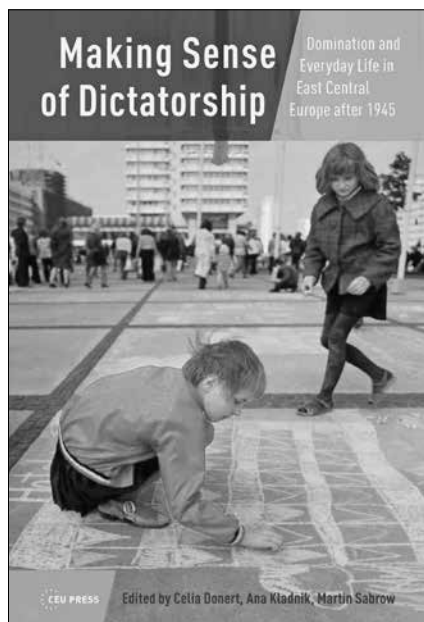


/// Gabriella Vámos

=== **Under Cracked Ceilings**

Celia Donert, Ana Kladnik, and Martin Sabrow.
Making Sense of Dictatorship. Domination and Everyday Life in East Central Europe after 1945.

Budapest: Central European University Press, 2022. Pp 280.



Historians and social scientists in the former Soviet bloc have been interested in understanding the dynamics of socialism for years. Over the past three decades, the archival revolution in these countries has made many resources accessible.¹ This has resulted in a change from the previous totalitarian paradigm of public and political history to a greater emphasis on the history of everyday life. Due to the expansion of sources, it has become increasingly clear that the approach of both

1 = = Some examples summarising research based on a variety of archival sources are as follows: Jonathan Bach, *What Remains: Everyday Encounters with the Socialist Past in Germany* (New York: Columbia University Press,

2017); Laura Cashman, *1948 and 1968 – Dramatic Milestones in Czech and Slovak History* (London: Routledge Chapman & Hall, 2010); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Ben Fowkes, *Eastern Europe 1945-1969: From Stalinism to Stagnation* (London: Routledge, 2000); Kevin McDermott, *Communist Czechoslovakia, 1948–89: A Political and Social History* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015); István Rév, ed., *Centaurus* 61, no. 3 (August 2019), Special Issue: Technology and Information Propagation in a Propaganda War; and Tibor Valuch, *Everyday Life under Communism and After: Lifestyle and Consumption in Hungary, 1945–2000* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2021).

perpetrators and victims to understanding the period needs critical examination. By studying the diversity of individual and social actions, we can better understand the socialist period. The decade-long stability and sudden collapse of socialist rule raises the question: why did people accept dictatorship even though living standards visibly deteriorated and though the majority did not share the basic principles of communist ideology? Several important questions like these were raised during the research project “The Socialist Dictatorship as a *Sinnwelt*,” which was organised between 2007 and 2010 by the Institute of Contemporary History in Prague and the Centre for Contemporary History in Potsdam.

As the result of the project, the book *Making Sense of Dictatorship: Domination and Everyday Life in East Central Europe after 1945* contains thirteen studies reflecting the evolving relationship between citizens and the state. The authors examine various aspects of daily life across nations and subsequently create fresh analytical frameworks for studying dictatorships. Their primary focus is on how individual experiences and actions are interconnected within the broader social context. To understand this, the authors draw inspiration from the German *Alltagsgeschichte*, which originated in 1980. In particular, they are influenced by Alf Lüdtke and the concept of *Eigen-Sinn* that he developed.² In post-WWII Germany, research on everyday life reflected on the relationship between power and the German people under Nazi dictatorship. They raised several uncomfortable questions in that they exposed the masses of active and passive supporters of the dictatorship, without whom the system could not have survived. The concept of *Eigen-Sinn* seemed a suitable way to describe those who passively helped to build the Nazi regime without explicitly supporting its ideology. This approach also applied to research on East Germany after 1989, as it was based on the relationship between rulers and ruled, rather than on power as an external force acting independently on society. Historians did not use it to challenge the unequal distribution of power in the socialist dictatorship, but rather to challenge the notion that the citizens were utterly powerless against the state. They emphasised that communist dictatorships survived for decades by evolving in parallel with society.

Hence, the concept of *Sinnwelt* is consistently presented throughout the book and analysed in detail in Martin Sabrow’s study, which shows the various worlds of the meaning of different social actors. Sabrow argues that *Sinnwelt* is an approach to analysing and understanding the rise and fall of communist power in East Germany. The accessibility of secret police files after 1989 has opened new perspectives for historians, challenging the traditional interpretation of the GDR as a totalitarian regime supported by the military and the Berlin Wall. The survival of the GDR in the long term was not solely based on violence, but was also due to the social acceptance that it enjoyed. The German Socialist Unity Party (SED) had

² = Alf Lüdtke, *Eigen-Sinn: Fabrikalltag, Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik von Kaiserreich bis in den Faschismus* (Hamburg: Ergebnisse Verlag, 1993).

two million supporters in 1948; by 1989, one out of every seven citizens was a party member. Membership held an appeal that was not limited to politics alone but also encompassed cultural aspects. Sabrow highlights that in the GDR, the roles of perpetrator and victim were frequently exchanged, and the population was by no means powerless. The socialist state was established in 1949 and legitimised itself through socialism, anti-fascism, and its commitment to peace, progress, and prosperity. Between 1950 and 1980, it is unclear how society received these efforts, but the majority did not seem to oppose them. Despite the Berlin Wall being erected in 1961, citizens of the GDR took the power structure for granted and pursued personal gain instead of confrontation. It was only revealed after 1989 that the party had been artificially propped up.

The experiences and behaviour of ordinary people are analysed by Thomas Lindenberger, who demonstrates the interaction between the socialist and societal *Sinnwelt*. Lindenberger explains that during the period of stability, the development of authoritarianism and communism was unquestioned. In contrast, unrest brought the violent side of the *Sinnwelt* to the surface. Citizens sought to live in harmony with the realm of power to exploit material and symbolic resources. They were able to exert their influence without challenging the socialist worldview. In connection with Lüdtke's concept of *Eigen-Sinn*, Lindenberger clarifies that *Eigen-Sinn* is not synonymous with resistance to *Sinnwelt* but rather with a series of private decisions that may even push the *Sinnwelt* to its limits. This definition of *Eigen-Sinn* is employed throughout the volume, starting with two introductory essays before grouping case studies into three larger units.

In the second section, three studies focus on authorities and domination. Ciprian Cîrnială examines the life of one policeman, Nicolae, during Romania's state socialism era (1960–89). This one case study presents three themes: the relationship between public security and state socialism, its importance, and its role in propaganda. Additionally, it also provides information on the daily work of police officers during the socialist period and illustrates the complex relationship between individuals and political power. Narrative interviews with policeman Nicolae indicate that the socialist police not only legitimised but also delegitimised the regime. Policeman Nicolae's faith in the regime was uncertain; indeed, at one point he even wrote a letter to the Foreign Minister suggesting that Ceaușescu should be replaced. Although Nicolae escaped punishment for his risky move, his wavering support for the regime was revealed. Cîrnială analyses Nicolae in detail and interviews him, emphasising the diversity of settings and timelines in the narrator's life. The critical reading of this subjective but illuminating narrative is highlighted throughout.

Hedwig Richter introduces the network of informants in the GDR. She points out that the bureaucratic machinery outside the Stasi network operated thanks to the commitment of individuals and a population increasingly accustomed to dicta-

torial rule. Many citizens believed that bureaucratic control was legitimate, a belief that may explain why former Stasi informers were widely criticised after the Peaceful Revolution. In contrast, informers who operated through bureaucratic channels, such as universities and cultural institutions, were rarely condemned. Surveillance reports demonstrate how the dictatorship silenced critical voices.

In his study, Michal Pullmann sheds light on the crisis faced by the ruling elite in Czechoslovakia during the years leading up to the regime's fall. Between 1986 and 1989, the Czechoslovak party leadership realised they could not implement Gorbachev's reforms locally due to their limitations. It is essential to understand that the perestroika launched in the Soviet Union in 1985 was not just another ideological campaign but an economic reform that was challenging to adapt to Czechoslovak conditions. The basic yet unrealistic assumptions that had dominated until then had become uncertain, and the population was increasingly interested in opposition groups. State leadership attempted to maintain the illusion that the socialism reformed by perestroika was still in place. Nevertheless, the elite disintegration that led to the collapse of the dictatorship in 1989 was already underway.

The third main section consists of papers that examine the relationship between everyday social practices and *Sinnwelt*. In her research on the Slovenian city of Velenje, Ana Kladnik delves into the conditions of urban construction in former Yugoslavia. She reveals that after Yugoslavia's expulsion from the Cominform, the new country's leaders sought to build a unique identity based on the decentralisation of the state, empowering worker administration of the enterprises, and introducing socialised ownership. This resulted in the first Law on Self-Management in 1950, followed by the communal system in 1955, which led to decentralisation and financial independence. Kladnik investigates how the Yugoslav collaborative system facilitated the rapid growth of Velenje, which, thanks to lignite mining, transformed itself into a major industrial centre and modern town after World War II. The town's population, which increased owing to the development of the Velenje Coalmine Company and Gorenje Company, played a significant role in the town's progress through voluntary work. However, in the late 1980s, a new paradigm of individualisation emerged, bringing the country and its companies into crisis. Internal cohesion declined, and socialised work was reduced as a result.

In her analysis of the washing machine campaign in Hungary during the Kádár-era, Annina Gagyiova showcases the changes in political strategy after the 1956 Revolution. The revolution caused many people to question the legitimacy of the socialist government, leading the Kádár leadership to believe that increased living standards should accompany the construction of socialism and that private consumption should be allowed. Gagyiova demonstrates that the washing machine campaign was closely associated with modernisation and women's employment and emancipation. As washing was perceived as women's work, this propaganda to

purchase washing machines was mainly aimed at them. Despite efforts to meet the demand, there was a shortfall in supply due to production loss. To compensate, the state imported machines from the Netherlands. However, many people could still not buy washing machines due to financial constraints or the lack of supply. Consequently, many rented the machines or sold vouchers on the black market. The situation changed in the 1960s, however, with the introduction of a new economic mechanism in 1968. This mechanism synchronised supply and demand and ushered in a new era of socialist consumer culture, bringing about a change in socialist economic policies.

Barbara Klich-Kluczevska analyses the problematic situation faced by unmarried Polish mothers who raised their children alone in the 1970s and 1980s. These women found themselves in a much more complicated situation than divorced women and widows, as many of them not only had low levels of education and low-paying jobs, but also had to deal with social exclusion. Upon reaching the end of their maternity leave, they were often at risk of homelessness, as workhouses did not accept mothers with young children, and finding a room to rent became practically impossible. Those who could not manage independently moved back in with their parents, who often treated them with the same contempt as the rest of society. Their children suffered the same fate. They could hardly rely on state support and instead had to rely on the Catholic Church. For these women, the image of the Polish woman and mother, as portrayed by socialism, who could reconcile her duties as a worker and housewife under all circumstances, was impossible. These women ultimately belonged to an invisible group in socialist society.

Celia Donert presents a positive example of community responsibility for children through the Kinderladen case. The name Kinderladen was derived from parent-led childcare initiatives that emerged after the West German New Left student movements in 1968. The Kinderladen in Prenzlauer Berg, which was at one time the most exclusive district of East Berlin, was established between 1980–83 in the vacant ground-floor flat of a nineteenth-century tenement building by a group of people who still lived there, led by Ulrike Pop and Bärbel Bohley. The founders of Kinderladen were members of Women for Peace, and they protested the militarisation of East German society, which had become part of everyday life in kindergartens and schools. The Kinderladen project was established as an alternative to existing socialism, and it was a critique of the state-run childcare institutions (*Kinderkrippe*) in East Germany. Its establishment was closely linked to the peace movement in the West and resistance to the arms race. The Kinderladen was more than a short-lived institution, however; as Donert points out, “the Kinderladen was an example of the conflicts over definitions of key terms in the political culture of the GDR, such as peace, equality, and human rights.”

The volume’s last major section focuses on intellectual and expert worlds and on the legitimation or delegitimation of specific actions. Matěj Spurný’s paper

analyses the case of Most, a town in North Bohemia, Czechoslovakia, the history of which illustrates the changes in the mindset of both the local people and experts in urban development. Coal mining started in the mines surrounding the medieval town of Most in the nineteenth century. After World War II, the Czechoslovak government decided to extract coal from the mines beneath the town, so in 1964, they chose to demolish the historic part of the town and construct a new one. The authorities justified this action by maintaining that the people currently living there could live elsewhere in better conditions. The construction of the new town was criticized by preservationists, intellectuals, and locals for its destruction of the natural environment and material history. The Gothic Church of the Assumption is the only remaining structure from the old town, having been moved to its new site in 1975. The new town was initially well-received, but in the 1970s, with the rise of the green movement, concern for national and cultural heritage, and the stagnation of economic and technological development, changes in local sentiments (*Sinnwelt*) became inevitable.

Péter Apor's fascinating research delves into Hungarian critiques of the concepts of individuality, the individual, and community. Apor highlights that the analysis of lifestyle and consumption under capitalism and socialism was a recurring theme among intellectuals. With the socialist governments' shift towards technological modernisation and the politics of living standards, theories of the convergence of the two global systems emerged that also emphasised the role of the market in socialism. This resulted in an ambiguous definition of the socialist way of life, which sociological research has shown had remained traditional, especially in the villages which had changed little despite earlier modernisation programs. The discussion surrounding this lifestyle theme emphasised that the development of a socialist society was only possible through the transformation of everyday life. Apor also points out that the fall of socialism, which was supposed to eliminate individual alienation and bring about authentic communities, led to another equally alienating world, and that the history of post-socialism cannot be separated from the late years of socialism itself.

Jonathan Larson's study explores the political role of *samizdat* during the period of socialism. He examines the role of two Czechoslovak archives, the Czechoslovak Documentation Center (CSDS) and Libri Prohibiti (LP), in preserving samizdat and how the genre became part of everyday communication during a period of limited expression. He presents an ethnography of the archives, highlighting the genre, content, and philosophy behind the creation of samizdat archives. Larson's study also nuances existing narratives about samizdat as a form of cultural resistance.

The volume's final chapter features a study by Michal Kopeček about the emergence of human rights, socialist legality, and the birth of legal resistance in Czechoslovakia and Poland during the 1970s. Kopeček emphasises that socialist

legitimacy and legal resistance differ from *Sinnwelt*'s research paradigms because "the story of dissidence in the post-dissident liberal narrative is, by definition, an anti-totalitarian story par excellence." Through case studies from both countries, Kopeček examines the challenges faced by human rights advocates, the systematic negation of these rights, and the violation of rule of law principles. In response to these challenges, dissident organisations and committees were established to support those arrested and their families. Although the state made numerous attempts to dismantle these groups, they persisted. The communist authorities were also constrained by international human rights conventions, which limited their power. Finally, Kopeček notes the emergence of a group of reformist intellectuals who, while still adhering to socialist principles, began to advocate for a liberal rule of law.

The essays in this volume cover various topics related to the socialist experience in the Soviet bloc countries, spanning multiple periods and locations. The authors have researched the history of everyday life and provided their perspectives on it. Readers can gain further knowledge on the subject through both the literature cited in the essays and the selected bibliography at the end of each article. The index of subjects, places, and names at the end of the volume is also an excellent tool for navigating the text and finding commonalities and local perspectives across the studies. I believe that this volume, in terms of the diverse research topics of the studies and its approach to everyday history, is both new and valuable for those working in history and the social sciences.

=== Literature ===

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Keywords

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