

Dynamics of Protest and Repression in the German Democratic Republic - A New Dataset

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Abstract

Various disciplines of the social sciences have contributed to the great amount of current theoretical approaches on contentious politics. The theories allow for a multitude of logically consistent and plausible hypotheses about the dynamics of political mass mobilization. Nonetheless, even mass public uprisings regularly take us by surprise. Recent more disaggregated research contributes to our understanding of the mechanisms that have been deemed to drive the behavior of protesters and security forces. The bottleneck for disaggregated analyses often appears to be the lack of sufficiently fine-grained, valid and reliable event data. We are building a new georeferenced database of protest and repression events in the German Democratic Republic between August 1989 and April 1990 at the day-municipality level. We draw on a multitude of sources including archival records of the German secret police (Stasi) as well as various other state and non-state institutions. The dataset not only contains characteristics of 3,310 georeferenced protest events in 549 municipalities, but also contextual information for all 7,613 GDR municipalities existing in 1990. This includes demographics, socioeconomic conditions, local grievances, resources, and mobilizing networks. In addition, we are currently processing information on individual security forces and their respective actions on site.

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Motivation for a new dataset

Erich Mielke, former long-term Minister of State Security (Stasi) of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), famously demanded from his staff: ‘we must know everything’ (cited in [Giesecke, 2014](#)). To keep up with its own ambitions, the Stasi developed a comprehensive surveillance apparatus of some 190,000 informal collaborators in addition to over 90,000 full-time servants ([Giesecke, 2000](#); [Mueller-Enbergs, 2008](#)). Using all kinds of overt and perfidious covert forms of repression, ranging from political imprisonment over workplace discrimination to defamation in private life, the Stasi compelled people to spy on their colleagues, friends, and families. This practice generated an atmosphere of fear and mutual distrust. To protect themselves against persecution, people conveyed rather conformist political positions, even if they did not reflect their actual preferences ([Kuran, 1991, 1995](#)). This reaction called preference falsification in combination with an unfree media system often not only impedes the prediction of even large-scale public uprisings, but also scientific investigation afterwards as the organization of resistance has been clandestine by necessity and therefore publicly available reports are scarce.

Thus, it is not overly surprising that, in light of the great amount of theoretical literature on the dynamics of mass mobilization and repression, systematic empirical research has produced comparatively inconclusive evidence for many suggested processes. Students of public resistance and political violence are often faced with a multitude of individually plausible and logically consistent, but potentially conflicting explanations for the behavior of protesters and security forces across time and space. For example, does repression rather deter or spur resistance? When does repression have one effect or the other? Do perpetrators matter? Does it matter whether people have experienced repression themselves, witnessed it, or merely heard about it? Are people sensitive to geographical or social distance to contentious events? With our data project we want to go about what we believe to be the most important reason for our difficulties to answer such questions: the lack of sufficiently disaggregated and reliable data on the dynamics of public uprisings. In an attempt to alleviate this shortage we introduce our new protest and repression dataset on the revolutionary period between August 1989 and April 1990 in the

German Democratic Republic. Being able to also draw on official Stasi documents with rich information on location, time, and actors involved, we may eventually benefit from Mielke's ruthless efforts to acquire as much intelligence as possible. Moreover, due to the public and political interest in a comprehensive historical investigation and documentation of the GDR regime, we can also draw on various archives of both state and non-state institutions. In the remainder of this short overview we briefly review known problems of data collection, explain what distinguishes our dataset from existing ones and how these advancements may contribute to our understanding of the dynamics of mass mobilization and repression, and give a short overview over the building blocks of the new dataset.

Reporting biases and the virtues of multiple sources and disaggregation

The scarcity of sufficiently reliable high-resolution data on conflict is inherently linked to the lack of reliable sources of information on protest and repression. Many of the most prominent datasets on protest and political violence, for example, exclusively rely on newspaper articles, which are known to be problematic in various ways (Earl et al., 2004; Öberg and Sollenberg, 2011). In autocracies with unfree media systems, domestic media tend to propagate a caricature of reality that an administration would wish their citizens to internalize. While domestic media coverage of upheavals in this kind of political system is an important topic for investigation in and of itself, it is often not suitable to extract an accurate or comprehensive account of events.

Solely relying on foreign media, however, may also introduce biases (Earl et al., 2004; McCarthy, McPhail and Smith, 1996), even though these are caused by different reporting mechanisms (e.g. Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Kalyvas, 2004; Öberg and Sollenberg, 2011; Weidmann, 2013). That is, events of protest or political violence may systematically differ in their probability of being covered by the news and the way the media is reporting on them (e.g. Kalyvas, 2004; McCarthy, McPhail and Smith, 1996; Snyder and Kelly, 1977). For example, urban contentious events are more likely to gain international media attention than equivalent incidents in rural areas (Woolley, 2000). Such underreporting of remote events can be due to a (compelled) concentration of reporters in larger cities for

security reasons or missing infrastructure in rural areas (Öberg and Sollenberg, 2011). At the same time selective reporting on larger (Mueller, 1997), more spectacular (Öberg and Sollenberg, 2011) and geographically closer events (Barranco and Wisler, 1999) may result from the limitations of journalists' mobility, but also the available space in newspapers and the readers' general interest in the case. Whether new media and communication technologies may reduce media bias in the future remains to be seen. As of now, technological innovations such as cellphones and the internet have been changing the determinants of potential selection biases rather than eradicating it (Weidmann, 2016).

Existing datasets

The 1989 GDR people's revolution offers the relatively rare opportunity to gather data from a multitude of different sources. In addition to news reports on political developments in the GDR, our dataset draws on activist chronicles and interviews, statistical yearbooks, systematic state records of the Ministry for State Security (MfS), and other archival documents. By making use of this diverse set of data sources we are confident to maximize quantitative coverage of events and qualitative event characteristics of interest. One of the first systematic and highly disaggregated event data collection projects covering the 1989/90 GDR revolutionary period is PRODAT¹ by Rucht, Hocke and Ohlemacher (1992). PRODAT is based on West German newspaper articles only. Differences to our dataset are particularly pronounced for events in smaller communities. While in our dataset 14% of the protest-experiencing communities have less than 1,000 inhabitants, in PRODAT this is only the case for 4% of the communities. The average protest-experiencing city in our dataset has 19,249 inhabitants, while the average city with at least one protest event in Rucht, Hocke and Ohlemacher (1992) has a population size of 106,838. With just 107 inhabitants the village of Werder (county Jüterborg, district Potsdam) is the smallest protest-hosting community documented in our dataset.

The most exhaustive existing datasets on the GDR 1989 revolutionary period are Kern (2011), Crabtree, Darmofal and Kern (2015), and Grdesic (2014). These datasets rely on

¹<https://www.wzb.eu/de/forschung/beendete-forschungsprogramme/zivilgesellschaft-und-politische-mobilisierung/projekte/prodat-dokument>

the chronicle of protest events by [Schwabe \(1999\)](#). The chronicle, in turn, is based on a wide range of different sources such as regional newspapers, state records, and archive materials. However, in [Kern \(2011\)](#), [Crabtree, Darmofal and Kern \(2015\)](#), and [Grdesic \(2014\)](#), information on protest events is aggregated to the county level for each of the 216 counties of the GDR and does not include information on the reaction and capacity of security forces on site. This data allows the authors to empirically tackle some of the most prominently discussed facilitating factors of mass mobilization like the influence of foreign media. For example, [Kern \(2011\)](#) and [Crabtree, Darmofal and Kern \(2015\)](#) show that West German television did not affect mobilization in 1989 GDR by providing informative and ideological support. Among others, these studies have shown that we need to put more effort into systematic empirical tests of existing arguments to be able to formulate potential scope conditions under which relationships seem to hold and what might prevent certain effects.

We believe that the sources of information on the GDR's revolutionary period allow for further disaggregation and the collection of key variables like repression, reducing the gap between the levels of theorizing and empirical analysis. According to ([Weidmann, 2013](#), p. 572), increasing the "analytical resolution" is associated with a greater risk of suffering from media-related biases and should be done only if additional sources are available for comparison. Additional sources should either come from at least one of the actors involved and/or follow-up data collection efforts ([Weidmann, 2013](#)). As mentioned above, we are confident that our data sources meet these criteria. Considered primary sources do not only comprise documents from activists, parliamentary fact-finding commissions and NGOs, but also reports by GDR security services. As the police and intelligence agents had compiled these reports for internal use (only), the concerns regarding domestic media biases in autocracies should be less prevalent.

Overview of the data

In its final version our dataset covers information on protest and repression events in the GDR between August 1989 and April 1990 as well as a great number of contextual factors.

The unit of observation is the municipality-day, thus providing a high resolution in spatial and temporal terms. The dataset comprises four building blocks. In order to be able to analyze spatio-temporal patterns of protest and repression at the municipality level, we collected a full list of all GDR municipalities that existed in 1990 and geocoded each municipality. The dataset covers therefore all 7,613 existing municipalities in the GDR. In the second building block we processed information on protest events during the people’s revolution in 1989/90. Data on protest events, among others, include: participant counts, types of contentious events, organizers, and the topics. We linked each protest event to the georeferenced municipality. We further collected information on a municipality’s history of resistance and Soviet military intervention during the bloody 1953 “Volksaufstand”.

Table 1: Overview building blocks and sources

Building blocks	Example variables	Information sources
Full list of municipalities	Official municipality name, longitude, latitude	Census, Google Maps
Protest	Protest location and day in 1989 and 1953	News papers, archive material, chronicles, secondary sources
Repression	Soviet intervention in 1953, Stasi density, physical violence at protest site	Archive material, secondary sources, chronicles
Further variables	Living conditions, education, opposition groups, Sorbian community, evacuation trains	Archive material, secondary sources, statistical yearbooks

The third building block, which is still work in progress, covers repressive actors and actions. Variables include local repressive capacities, characteristics of the deployed security forces, and the use of repression at individual events of contention. The fourth building block provides information on contextual factors. These contextual factors do not only comprise local economic, educational, and environmental conditions, which have been often deemed to be major sources of contemporary hardship and concern (Timmer, 2000), but also whether municipalities were threatened to fall victim to open-cast coal mining or hosted ethnic minorities with previous separatist ambitions. In addition, we have collected valuable measures of mobilizable resources and networks. For each of these building blocks, we draw on a variety of different sources, including archival material, sta-

tistical yearbooks, secondary sources, and census material. Table 1 provides an overview of exemplary variables and sources used in each of the building blocks. In its final version, the dataset will allow us to construct georeferenced time series data on protest and repression events on a municipality-day level, and users of the data will be able to put to test numerous suggested processes of (de-)mobilization and (restraint from) repression.

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