

*Meškank, Timo: Instrumentalisierung einer Kultur. Zur Situation der Sorben 1948-1989.*

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Timo Meškank is a Sorbian historian who teaches the Sorbian language and contemporary history at the University of Leipzig. As a student at the Technical University of Dresden (1985-89) and the University of Leipzig (1990-96) he experienced the end of the German Democratic Republic and its somewhat painful transformation in the post-unification period. From 1988 to 1990 he edited a student newspaper, *Serbski student* (Sorbian Student), which published a number of articles critical of the way in which socialism had developed in the GDR, and as a result he and the newspaper came under close scrutiny from the secret police. He also completed a PhD thesis at the Humboldt University in 2000 on Czech-Sorbian relations in the inter-war period, and spent a year at the Charles University in Prague in 1992-93, which explains the comparative methodology of this book. He compares the role of Czechoslovak writers and artists under Communism with that of their Sorbian counterparts, politically and artistically, and presents a more positive view of the Czechoslovaks.

This book, which was originally published in Upper Sorbian in 2011 with the title, *Kultura w službje totalitarneho režima* (Culture in the service of a totalitarian regime), reflects his preoccupation with the discrepancy between the public image projected by the Communist government of the GDR of its policy of support for the Sorbian minority in Upper and Lower Lusatia and his experience of the way in which the Sorbian institutions were used by the ruling party, the Socialist Unity Party (SED), from 1948 to 1989, as a conveyor belt (Transmissionstriemen) for the implementation of their policies. The SED's version of the Soviet nationalities policy, the institutions which supported it, and the intellectuals and writers who agreed to work within its confines, provide the major focus of this study. By 1951 the SED had taken over political control of the umbrella institution for Sorbian cultural associations, the Domowina (Homeland), which had been founded in 1912, but was banned by the Nazis in 1937. It therefore had to be refounded after 1945 in a period of intense pressure from the Soviet occupation power and from the political institutions created in the Soviet Zone. Meškank is particularly concerned with the role that writers and artists played in these institutions from the late 1940s to the collapse of the Communist regime in the autumn of 1989. Underlying this concern is the view that many of those who played leading roles during the Communist period were compromised, but they still continued to play a substantial part in the institutions after reunification.

The story of the development of the Domowina from an institution which worked for the nationalist cause of the Sorbs to one which became subordinate to the political demands of the SED has been analysed extensively by other authors such as Ludwig Elle, Edmund Pech and Peter Schurmann. What is new about Meškank's book is the emphasis on the role of the cultural and intellectual elite in this submission to political demands. His analysis of their role is not a positive one, particularly when compared with the part played by their Czechoslovak counter-

parts in the fight for 'socialism with a human face' in the 1960s. Meškank concentrates on particular figures: For example Pawoł Nedo, the head of the Domowina until its ban in 1937, who then resumed this role after 1945, having joined the KPD, later SED. He portrays Nedo as a nationalist Sorb, who is, however, forced to choose between his nationalist idealism and his commitment to the Communist cause. In 1950 he gave in to political pressure and ceded his post to the hardline Communist, Kurt Krjeńc, moved into the academic world and eventually became a professor at the Humboldt University in Berlin. Meškank believes that Nedo was typical of Sorbian intellectuals who did not realise that they could not win against the political power of the SED, but thought that they could achieve their nationalist aims by compromise. Others were convinced of the Communist cause and were prepared to use their writing or art in this cause. The prime example cited by Meškank is Měrćin Nowak-Njechorński, who openly expressed his belief in the primacy of politics over art. He regarded the role of Jurij Brězan, the leading Sorbian novelist of the post-war period, as more ambiguous: He started as a convinced socialist and member of the SED, but at certain points his criticism of the imposition of particular political decisions, which affected the Sorbs negatively, for example the changes in 1964 to the bilingual school system, was expressed openly. His clashes with the functionaries in the Domowina caused him to move the centre of his engagement in GDR institutions to Berlin. He also became the first major Sorbian writer to produce bilingual versions of his work. Despite his criticisms of SED policy, Brězan continued as an SED member until 1989 and as a vice-president of the GDR Writers' Union.

Meškank's criticism is particularly strong of those writers and intellectuals who agreed to act as informers for the secret police. He sees their motives as varied: arising from conviction, opportunism, or a desire for financial and material gain. Some who informed on their colleagues and friends in early stages of their careers, later became themselves objects of suspicion and surveillance when they espoused causes, of which the SED did not approve, such as expressing environmental concerns and criticising the impact of open cast mining in Lusatia on the ethnic substance of the Sorbs.

Meškank's conclusion is that the GDR period was a heavy one for the Sorbian minority with adverse effects, which is interesting in that the previous period from Hitler's accession to power in 1933 to the end of the Second World War was one in which the Sorbs were subject to overt oppression. A number of the writers and intellectuals, who were later prominent in the GDR, worked underground against the Nazis, particularly in Poland. Their experience of Fascism often provided the basis of their commitment to Communism. Meškank's objection to the GDR's policy and practice was that it professed to provide positive support for Sorbian culture, whilst maintaining the primacy of their political and economic goals. It is true that particular policies, such as the development of open cast mining for lignite, did lead directly to the destruction of a large number of Sorbian communities and the resettlement of the Sorbian population in predominantly German local towns. Any Sorbian intellectual or writer who refused to compromise with the political system was liable to find it difficult to develop and find expression for their work, and at worst

was subject to repressive measures, including imprisonment, although some writers, such as Kito Lorenc, did manage to maintain their political and artistic integrity. The only environment where freedom of expression as a general rule was possible was within the churches, although the secret police did manage to recruit a number of informers in both the Catholic and Protestant churches.

Meškank links the nationalities policy to the negative demographic statistics in the GDR period: The number of mother-tongue speakers declined substantially and the overall area of Sorbian settlement shrank. The GDR government refused to allow the last comprehensive demographic survey from the mid-1950s to be published, so it is difficult to establish exactly the extent of the decline. Meškank is certainly correct in his overall negative assessment of GDR policy towards the Sorbs. What is difficult to establish is how far a more democratic society would have been able to produce a more positive outcome, given the difficulties that minority cultures have experienced in a variety of political and social contexts since 1945 in their relations with majority cultures. Meškank provides a negative analysis of the role that Sorbian writers and intellectuals played in that decline. They were given greater opportunities to publish their work and to be active in Sorbian institutions, but the compromises they had to make in the process were, in Meškank's view, too high. He is also highly critical of the Domowina's submission to political control by the SED, although he does admit that it did give greater priority to cultural and linguistic activities in the latter part of the GDR, which led to a rise in its membership.