

Frank Bösch, **Deals mit Diktaturen. Eine andere Geschichte der Bundesrepublik.** München: C.H. Beck, 2024. 622 pages. ISBN 978-3-406-81339-9.

Can economic and diplomatic partnership with authoritarian regimes contribute to their liberalization or even bring about their eventual democratization? This question has been widely debated in recent decades in connection with the West's policies towards China, Iran, Russia, and others. Germany's most recent governments have perhaps been the most prominent adherents to this theory. The country's longstanding relations with Vladimir Putin – especially the Nord-Stream pipeline projects – have become the subject of much criticism since the 2014 annexation of Crimea and even more intensively since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Politicians, analysts, and academics alike have accused the governments of Chancellors Schröder, Merkel, and Scholz of appeasement-style policies in the face of an ever more openly revisionist and aggressive Russia. Defenders of bringing about “change through trade” (*Wandel durch Handel*) often point to Willy Brandt's *Neue Ostpolitik*, the constructive engagement with the Warsaw Pact that helped foster détente in the Cold War. While much of the current debate centers on engagement with rival authoritarian states, less attention has been paid to Germany's past relationships with dictatorial and authoritarian regimes it has considered allies or even friends. In his latest monograph, *Deals mit Diktaturen. Eine andere Geschichte der Bundesrepublik* [Deals with Dictatorships: A Different History of the Federal Republic of Germany], historian Frank Bösch (University of Potsdam) addresses this overlooked aspect of German foreign policy.

In his six-hundred-page volume, Bösch seeks to tell the story of the manifold relationships that Germany has cultivated with authoritarian regimes around the globe. While the focus is reserved for the decades of the Bonn Republic from 1949 to 1990, the book also includes a review of and reflections on the post-1989 era and recent developments. Some of the findings of this densely researched, detailed monograph may be sobering considering Germany's supposedly values-based foreign policy of recent years. Most of Bösch's work is dedicated to analysis of the FRG's relationships not with its Cold War foes, but with the many other undemocratic regimes that it has regarded as allies and partners – albeit sometimes difficult and uncomfortable ones. Bösch stresses at the very beginning that his aim is not to provide a history of the dictatorships in question, but rather – as his title suggests – a different perspective on the history of the Federal Republic itself. In contrast to some recent publications that portray authoritarian regimes as inherently at odds with liberal democracies and indeed alien to them,¹ Bösch highlights the close cooperations, interconnections, and even ideological sympathies between Bonn and various dictatorships, as well as the heterogeneous responses and reactions to them from the West German media and civil society. These responses have ranged from

¹ Anne Applebaum, *Autocracy, Inc: The Dictators Who Want to Run the World* (New York: Doubleday, 2024).

admiration of and fascination with certain regimes to broad solidarity with their victims and outrage at their imprisonment and torture.

Relying on a wide variety of sources ranging from media reports to ministerial archives, personal papers of high-ranking politicians, the archives of party foundations, and even documents from the foreign intelligence service BND, the book sets out on an ambitious task. It consists of thirteen densely researched chapters in which Bösch analyzes the FRG's view of and approach to the Iranian and Ethiopian monarchies in the 1950s and 1960s, the regimes of Franco and Salazar on the Iberian Peninsula, the Colonels' regime in Greece, various dictatorships in South Korea, Pinochet's Chile and other regimes in South America and Africa, and Gaddafi's Libya, as well as communist China under Deng Xiaopin. Regarding his terminology, the author admits that his synonymous use of the labels "dictatorship" and "autocracy" does not follow typologies common in political science. Instead, he uses the terms to refer to any system of unelected government that relies on violent suppression of its opposition (pp. 16–17). This approach allows Bösch to avoid unnecessary distraction by theoretical differences between "monarchies," "people's republics," and military juntas.

While Bösch clearly focuses on the pro-Western and anti-communist regimes of the Cold War, two chapters of his book are also dedicated to the FRG's changing relations with the Warsaw Pact. Here, the author is able to enrich the state of research on this already thoroughly examined topic. However, since the changes in Bonn's *Ostpolitik* have always been central in the historiography of the FRG, he might well have shortened some of his detailed descriptions that somewhat distract from the main and innovative contribution of his study, which is shedding light on the FRG's changing image and treatment of *allied* regimes.

Despite its richness of detail and its leaps from one Cold War theater to another, the book manages to retain a comprehensible and accessible style. Defining his approach, the author argues for a broad interpretation of the word *deal* as he seeks to address various forms of active cooperation, instead of narrowing them down to written contracts and formal diplomatic negotiations. This consequently leads him to assess that not only diplomats, entrepreneurs, and government representatives, but also human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, had to make deals with dictatorships as they attempted to help incarcerated dissidents or simply gather information on the situation in a specific country. Societal groups, from critical and uncritical journalists to trade unionists and the activists of the "New Left," all had to engage with the authoritarian systems to further their goals, rendering the practice of *dealing* with dictatorships morally ambiguous.

Bösch paints a picture of the FRG that is at odds with the official rhetoric of German foreign policy. He addresses an oft-levied charge: Germany's state and commercial representatives have cultivated and maintained close relations with various dictatorships and authoritarian regimes since the 1950s primarily for economic reasons, while violations of human rights in those countries were often of little concern. Unsurprisingly, anti-communism and business interests served to legitimize often deeply interwoven

economic, political, and military contacts, from government guarantees for investments to prolific arms sales.

Competition with East Germany for international attention drove Bonn to try to humor autocrats in the Global South. At the same time, more baroque heads of state such as the Shah of Iran or Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia gave Bonn an opportunity to perform its own sovereignty and respectability through pompous state visits. Such visits may not always have had tangible results but were of high symbolic importance to the new Germany, which was still being avoided by democratic heads of state in the post-war years (pp. 21–27). Bösch illustrates the wide-ranging measures German authorities would take in order to remain on favorable terms with tyrannical “friends.” Some sections on the political culture of the Adenauer-era make the FRG’s continuity with Germany’s totalitarian past obvious to an unsettling degree. Government officials with Nazi pasts and authoritarian impulses went to great lengths to quell domestic protests against allied heads of state, monitor and intimidate critical media reports, and even prosecute cartoonists. Additionally, the FRG’s intelligence services surveilled foreign students and dissidents and closely cooperated with their colleagues at, for example, Iran’s SAVAK secret police.

Former Nazi diplomats were content to continue their careers in the German embassies in right-wing authoritarian ruled states, where they showed great sympathy as well as ideological and material support for their repressive host governments. In this context, Bösch demonstrates that the Nazi past was not a liability for the FRG’s reputation everywhere, as it could count on sympathy among the elites of some authoritarian-ruled countries like Francoist Spain or Salazar’s Portugal *because* of its past. Close cooperation in military affairs and the rhetoric of occidental Christian brotherhood between Bonn, Madrid, and Lisbon were, however, not without risk from a public-relations perspective. Memories of Germany’s role in the Spanish Civil War were still present throughout Europe and North America. Despite the risk, Bösch identifies a tendency to sympathize with the catholic Iberian regimes especially among the ranks of the governing CDU/CSU – a certain ideological affinity that has recently been more closely analyzed by Fabio Wolkenstein’s 2022 study on the intellectual history of Europe’s Christian Democratic parties.²

Cultural relativism led the FRG’s diplomats to view many countries as unfit for democracy and in need of an authoritarian transition period, while an opportunistic interpretation of Germany’s own history supported the idea that because of its past, Germany was not entitled to criticize human rights abuses in other countries – a reverse application of the normative historical dimension often present in contemporary German political discourse.

Balancing out his meticulous chronicle of Bonn’s “pragmatic” policies towards repressive torture states, Bösch also brings to light a rarely appreciated history of broad public solidarity with the victims of various dictatorships. This was expressed through

² Fabio Wolkenstein, *Die dunkle Seite der Christdemokratie: Geschichte einer autoritären Versuchung* (München: C.H. Beck, 2022).

demonstrations, petitions, and the activities of labor unions, Lutheran and Catholic congregations, the media, and emerging civil society organizations. Pioneering in the research of the history of Amnesty International, he devotes an entire chapter to Amnesty's German section, for the first time accessing its German archive.

The outrage of large sections of the public at the military coups in Greece (1967) and Chile (1973) and the crimes of the subsequent regimes, as well as the more conciliatory position of certain conservative politicians, are still relatively well-remembered in German public consciousness. However, Bösch also reconstructs the much less remembered yet widespread public support for dissidents abducted from German soil by the mostly "forgotten" South Korean military-dictatorship (pp. 207–215). In general, with regard to the changes in the public's attitude towards human rights, Bösch summarizes: "Not the extent of the murder and torture of opposition members determined the German commitment, but the political, economic, and cultural proximity of the torturing state to the Federal Republic" (pp. 495–496). In this sense, the presence of Greek *Gastarbeiter* workers and the perceived "Europeanness" of Chile helped to humanize the victims of those regimes' oppression and mobilize protests in Germany.

Bösch makes an almost opposite observation about Africa. Because of a lack of interest and insight into the conflicts of that continent, no broad protest campaigns were mounted against African regimes except for the issue of Apartheid. Bonn did not shy away from courting the likes of Idi Amin or Jean Bédel Bokassa and engaged in especially close political and economic relations with Zaire's kleptocratic ruler of three decades, Mobutu. The key position of Mobutu's "stable" anti-communist regime in the African state system and the enormous possibilities of the country's resources assured that he would be both a welcome guest and an economic as well as a military partner for Germany. Here, as in other cases, Bösch identifies a special role of the federal state of Bavaria and its governing party, the CSU, which engaged in a type of independent foreign policy. The CSU established uniquely close contacts to Mobutu, Pinochet and other strong men because of its strong ties to industrial circles as well as a certain ideological affinity with right-wing authoritarianism (pp. 324–335).

Two case studies of non-allied regimes serve as an interesting contrast to the clearly pro-western ones in places like Spain and Chile. West Germany's entanglement with Gaddafi's Libya is one example of an ambivalent relationship with a "difficult" regional actor whose unpredictable personality and willingness to extort concessions through his cooperation with terrorists forced concessions from Bonn. Secondly, the thaw in relations with Beijing reveals an odd reversal of previous patterns: while some of the most conservative politicians were the first to embrace "Red China" as an economic partner and largely ignored human rights issues, activists of the "New Left" largely left their admiration for Maoism behind and for the first time mobilized against a communist country because of its occupation of Tibet (pp. 434–443).

Bösch's study concludes with an overview of the post-1989 changes in Germany's perceptions of and interactions with autocracies. Here he points to the gradual establishment of hybrid regimes like that of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey that are seen in

a different light than the more “obvious” military regimes of the past. Another important development is the increased presence of migrants in Germany. While, for example, Chileans in 1970s West Germany were almost exclusively refugees and émigrés who had fled Pinochet, nowadays some segments of migrant communities are sympathetic to the regimes in their countries of origin, like those in Turkey or Russia. The desire to limit immigration, especially after 2015, became another catalyst for controversial deals with strongmen in the Merkel-era (pp. 470–478).

Deals with Dictatorships is understandably far from exhaustive – populous authoritarian-ruled states like Suharto’s Indonesia, Pakistan, Turkey, and Thailand are hardly mentioned, despite their amicable relations with Bonn. Nevertheless, the monograph sets the standard for future research and can serve as an invitation for in-depth case studies and comparative approaches. The latter seem like an especially promising endeavor.

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doi: 10.14712/23363231.2025.5