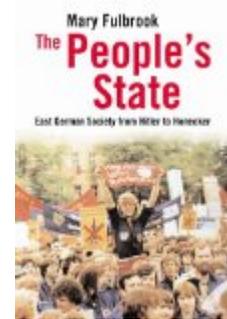


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mary Fulbrook. *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. 352 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-10884-2.

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## What's in a Name?

I have been thinking of William Shakespeare much of late—not an unlikely intellectual exercise for an historian of the GDR, where the English bard was one of the few western poets widely read, and whose stories even became classic DEFA films. But my ruminations have not been the timeless existentialist question, to paraphrase Hamlet, about whether it was worth it all for the socialist state to try and “be” for nearly a half century. Rather, I have been thinking of names, as in Juliet’s claim that “That which we call a rose / By any other word would smell as sweet” (*Romeo and Juliet* [II, ii, 1-2]). I must disagree. For the sake of historical accuracy, we less poetically inclined scribes of human experience insist on a precise nomenclature. Words ascribe meaning, interpretation, viewpoint. I maintain that there is much in a name, indeed everything.

I have been thinking of Shakespeare and names because I have just finished Mary Fulbrook’s new social history of the GDR, a sweeping work of awe-inspiring objectives and scope as engaging and informative as it is frustrating and, at times, problematic. Those contradictory tendencies are evident even before the reader opens the book. The title, *The People’s State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker*, offers a political and geographic impossibility: East German society cannot be described “from Hitler,” since the place loosely termed “East Germany” did not have a society during Hitler’s reign or even in the first weeks after his death. The phrase “people’s state” suggests an ironic interpretation of the way in which the German Democratic Republic was not a democracy, but it also alludes to the fact that,

in the end, the people brought down their regime. My ambivalence about the title has me asking the rhetorical question: Would she have dared write a book entitled *West German Society from Hitler to Kohl* (or Schröder or Merkel)? I know the answer, of course. Such a title would imply that the Federal Republic was a direct heir of Nazi Germany. Despite any continuities and comparisons that can be and have been made between certain aspects of the two societies, the title would be inflammatory and oversimplifying. Still, a book that promises a comprehensive account of life in the Soviet Zone and GDR is long overdue, and the title is catchy. Moreover, Fulbrook has always been a historian who tackles large projects of the kind that enrich our historical understanding and set the tone for key historiographical debates. So in opening the book, I file away a mental note not to assume that the name of the book is reflective of the content. It turns out that I will be wrong, and indeed will spend days poring over the meanings of the ambiguous names that Fulbrook assigns to phenomena and agents. But, like the title, these appellations are at once troublesome and thought-provoking, so that the reader will not be entirely disappointed in the overall result, even as he or she stumbles over the occasional roadblocks Fulbrook has (consciously? ) erected.

Fulbrook joins an increasing number of historians—some of them her students—who have rejected a narrow historiographical interpretation of the GDR as a totalitarian culture in favor of a more nuanced view of the entire society. Fulbrook has coined a few new phrases to describe this broader view of a half-century of East

German history; of these names, “participatory dictatorship” (p. 12) is one that positions her to argue against the nearly household phrase (in historians’ households, anyway) of *durchherrschte Gesellschaft* and its variations of omnipresent totalitarianism. The idea behind a participatory dictatorship is not novel to scholars who have investigated societies with any degree of repression: at all levels of society people in the GDR influenced their own lives, and for sincere, questionable or nefarious reasons worked with and within the system. Fulbrook does not cite Michel Foucault, one of the first theorists to articulate notions of shared power, or any of the numerous scholars who have long accepted the premise that any government—democratic, dictatorial, colonial—does not and cannot hold all the power in a zero-sum equation. But her work here draws on these long-accepted ideas, thus heeding Alf Lüdtke’s 1998 advice to look beyond the dictatorship model that initially characterized early scholarship on Nazi Germany.[1] Fulbrook emphasizes in an endnote that it should be “blindingly obvious” that to look exclusively at “repression and brutality, opposition and the fight for freedom” in any society “ultimately distorts rather than clarifies the picture” (p. 300, n.9). But it has not been “blindingly obvious”—if so, numerous papers, articles, dissertations and manuscripts written outside of the “dictatorship literature” model over the past years would be more widely read and cited. So although one cannot credit Fulbrook with inventing the concept that even citizens of a repressive society have some degree of agency, it is nonetheless the case that if historians have not yet read Foucault or other theorists on power, then they are not likely to start now. And Fulbrook’s is a useful definition of power relationships in the GDR that will bring us closer to understanding how East Germans experienced their state.

But Fulbrook is not entirely sure of herself in making this claim, or comfortable with her own definitions. It is clear from her own explanations of why she began writing this book—in order to explain how former GDR citizens could believe they lived a normal life in that society (p. viii)—that she is struggling against dictatorship-style definitions of the GDR that she herself at one point accepted (see, for instance, her book *Anatomy of a Dictatorship* (1995; new ed., 1998). She puts quotation marks around the word “normal” and its linguistic variants, and usually writes about former East Germans “feeling” that they were living a “normal” life or receiving benefits from the system—as if it might be possible that these people were and are deceiving themselves about their level of contentment (pp. 13, 20, 29). How does a historian know

how people felt, and whose definition of normal is she using? Putting quotation marks around a word does not exempt an author from defining a concept so central to a book’s central questions. It would be the ultimate irony if Fulbrook were accusing the former citizens of a socialist country of suffering from false consciousness. To compound such rhetorical difficulties, Fulbrook occasionally falls into sarcastic remarks and unhelpful stereotypes, as when she mentions twice the East German desire for bananas in discussions of consumer culture—a tired icon that has made East Germans the butt of many a joke (a postcard is available at most tourist shops in Berlin showing an East German peeling a cucumber with the statement, “My first banana!”) and obscures the real financial and social issues fostered by an ineffective planned central economy. Further examples of her explanations are confusing, as when she notes in photo number nineteen that the award “Best quality worker [in the masculine gender] in the socialist competition” (*bester Qualitätsarbeiter*) that the phrasing is “somewhat sexist.” Many GDR women began to eliminate the feminine ending on nouns as a way of obscuring obvious gender markers—indeed, many eastern German feminists continue this practice today. Is she accusing these women and men of sexist practices, when they themselves believe(d) them to be emancipatory?

Other analyses of the interactions of GDR government and society are difficult to interpret because of the way Fulbrook frames the issues. For instance, a chapter dramatically entitled “Matters of Life and Death” is actually an account of social welfare issues. Here, Fulbrook alternates between sharp attacks on the East German government for not taking care of its citizens’ health and musings about the analogous nature of capitalist governments’ lack of concern for the general populace’s well-being—especially as regards the tobacco industry in the West. Her key examples for the GDR case, however, do little to prove her argument about the “vulnerable and the victims” in that society (p. 114). First, her criticism of the GDR medical establishment (and by extension, the state) as refusing to classify alcoholism as the result of social problems, but rather seeing it as a medical condition or a moral weakness, is hardly an issue unique to that socialist country. Identical notions about alcoholism pervade western society—including in Great Britain and the United States. The reader might not notice her failure to contextualize alcoholism in a broader, global sense had she not added the mocking Panglossian phrase that this ostensible misdiagnosis of alcoholism occurred “in the GDR, the best of all possible worlds” (p. 105). The

section on alcohol consumption and its role in citizens' lives—causing workers to strike if the quality of the beer was not good enough, for instance—is enlightening when she stays in the realm of evidence and analysis. Her assumptions about what constitutes alcoholism—a very loaded term in itself—and its causes, however, may be accepted in many western medical and social policy circles, but certainly not in all. Fulbrook's naming of a practice and her implied solutions allow her to slip back into a genre of western history that passes moral judgment on the GDR state without necessarily bringing us closer to an understanding of that society.

Then, Fulbrook's jump in a subsequent paragraph from alcoholism to rates of suicide as "even more problematic" (of, I suppose, the state of social problems in the GDR) demonstrates more of the indecisiveness in her scholarship (p. 106). Fulbrook does not present enough supporting evidence to assert that suicide is "a very sensitive barometer of social conditions and unbearable pressures," and her citation of Émile Durkheim's revolutionary work is only the beginning of a large literature on the subject about why people take their lives. Her theories about the higher rates of suicide during and after some political upheavals are fascinating and worthy of further historical analysis. But correlation does not imply causation, not even when an historian tries to qualify a discussion by stating, with no supporting evidence, that "[n]ot all suicide statistics are politically relevant, but some clearly are, however small a minority this may be" (p. 108). Her claims that lower numbers of recorded suicides suggest a "more hopeful" attitude about the future during the Gorbachev era definitively take this complicated subject out of the realm of medical, psychological, sociological and even historical analysis. They leave the very concept of suicide ill-defined, and plant her arguments firmly in the realm of politically based speculation—the very school of thought Fulbrook is fighting against. She relents in the final paragraph, speculating that there should be a "plague on both their [communist and capitalist regimes'] houses" for each government's lack of response to health problems. This concluding sentence sums up one of Fulbrook's most interesting points, one she addresses often but peripherally: many of the GDR's ills resemble the same challenges and failings of modern, western, industrialized society. But it is a contention that she embraces boldly at some points, only to abandon it at others.

Her conclusion presents a decision to prioritize linguistic cleverness over historical clarity. The title, "Conclusion: From Nazis to Ossi?" is so burdened by a west-

ern political connotation that it is difficult to assess her final words. The title refers back to her book title in a satisfying closing of a rhetorical circle, but does little to flesh out her actual argument about whether and how East Germans lived normal lives. After Fulbrook's initial and vehement rejection of the dictatorship model to understand the GDR, it is curious that she comes back to a dictatorship comparison. The overall thesis of her closing argument is a surprisingly (blindingly obvious) observation that she had already covered in her opening pages: "The GDR was a very different kind of dictatorship" than that of Nazi Germany (p. 291). The use of the characterization *Ossi* in the chapter title to indicate that East Germans had developed their own culture and society, related to but separate from that of the Federal Republic, is one that can be better made than through the use of a vague term to describe seventeen million people. When used by people in the West, especially western Germany, *Ossi* is too often pejorative, even if the term has at times been co-opted by eastern Germans as a badge of honor (the same goes for the term *Wessi* to designate western Germans). In the end, the reader is left with the question of what Fulbrook's argument ultimately is. At the end of a book that covers most aspects of GDR society, the statement that "the experience of a degree of freedom, constructive participation in, and facilitation by, the socialist project, was authentically possible at the very same time as the knowledge of outer political constraints" (p. 298). She claims that "[t]his complexity [is] difficult to grasp and express," but it is not so difficult to comprehend that under any government citizens have some degree of freedom to act but also face some degree of possible retribution. In the GDR, governmental punishment could be and was often brutal, but Fulbrook makes clear throughout her book that it was not always so for everyone, and the potential violence of the regime did not affect many—even most—East Germans' sense of belonging to a community that they helped construct and could influence.

In the final analysis, Fulbrook declines to answer the question of whether and how former GDR citizens believed themselves to have normal lives. She hedges instead, closing on the note that a historiographical recognition that the GDR's "repressive structures" does not take away from eastern Germans' "genuine nostalgia for lived experiences" (p. 298). Her choice of words again betrays her ambivalence. Is there such a thing as artificial nostalgia? More important, her use of the term nostalgia will remind most historians (and Germans, from either side of the former Wall) of *Ostalgie*, a derisive word

play on East (*Ost*) and nostalgia (*Nostalgie*). *Ostalgie* connotes a specific naïve and misplaced nostalgia by eastern Germans for their former lifestyle, a longing for an idealized paradise of social equality that never existed. Yet Fulbrook has shown throughout the book that the polar opposite of *Ostalgie*—western scholars’ oversimplified view of a nightmarish, Orwellian society peopled with gray, downtrodden, would-be capitalists with no agency—is also a dystopia that was not the product of accurate historical investigation. (The scholar who successfully names that phenomenon will certainly wield a rhetorical tool of great value to the literature on GDR history.)

This very ambivalence about how to view the GDR accurately makes this book so compelling. Its broad range of topics offers both the senior scholar and the advanced undergraduate of German history much to ponder and struggle with. Fulbrook’s decision to begin at the level of East Germans themselves allows the reader to understand the practical aspects of state policies and keeps the people of the GDR front and center of her narrative. Thus her progression from various everyday social activities, such as work and leisure, to the descriptions of GDR politicians’ beliefs and lifestyles, is a refreshing bottom-up approach to understanding the intricacies of East German society. She is meticulous in her research here. For example, her attention to policies regarding the Sorb ethnic minority is a necessary reminder of the heterogeneity of East German citizenry (pp. 265-266). When she returns to the question of traditional power relations, however, her insistence that her book “is not a political tract” rings somewhat hollow (p. x). She is a bit too indignant in her view that political leaders lived in walled-off communities where they “did not even need to mow their own lawns,” a situation she believes prevented residents there from forming potentially dangerous friendships (pp. 181-182). Such privileged living arrangements seem less a result of a ruling party trying to prevent “fraction-building” and more an expression of the perks and even protections that modern states and societies accord those citizens of any country wealthy enough to afford a gated community of whatever kind. Certainly she is right about the hypocritical nature of a supposed classless society that was continued to arrange itself along class lines, but that news was a discussion point even for East German citizens long before the opening of German-German borders. It is more interesting as yet another example of her peripheral argument that government and society in the GDR held many similarities to other industrialized countries. This sort of

passage is exactly the kind that will provide lively discussions among scholars and students alike, and allows the reader to ponder questions that have not been addressed elsewhere—what happens when people do not all mow their lawns on Saturday mornings? The reader may not agree with Fulbrook’s assumptions, but much here will initiate exciting new avenues of historical investigation. Placed alongside other social histories of the GDR, *The People’s State* is as much a contribution for its author’s own coming to terms with a more nuanced historiography as it is for Fulbrook’s impressive foray into a comprehensive account of East German life.

Still, the book will not be an easy one for any members of her intended audiences to use. Some of the citations make it a difficult secondary source research tool for the instructor or student. For instance, the endnote texts do not always correspond to the page they are supposed to reference, and a few of Fulbrook’s interesting details go uncited, such as the GDR’s alleged coffee-for-arms deals with countries such as Ethiopia, Angola, Vietnam, Laos and the Philippines (p. 282). Many references send readers to either her own work on the subject, or only one secondary source whose arguments she recapitulates with little new analysis. In one instance, she lists Norman Naimark’s book on the Soviet Zone “particularly” for information about the rapes during the Soviet occupation years of German women by soldiers, while Atina Grossman’s useful writings and presentations on the subject go unmentioned (p. 301, n. 8). Intriguingly, some endnotes cite only her own students’ work, and then with shining praise, such as the “rich material” about sports in the GDR in Daniel Wilton’s University College London Ph. D. thesis (p. 306, n. 53). Wilton’s work on expressions of popular opinion via East German sport and music is an interesting source for Fulbrook’s larger point about citizens’ participation in sports clubs, but other work has been done in the field that readers should be made aware of, including by Molly Wilkinson Johnson.[2] It is also difficult to discuss the role of sports in the GDR without at least cursory mention of the massive doping program for major athletes, as discussed in the rather sensationalist revelations by Steven Ungerleider in his book *Faust’s Gold: Inside the East German Doping Machine* (2001). Finally, scholars trying to employ Fulbrook’s archival sources will face the small task of actually identifying and locating the holdings. Nowhere is a list of archives cited; she does not include their corresponding abbreviations and their present locations, her one note about the ZIJ moving from Leipzig to Berlin notwithstanding (p. 330). Her desire to keep her select

bibliography at a manageable size does not justify this omission. Readers unfamiliar with the ZIJ should know that she is referring to the former Zentralinstitut für Jugendforschung. Most seasoned German historians will recognize the SAPMO-BA and perhaps even the DA abbreviations; if not, take heart. The internet can fill in those gaps, although I question why it should have to do so.

*The People's State* will undoubtedly become a much-read book for scholars at all levels of German history. Its sheer scope takes the historiography down a path of social history scholars will need to follow further as we gain distance and perspective on the GDR. It is not an easy book, leaving the reader with more new questions than answers, even regarding Fulbrook's own conclusions. But Fulbrook did not give herself a simple task. If, after reading the book, the fundamental question of "what was the GDR" remains unanswered—unnamed—

then it is only fair to the author and the historiographical literature that we acknowledge the monumental task she has undertaken, which opens up the possibility of further meaningful dialogue about the complexities of GDR state and society.

#### Notes

[1]. Alf Lüdtke, "La République démocratique allemande comme histoire. Réflexions historiographiques," *Annales, histoire, sciences sociales* 53 (1998), p. 5.

[2]. For example, Molly Wilkinson Johnson, "Sports, Mass Mobilization, and the Everyday Culture of Socialism in East Germany" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2003); "Reach Out to Each Other in Brotherhood': History and Identity at the 1956 German Gymnastics and Sports Festival in Leipzig," paper presented at American Historical Association Annual Convention, San Francisco, California, January 2002.

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