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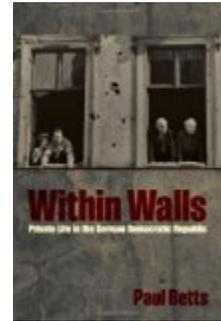
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Paul Betts. *Within Walls: Private Life in the German Democratic Republic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. xi + 321 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-920884-5.

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All in the Family

In her riveting memoir of growing up in the GDR, Marion Brasch recounts that her father reported her brother (the soon-to-be-famous) Thomas Brasch to the Socialist Unity Party (SED) after Thomas distributed leaflets against the Warsaw Pact's invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. The harrowing conflict between a rigid, dedicated communist father and a rebellious, idiosyncratic son is the central, but far from only, example in this moving narrative of the unhappy interplay between ideological commitment to a controlling state and the psychological dynamics of a dysfunctional family. Brasch lays bare the story of a socially isolated and gradually disintegrating family whose members continued to believe in the promise of communal society even as some of them defiantly rejected real, existing socialism.[1]

The Brasch narrative encapsulates an extreme instance of the paradoxes that entangled the relationship between the private lives of East Germans and the public claims of the East German party/state. Paul Betts's highly original study of the clash, divergence, and coexistence of public and private, state and individual, political and personal in East Germany explores and analyzes these apparent contradictions across a variety of domains and the span of the GDR's existence.

The socialist contradiction in relations between the private and public arose out of the gap between state socialism's promise (or threat—depending on one's point of view) to “communalize the private” and its failure to do that (p. 3). The private sphere continued to function

essentially as under capitalism, a fundamental inconsistency between intent and reality in East German socialism. Yet, as Betts reminds us in vivid chapters on the Stasi's informant system and on harassment of Christians, the state constantly violated privacy. Indeed, it heavily intervened in the private sphere but mainly in the form of suppression, blackmail, and, above all, surveillance. Rather than make the private social, the SED undermined private integrity to further its main priority: securing the public realm. Ironically, the “sham existence” of the public sphere, Betts concludes, had the effect on East Germans of investing the basically intact private sphere with more reality than the public arena and encouraging them to be active in the realm of private life. “Private life—generally associated with liberal society—assumed,” he argues, “its most political power and personal value under authoritarian regimes” (p. 3). This “power” emerged in the early 1970s. With shorter workdays as well as more and better (if still very limited) consumer choices, East Germans of the early Honecker era could hope to create a socialist good life—in private.

In arguing that a socialist private sphere came into its own in the Honecker years, Betts's interpretation overlaps heavily with the concept of the “niche society” put forward by Günter Gaus. Betts qualifies Gaus's theory, however. The niche society, he argues, represented neither an absolute nor an apolitical retreat into private life. Rather, it represented a revised social contract between party and citizen: the SED recognized the legitimacy of the private sphere, while (many) individual citizens rec-

ognized the legitimacy of socialist rights. In thousands of civil suits and hundreds of thousands of letters of complaint, East Germans actively deployed the language of socialist rights in order to defend and even expand their private space. They appealed to the state to enforce socialist justice and, thus, the state came to act as “both the foe and the guardian of the private sphere.” The state “listened in” on private citizens but also “listened to” them as long as citizens spoke as individuals, not organized interests, and used official and largely unpublicized channels of complaint (p. 15).

Betts develops and supports this elegant thesis in seven topical chapters that also track the emergence of a socialist private sphere over time. He does not claim to cover all aspects of private life in the GDR but describes his study as “experimental in theme and approach” (p. 16). His primary sources are drawn from a range of state and non-state archives; notes refer mainly to state-generated documents but also to private/personal papers. He took good advantage of working on a topic in contemporary history: he conducted interviews with ten people; Angela Brock conducted twenty additional interviews; and he received thirty written responses to a questionnaire about private life.

As Betts generously acknowledges in the text and endnotes, four of his topics have been well covered in the secondary literature on the GDR that has poured forth since 1990: Stasi monitoring of people’s intimate lives; state harassment of committed Christians and the emergence of a Christian subculture; the state regulation and popular practice of marital dissolution; and the ever-expanding system of petitions of complaint that the state allowed and, from the 1960s, regularized and even touted. Betts’s contribution to the literature is to highlight privacy issues and to explore the complex ways in which both state authorities and ordinary individuals refined and even redefined their understanding of private rights and individual needs in response to state intrusion into private affairs, on one side, and people’s efforts to evade intrusion, on the other. The theme of Stasi spying brings forth, not surprisingly, the most bizarre evidence of the entanglement of private and state interests, individualistic behavior and state control. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Stasi devoted considerable resources to the study of individual, especially behavioral, psychology in order to help it recruit and train effective unofficial collaborators in its effort to shore up a collectivist state. Its activities had chilling consequences and yet also unintended ones. Denunciation, Betts argues, offered a peculiar type of agency to individuals who had scores to settle

and could also use their information to clinch private bargains with the Stasi.[2] The aim of breaking up families, he suggests, often backfired: some families drew closer together (although the case of the Brasch family suggests that denunciation could set off powerfully disruptive reverberations).

Betts enters considerably less well-charted waters in his very fine chapters on civil disputes between citizens; interior design; and the photography of domestic life. In his most social-historical chapter, Betts makes a convincing argument that East Berliners had a highly developed sense of self, privacy, and personal integrity, on the one hand, and harbored strong convictions about the state’s willingness to help them protect their private rights, on the other. The evidence consists of court cases brought by Berliners concerning small property claims, violations of noise ordinances in residential housing, and, especially fascinating and unexpected, insults and defamation.[3] The chapter “Picturing Privacy,” showcases Betts’s skills as a cultural historian. Here, he looks at the evolving official, popular, and artistic sense of the family and individual through the eyes of photographers, both state-sanctioned and (semi-)dissident and/or avant garde, by analyzing the portrayal of individuals and families in public/outdoor spaces as well as in the home.[4] Over time, the SED accepted private life as a “major theme of East German art” as the party came to recognize the private sphere as “a—if not perhaps the—key site for the development of the socialist personality” (p. 207).

His chapter on interior design applies cultural and discourse analysis to the domestic material culture of the GDR and, especially, the shift from the “socialist Biedermeier” of the early 1950s to the “socialist modern” that emerged in the 1960s. The early era was characterized by Stalin-inspired attacks on bourgeois formalism as well as by a clear empathy for the classically bourgeois conception of the home as a “repose” free of “technology, production, and rationalization” (p. 133). The socialist modern was, in contrast, highly influenced by functionalism and characterized by explicit incorporation of technology and rationalization into the home. In neither era did designers conceive of an interior that was truly socialized—not even in the form of communal living/dining areas combined with private sleeping quarters—but, Betts argues, the socialist modern was more, and quite openly, predicated on satisfying private needs and desires. Betts follows the various strands that contributed to this shift—Soviet influences, economic exigencies, SED leaders’ petite-bourgeois idea of the socialist home, consumer tastes elicited through market re-

search, the needs of employed wives/mothers, and competition with Western trends. In a discerning comparative aside, he notes that “both Germanies shared a common perception about the elective affinity of traditional family and domestic modernity as a key hallmark of post-fascist culture” (p. 135). Thus, he suggests that the significance and form of private life in East Germany were influenced both by German history and a wider postwar elevation of the family and the modern, well-outfitted, comfortable private space of the home.

Betts’s beautifully written book both complicates and challenges Hannah Arendt’s argument that “totalitarian domination ... destroys private life as well [as the public realm]” (p. 7). As he demonstrates so well, destruction did not occur in the most obvious way suggested by Arendt’s words: private life did not wither away. In fact, it took on great importance for East Germans. Yet the exigencies of real, existing socialism certainly distorted and often poisoned private life, even when the state did not actively use informants to exploit intimate tensions. The lack of a civil society closed off a potential escape from the inevitable stresses, diverse dissatisfactions, and boring interludes of private life. The extent, rhetoric, and type of disputes between neighbors, spouses, and other constellations of individuals or families were shaped, Betts suggests, in interaction with the socialist state *and* the absent public sphere. Private disputes about “honor,” petty property, and the everyday disturbances of urban living took on considerable significance and were taken directly to the party/state and its institutions for adjudication and satisfaction.

More subtly, the yawning gap between lofty ideals and constrained reality gave a characteristically socialist bent to generational and marital struggles inside the family—as suggested not only by Brasch’s family narrative but also by Maxim Leo’s memoir and Eugen Ruge’s outstanding autobiographical novel about his commu-

nist family.[5] Not only political disappointment but also psychological pain was denied and repressed. Thus, life “within walls” became unsatisfying even for many of socialism’s most committed advocates—and, especially, for their children and grandchildren. Betts offers a convincing interpretation of how these and other private concerns—from the material to the spiritual, from the petty to the profound—gradually undermined the SED’s mission of public control and so contributed to the collapse of communism in 1989.

Notes

[1]. Marion Brasch, *Ab jetzt ist Ruhe. Roman meiner fabelhaften Familie* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2012).

[2]. The direct consequences of denunciation and, above all, its ripple and boomerang effects were, of course, much more contained and infinitely less deadly than in the USSR during the Terror. See, e.g., Wendy Goldman, *Inventing the Enemy: Denunciation and Terror in Stalin’s Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[3]. Here he builds on the important work of the legal historian Inga Markovits. See, especially, Inga Markovits, *Justice in Lüritz: Experiencing Socialist Law in East Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[4]. A recently published book of “everyday” photography demonstrates some of the shift in topic and perspective that Betts analyzes: Manfred Beier, *Alltag in der DDR: So haben wir gelebt*, ed. Nils Beier (Cologne: Fackelträger, 2010).

[5]. Maxim Leo, *Haltet euer Herz bereit: Eine ostdeutsche Familiengeschichte* (Munich: Heyne 2011); Eugen Ruge, *In Zeiten des abnehmenden Lichts: Roman einer Familie* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2011).

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