H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Peter Barker, Marc-Dietrich Ohse, Dennis Tate, eds..** *Views from Abroad: Die DDR aus britischer Perspektive.* Bielefeld: WBV, W. Bertelsmann Verlag, 2007. 284 pp. EUR 19.90, paper, ISBN 978-3-7639-3569-7.


**Reviewed by** Patrick Salmon

**Published on** H-German (August, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Susan R. Boettcher

This collection of twenty papers is based on a conference held at the University of Reading in July 2006. Two previous academic conferences had focused mainly on bilateral relations between the United Kingdom and the GDR; this one was more wide-ranging and more interdisciplinary. After three scene-setting chapters labeled "Controversies," the book is divided into two parts: "History and Politics" and "Literature and Film." Despite the range of theme and content, the chapters hold together remarkably well. The collection is genuinely interdisciplinary and the various contributions offer a nuanced picture of a society more complex and diverse than its grey exterior image often suggested.

In the first section, pioneer GDR scholar David Childs recounts the obstacles that faced research on the GDR in the United Kingdom, quoting with justified pride the Stasi's reports on his own political unreliability. Mary Fulbrook addresses what it meant for people's lives and personalities to live in a regime that was undoubtedly repressive, yet inevitably relied on a measure of consent. She goes on to ask why historians who try to study such ambivalences are sometimes accused of sympathy with the regime, when historians asking similar questions about the National Socialist era are spared similar reproaches. Focusing more on the continuities between the DDR and the new Germany, Dennis Tate discusses the "normalization" of autobiographical literature from the mid-1990s onwards, suggesting that the *Literaturstreit* of the immediate post-*Wende* period (surrounding such works as Christa Wolf's *Was bleibt* [1990]) was a temporary distortion of a tradition of critical self-analysis dating back to the 1960s that has come to inform and invigorate contemporary German literature.

In the "History and Politics section," two chapters focus on the immediate postwar period. Andrew Beattie has studied British reporting on the "special" camps set up in the Soviet occupation zone immediately after the end of the war, often on the sites of former Nazi concentration camps. British knowledge of the harsh conditions was combined with an awareness of their purpose:

not so much denazification, as was claimed, as to lock up and intimidate "potential opponents of any Soviet-controlled government" (p. 71). Yet, with all their brutalities, a qualitative difference of nature and purpose remained between the Soviet camps and the extermination camps of their Nazi predecessors. Jessica Reinisch continues the theme of denazification with an analysis of the ways in which initially harsh policies in the public health sector had to be modified in the face of personnel shortages and the ravages of epidemic diseases such as typhus. The distinction between "active" and "nominal" Nazis became blurred, while the forced relocation of doctors from the more favored south of the country to its less attractive north inadvertently helped to rehabilitate ex-Nazi doctors, who found it easy to conceal their backgrounds and open new private practices with no questions asked.

In the first of the chapters devoted to East Germany proper, Mark Allinson cuts through the rhetoric of Soviet-style economic planning with a withering analysis of the hapless attempts of the SED Politburo in 1977 to make the plan fit the intractable economic climate of the first oil price shock. Mike Dennis returns to the micro-level with a study of the Vietnamese workers who arrived in large numbers in the GDR in the 1980s, competing with natives for scarce goods and housing and disturbing the authorities with their attachment to private enterprise: queues of GDR citizens lined up to buy the cheap clothing they ran up in improvised sweatshops. A more significant threat to conformity is discussed by Jeannette Madarász, who traces the emergence of independent women's groups during the Honecker era. Early hopes of greater emancipation through official channels were stifled by the growing conformism of the 1970s. "Alternative–thinking" women who began to organize themselves tentatively in the early 1980s were often highly educated, including medical professionals, church members, and artists. Focusing first on "peace," they moved on to other causes such as the environment, feminism, and female homosexuality--all highly unwelcome to the regime. Products and in many respects beneficiaries of the GDR, they nevertheless demanded more than its rigid system was prepared to concede. Peter Barker follows the transition of the Sorb community of the Domowina in 1989-90 and shows how, while the attempt to establish a separate federal state of Lausitz failed, the Domowina was democratized and Sorb minority rights were preserved and extended. Anna Saunders examines the changing identities of East German youth over the same period. She describes the brief period when the regime was beginning to crumble, but the Wall had not yet fallen, as one in which young people, perhaps for the first time, developed a genuine GDR patriotism based on the possibility of a democratic East German state. It did not survive long, as the people of the GDR succumbed to the blandishments of western capitalism and struggled, in early 1990, with the increasing harshness of daily life. Falling back on their immediate circles of family and friends, members of this generation did not develop any great affection for the new Germany, but continued to look back with pride to the decisive role played by East Germans in the autumn of 1989.

The two chapters on bilateral relations between the United Kingdom and the GDR, by Marianne Howarth on the one hand and Stefan Berger and Norman LaPorte on the other, cover virtually the whole of the period, from 1973 to 1990, in which diplomatic relations existed between the two countries. The underlying theme of both chapters is disappointed expectations. Given the ideological divide and the need to take account of the interests of Britain's West German ally, problems were bound to arise. Early hopes of improved economic and cultural contacts were frustrated: the GDR regime was nervous of anything resembling cultural propaganda and delayed negotiations for a cultural agreement until 1975, by which time the British had lost interest. Some improvement came with the conclusion of a con-

sular agreement and the visit of Labour Party general secretary Ron Hayward, but British diplomats remained skeptical of the GDR's humanitarian record. The early 1980s saw a surprising improvement in bilateral relations as the GDR came to regard the United Kingdom's more forthcoming policy towards the eastern bloc, personified by foreign secretary Sir Geoffrey Howe, as a counterweight to the hardline approach of the Ronald Reagan administration. This tendency reached a high point with Howe's visit to East Berlin--the first by a British foreign secretary--in April 1985. Critical of Reagan's Strategic Defence Initiative, yet insistent on meeting church representatives and independent writers and artists, Howe made a strong impression on the East German leadership. In the late 1980s, however, relations again stagnated, as it became evident to the British that the geriatric SED leaders were incapable of grasping Mikhail Gorbachev's reform agenda.

The literary and cultural half of the volume starts with a chapter by David Clarke on the attempt of the Johannes R. Becher Institute in Leipzig to train successive generations of writers to represent the working class. Quite apart from the fact that most factories could find no place for budding authors in their normal work force, the institute faced an insoluble dilemma: the more writers were allowed to come together, the more they wanted freedom to express themselves and the more distant they became from the working class. Laura Bradley explores one surprising byproduct of the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961: its impact on the theaters of East Berlin--not only the many practical implications (40 percent of individuals working in the East lived in the West; when many failed to turn up for work, a new generation of actors from the provinces suddenly had the career break of a lifetime), but also the contrast between the role of theater people in 1989, when they were among the most active in pushing for change, and 1961, when they tended to rally in support of the regime. Beate Müller deconstructs the ritualized language of Stasi reports on the writer Jurek Becker, showing the regime's need to manufacture enemies from a mass of trivial or inaccurate data in order to justify the continuing defense of the system against both real and imagined enemies. In contrast, Sara Jones's examination of the publication history of Stefan Heym's *Lassalle* (1969) juxtaposes the archival record with Heym's own autobiographical writings and shows that the author's relationship with functionaries of the regime was closer and more complex than he subsequently claimed. Genuine differences of opinion emerged among officials and publishers, which Heym was able to exploit in order to secure East German publication of *Lassalle* in 1974, five years after it had appeared in the West. Another ambivalent relationship between artist and system is explored in Renate Rechtien's study of three of Wolf's shorter semi-autobiographical works. In each case a personal crisis coincides with crises of the GDR or the Soviet system--the 11th Plenary in 1965, Chernobyl in 1986 and the *Wende*. Fortunately the post-*Wende* Wolf, writing in 1999 about a trip to California, seems to have "found a new ironic, self-ironic and above all humorous tone" (p. 231) that is far removed from her former angst.

The three final chapters are devoted to East German cinema. Rosemary Stott contrasts the box office fate of films imported from the West--mostly blockbuster entertainment--with that of homegrown productions aimed mainly at shaping the "socialist personality" and finds, unsurprisingly, that it was difficult for the latter to compete. Seán Allen compares films from the 1950s (by Kurt Maetzig) and from the post-*Wende* era (such as *Sonnenallee* [1999] and *Good Bye, Lenin!* [2003]) and detects a more complete portrayal of the role of women in the former than in the latter, which seem to reflect mainly the perspective of post-adolescent males. Daniela Berghahn examines the legacy of East German filmmaking since the *Wende*. The rapid demise of state-controlled DEFA meant a loss of jobs, security, and status for most of those who had worked in the East German film

industry. Moreover, the closure of hundreds of mostly rural cinemas and the conversion of the remainder into western-owned multiplexes was accompanied by the decline of cinema as a popular form of mass entertainment. Those who still went to the cinema preferred escapism to social realism. Yet, those filmmakers who survived professionally--mostly from the younger generation--experienced a sense of liberation. Freed from state control, they could at last make the kind of films they wanted. At first these focused mainly on the Stalinist legacy of the former GDR, but within a decade they had succumbed to *Ostalgie*: *Sonnenallee* again epitomizes the transition. Nevertheless, Berghahn concludes, something of the DEFA tradition of social realism has been kept alive in the new Germany.

W