

Sylke Kirschnick. *Anne Frank und die DDR: Politische Deutungen und persönliche Lesarten des berühmten Tagebuchs.* Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2009. 199 pp. ISBN 978-3-86153-528-7.



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Published on H-German (February, 2010)

Commissioned by Benita Blessing (Oregon State University)

In her analysis of Anne Frank's reception in the GDR, Sylke Kirschnick has undertaken an important case study regarding the ways in which East Germans coped with the National Socialist past. It is at best a challenging task--Anne Frank has become a symbol for so many groups and ideologies that it is difficult to recognize these interpretations of her as based on the same person. Indeed, as the Jewish studies scholar Alvin H. Rosenfeld has written about the most well-known diary and its author to emerge from the Holocaust, "The Anne Frank whom we remember is the Anne Frank we *want* to remember."^[1] The ways in which posterity has used and abused Anne Frank's memory are often stunning. Among the most egregious examples: North Korean students read the diary with the take-home lesson that Anne Frank suffered under the Nazis, just as North Koreans suffer under American domination. In a less-than-subtle attempt to equate the Holocaust and the Palestinian *naqba*, revisionists in the Netherlands have superimposed onto the iconic image of a smiling Anne Frank a *keffiyeh*,

the traditional Arab headdress and symbol of Palestinian nationalism. Again, Anne Frank's memory becomes the site of political contest.

In *Anne Frank und die DDR: Politische Deutungen und persönliche Lesarten des berühmten Tagebuchs*, Kirschnick examines the young diarist's legacy in a dictatorship where this famous story posed particular challenges. The work highlights key moments in a reception history thoroughly overshadowed by the uniqueness of the East German case: many East Germans were personally complicit in the Holocaust, yet an amnesiac state-sponsored doctrine of Antifascism ascribed responsibility for the genocide to the Federal Republic, the "successor state" to Hitler's Third Reich. As this reception history shows, managing these complex dynamics posed unique difficulties.

The virtues of Kirschnick's book are many: each chapter (unnumbered, unfortunately) of *Anne Frank und die DDR* is a concise, detailed, and well-

focused study of how theaters, publishers, film studios, schools, radio, exhibition spaces, and other official institutions dealt with Anne Frank's story and the specific media that popularized it. The chapter "Ein 'Dokument der Menschlichkeit,'" for instance, documents the central role of theater in Anne Frank's East German reception (pp. 35-58). Unlike Americans and Western Europeans, East Germans first encountered Anne Frank not through translations of her diary, but through stage adaptations of Frances Goodrich's and Albert Hackett's Broadway play *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1955). The play premiered in seven West German cities and in one East German city (Dresden) on October 1, 1956. Kirschnick recounts the histories of individual productions and deftly analyzes several telling contemporary reviews. She shows how reviewers of these early performances celebrated the play's universalizing and peace-loving message, while implicitly deflecting responsibility for the Holocaust onto "nationalsozialistische[n] Führer[n] und namenlose[n] Tätern" (p. 45).

Such Cold War dynamics played a critical role in other venues as well, delaying the diary's eventual publication in East Germany. The anti-communist sentiments of Anne Frank's father, Otto Frank, led him initially to object to licensing the German language edition in East Germany. The play's success on East German stages helped change his mind. Frank ultimately decided that it was important that wide audiences be able to access the work, even readers "in den besetzten Ländern," as he referred to the Eastern bloc (p. 67). Kirschnick fleshes out the details of how negotiations during the fall months of 1956 between Lambert Schneider Verlag (Heidelberg) and Union Verlag (East Berlin) paved the way for the *Das Tagebuch der Anne Frank* to appear in East German bookstores in early 1957 (pp. 66-73).

The hallmark of Kirschnick's excellent study is

her use (and in some cases, reproduction) of hitherto unexploited archival sources. Her chapter on theatrical performances of *The Diary of Anne Frank* cites interviews with original cast members and, in an intriguing parallel, includes excerpts from the childhood diary of Kati Székely, who starred as Anne Frank in a 1958 production at the Deutsches Theater in East Berlin (p. 48). For the chapter "Unsere Schule trägt ihren Namen," about the renaming of schools in Anne Frank's honor, Kirschnick relies on oral histories with former students of these schools as well as their school yearbooks, texts of school songs, and photographs of renaming ceremonies. The chapter that gives this book its subtitle "*Persönliche Lesarten des berühmten Tagebuchs*" includes excerpts of letters to Otto Frank from East Germans, young and old, Jewish and gentile, about the deeply personal ways the diary and play affected them. All of these sources demonstrate the dual roles Anne Frank played in East Germany: on a personal level, her story resonated deeply. Yet, officially and institutionally, her memory became yet another instrument in GDR polemics against the West.

Debates about Anne Frank in East Germany lasted until almost the very end of the state itself. Kirschnick's final chapter recounts the history and debates that preceded the visit of the international traveling exhibition "Anne Frank and Her World" to East Berlin in 1989 (pp. 171-180). The exhibition ran for three weeks in July 1989 in the Informationszentrum of the Alexanderplatz Fernsehturm (television tower). Significant aspects of the exhibition planning presented a number of ideologically-charged challenges, including the wording of panels: East German organizers insisted, for instance, that captions refer not to the Allies' *Eroberung* (conquering) of Germany, but rather to a *Befreiung* (liberation). Moreover, even as East German organizers acknowledged the exhibition as a warning against the dangers of *Ausländerfeindlichkeit* (xenophobia), they reiterated the party line that such problems arose from class

inequalities not present in the GDR. Even so, one visitor courageously wrote in the exhibition guest book "Neonazis nicht nur in der BRD, auch in der DDR" ("Neonazis not only in the FRG, also in the GDR" (p. 175).

Anne Frank und die DDR includes a useful bibliographic appendix about the publication history of *The Diary of Anne Frank* in East Germany. Nevertheless, it lacks a thorough subject index and at times leaves out footnotes where they would be useful for further research into the subject. These objections, however, are minor when compared with the virtues of this long-overdue contribution to the historical scholarship on public discourse in the GDR about the Holocaust.

Notes:

[1]. Emphasis in original. Alvin H. Rosenfeld, "Anne Frank and the Future of Holocaust Memory" (Joseph and Rebecca Meyerhoff Annual Lecture, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC 14 October 2004). Available from <<http://www.ushmm.org/research/center/publications/occasional/2005-04-01/paper.pdf>> (accessed 28 November 2009).

[2]. Rebecca Leung, "If Anne Frank Only Knew...Diary Used To Teach U.S. Fear And Hate In North Korea " (2004). Available from CBS News <<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/02/26/60minutes/main602415.shtml>> (accessed 28 November 2009).

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Citation: Daniel H. Magilow. Review of Kirschnick, Sylke. *Anne Frank und die DDR: Politische Deutungen und persönliche Lesarten des berühmten Tagebuchs*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. February, 2010.

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