



**Sandrine Kott.** *Communism Day-to-Day: State Enterprises in East German Society.* Trans. Lisa Godin-Roger. Social History, Popular Culture, and Politics in Germany Series. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014. 368 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-472-11871-7.

**Reviewed by** Ned Richardson-Little (University of Exeter)

**Published on** H-German (November, 2017)

**Commissioned by** Nathan N. Orgill

### **Power and Its Limits in Daily Life at Work in the German Democratic Republic**

In *Communism Day-to-Day*, Sandrine Kott explores the history of the everyday in state enterprises based in East Berlin. Published originally in 2001 in French and now available in English translation for the first time, Kott's work stemmed from the wave of critical work seeking to move beyond totalitarian interpretations of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the late 1990s. Building on the everyday history—*Alltagsgeschichte*—approaches to the history of East Germany pioneered by Thomas Lindenberger and others at the Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung (ZZF) in Potsdam, Kott seeks to find the limitations and contradictions of state power and society in the GDR through the lens of East Berlin workplaces.

Although seemingly limited in scope, the task that Kott has taken on is enormous in its effort to cover a wide array of everyday activities over the entire history of the GDR. This is made even more challenging by the incomplete and methodologically problematic records that are available for historians engaged in the study of state enterprises and everyday history. In spite of these formidable obstacles, Kott's book provides a remarkable look into the everyday lives of East Germans at a wide

range of "People-Owned Enterprises" (*Volkseigener Betrieb*, VEB) in East Berlin from the central bakery Bako to light bulb producers at Narva. In *Communism Day-to-Day*, Kott gives us a window into the diverse and evolving political, economic, and social dynamics of workplaces in the GDR.

Kott's overarching conclusion is that the seemingly total control of the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) was always limited in its application in everyday life and that power was perpetually under negotiation in the East German workplace. Dominance could only be practiced through myriad forms of compromise and collaboration between the state in all its forms and the workers of the GDR. So long as East Germans did not overtly challenge the SED power structure, they could survive and thrive without embracing the ideology of the state in full. As to the related question of whether there existed an East German society outside of the state, Kott argues that "the political dictatorship thus did not 'kill' East German society, but it 'midwifed' it into a specific world, one that was communitarian, divided, yet built on solidarity" (p. 252). Most important, the SED was able to inculcate a general set of communitarian values that were widely internalized by the popu-

lation even if they did not wholly support all aspects of state socialism.

The book is divided into four sections. The first part offers an examination of how political power functioned in East German enterprises. The second section looks at community ties and their role in both reinforcing control over the individual while separating them from state prerogatives. The third section focuses on efforts to organize young people and women as specific target groups of SED policy. The fourth and final part looks at the creation of new socialist citizens and the internalization of social values.

The first two chapters address the problem of power, politics, and culture in East German state enterprises in order to demonstrate the limits of SED domination of everyday life. While the SED was able to cement its control over the top echelons of unions and management in state enterprises, workers at all levels, from the unskilled to foremen, failed to join the party in significant numbers. The working population of East Germany did not embrace SED rule, but did not oppose it in practice. Programs originally designed to facilitate solidarity across enterprises and organizations created networks used for ad hoc exchange and provision of services and benefits. Over time, programs meant to inculcate socialist ideology and culture gave way to an emphasis on lifestyle and pleasure in order to sustain participation and loyalty.

To promote productivity from workers through social benefits and rewards, state enterprises turned to improvisation beyond the central planning of the party, which steadily eroded the legitimacy of SED rule. They had to engage in constant barter and trade with other organizations outside of the official purview of central authorities as a way of functioning normally. Lack of resources for the central authorities led to social policy devolving onto these institutions, perpetuating shortages as companies hoarded goods and distributed benefits internally.

Chapter 3 looks at the tension between group and individual identities in East German workplaces. In the early years of the GDR, the SED emphasized individual innovation and elevated the heroic acts of workers like the miner Adolf Hennecke who famously over-fulfilled his quota by 387 percent. Officials celebrated “Heroes of Labor” and created performance-based wage systems and production norms generated by socialist principles, in contrast to the capitalist profit motive. Activist brigades were created to encourage workers to take part in improving working methods and efficiencies. This emphasis on heroic socialist individualism was replaced over the years with a collectivism that increased the importance of local brigades over management. While this transformation pushed back against top-down incentive structures, it also meant that discipline was enforced by one’s peers who could both forgive transgressions and hold fellow workers to account for activities and behavior in their personal lives. This workplace family created both a community and unofficial systems of surveillance and control.

Social differentiation within the ostensibly egalitarian socialist system is examined in chapter 4. SED-dominated management was provided with better pay and benefits and was officially tasked with implementing the plan provided by central authorities, but workplace relations depended on compromise rather than tyranny. Planning demanded worker participation. To secure the collaboration of labor, management was forced to accommodate input and cooperation from below. This created general equilibrium where both management and workers were broadly forgiving of missed targets and goals.

Chapters 5 and 6 examine the SED’s efforts to organize and mobilize youth and women as specific categories of the population. The SED saw both groups as vital to securing power in East Germany, and policy toward them was a mix of success and failure. While gender equality was official policy, domestic relations did not match the

growing egalitarianism of the workplace. Female participation in the East German workforce was among the highest in the world (over 80 percent compared to 55 percent in West Germany), but at the same time, the top levels of the SED were dominated by men. In 1989, of the twenty-six members of the SED Politburo, only two were women (p. 183).

The practice of gift giving as part of the political and social life of the GDR is the subject of the seventh chapter. In workplaces, solidarity with socialists in the developing world as well as underdeveloped rural areas in East Germany was practiced through rituals of donation and in travels to the countryside for direct assistance. On the one hand, gift giving reflected the paternalistic nature of the East German state, but on the other it was also a means of compensating for the deficiencies of the planned economy. Enterprises used such rituals to affirm the loyalty of their employees, but citizens also adopted these customs as a means of solidifying social ties outside the direct purview of the state.

The final chapter treats timescapes, both in the everyday and in terms of demarcation of special events throughout the year. The national calendar was reoriented around new holidays beginning with the celebration of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht in January and reaching a high-point every October with the commemoration of the founding of the GDR. Coming of age was now marked by the *Jugendweihe* (socialist youth confirmation), rather than religious confirmation. Everyday life was now filled with ideological and communitarian rituals.

While the work is too specialized for an undergraduate or non-academic audience, *Communism Day-to-Day* is a good volume to introduce graduate students to research on the social history of a socialist dictatorship under adverse archival conditions. Kott clearly lays out the background of the field and the method and theory of her own

approaches so that it could provide an excellent teaching text.

The strength of *Communism Day-to-Day* is its wealth of fascinating details on everyday life in state enterprises in East Berlin across the entire history of the GDR. Kott is able to use these unique sources to find gems on topics ranging from the limits of political control, the functioning of the planned economy, gender roles, social differentiation, and other subjects that can only be examined through extensive archival research. By structuring the book around a set of sources rather than more specific research questions, the analysis is, however, more often broad than deep. Many topics are examined very briefly with a handful of anecdotes and then left—frequently with an exhortation for future scholars to delve deeper into the topic. But while *Communism Day-to-Day* lacks a singular focus, it more than makes up for this with a remarkable originality and depth of the archival research. Many of the themes developed by Kott, such as timescapes and rituals of solidarity, have yet to be fully researched since the original publication of this work. The translation of *Communism Day-to-Day* provides a timely reminder—especially as the field is now so fixated on global connections—that much work still remains to be done on social, local, and, everyday history of the GDR.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Ned Richardson-Little. Review of Kott, Sandrine, *Communism Day-to-Day: State Enterprises in East German Society*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. November, 2017.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=45376>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.