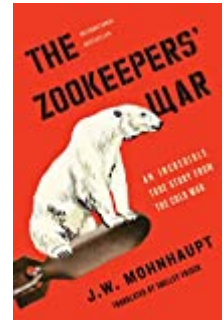


J. W. Mohnhaupt. *The Zookeepers' War: An Incredible True Story from the Cold War.* Trans. Shelley Frisch. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019. Illustrations. 261 pp. \$17.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-5011-8850-3.



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Published on H-Socialisms (April, 2021)

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Zookeepers in the Cold War

Journalist J. W. Mohnhaupt's captivating and engaging narrative throughout *The Zookeepers' War: An Incredible True Story from the Cold War* explores the conflict between East and West Germany as it filtered into the world of zoology and zookeeping. He begins the story with a physical fight between two zoo directors, one from the East Berlin Tierpark and one from the West Berlin Zoological Garden. The cause? An insult levied at an elephant. Of course, the underlying currents of the competition between East and West Germany, in which East and West Berlin became what Melanie Arndt calls "showcases" of their respective political ideologies with decisions either consciously or unconsciously made with reference to actions on the other side of the border, are the true motives. [1] Mohnhaupt crafts an excellent narrative about the relationship between Heinrich Dathe, director of the East Berlin Tierpark, and Heinz-Georg Klös, director of the West Berlin Zoological Garden, who became locked in a competition to ensure their

zoos were representing the success of their respective sides of Germany and the broader ideologies and systems they represented.

Throughout, Mohnhaupt creates nuanced personality sketches of both zoo leaders and accomplishes his goal to depict the relationship between the two Berlin zoos and “the two main characters in the most multifaceted mosaic I could create” (p. 231). He is aided by interviews with the children of the two zoo leaders and others who were involved in this zoological battle. At times Mohnhaupt overstretches, especially when he claims that “their zoos *were* their families, wives and children often little more than hangers-on” (p. 5). Such hyperbole combined with lack of clear connection to source materials becomes a challenge for historians but makes for an engaging and entertaining read. Mohnhaupt’s compelling and entertaining narrative is part of the allure of *The Zookeepers’ War*, which is wittily crafted and makes the most of the many ironies that occur, such as Dathe dying on Klös’s sixty-fifth birthday.

The book includes a prologue, epilogue, and eight chapters with such entertaining names as “War and Crocodile Tail Soup,” “Pandas and Prestige,” and “Big Plans, Little Fish.” These chapters trace the development of the two zoos from the final years of World War II to reunification in 1989. Chapter 1 explores the creative and brave efforts of Katharina Heinroth to save the Zoological Garden from bombing raids and postwar financial strife. It also introduces Knautschke the hippo, a character who came to symbolize the perseverance of German zookeeping, as he was born in 1943. Chapter 2 explains the origin of the East Berlin Tierpark in efforts to discourage citizens from traveling across the increasingly policed border to the Zoological Garden. Chapter 3 traces Heinroth’s travails as a female leader of the Zoological Garden and her subsequent ousting by the zoo’s board of directors. She selected as her successor Heinz-Georg Klös, who at the age of only twenty-eight was the youngest zoo director in Germany.

“Pandas and Prestige,” the fourth chapter, situates the fight for zoological superiority within

the Cold War context but also connects the two zookeepers’ vastly different approaches to animal acquisitions. Klös, for instance, suffered a crisis of confidence after the deaths of several animals in his zoo but nonetheless refused an offer to borrow the panda from his East German counterparts, claiming that “if the animal dies ... everyone will say she died on Klös’ watch” (p. 85). Dathe readily paid exorbitant fees to feature Chi Chi the panda in the East, increasing the relatively new zoo’s prestige and drawing four hundred thousand visitors. Mohnhaupt’s treatment of individual personalities within a politicized context is both balanced and nuanced.

Chapters 5 and 6 describe the final breakdown in East-West zoological relations, with the construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961 and the withdrawal of East German zoo directors from the pan-German zoo association in 1968. Mohnhaupt’s ability to find the most entertaining elements of a tense situation are on full display. He recounts US president John F. Kennedy’s gift of a bald eagle, aptly named Willy Brandt after the West Berlin mayor, which died two years later and had to be quietly replaced. The East German press joked frequently about “the habits of Willy Brandt, [who] loves to eat dead rats,” while the West Berlin zookeepers feared being mocked if word got out about the bird’s death (p. 111).

Chapter 7 returns to the pandas and Knautschke the hippo with Klös’s struggle to find an alternative to the success of the East’s giant panda. The timing of China’s “panda diplomacy” with Western nations during the 1970s helped facilitate the acquisition of two pandas who “were received as though they were state guests” (p. 180). As Mohnhaupt notes, though, “panda diplomacy” with West Berlin was short-lived—one panda, Tjen Tjen, died within three years. A further blow to West Berlin’s zoo was the death of Knautschke, who had become “a symbol for an entire city” (p. 185). Chapter 8 traces the final years before Germany’s reunification in 1990 and the

continued disunity and lack of cooperation between the two zoos after reunification and Dathe's death in 1991, demonstrating that the division was broader than just the two men in charge.

Mohnhaupt's gripping and easy-to-read narrative offers new perceptions of divided Germany, although the text might have provided further context for readers lacking extensive knowledge of this history. *The Zookeepers' War* joins the expanding field of borderland studies, although a deeper base in the relevant literature would have strengthened its discussion of the pervasive competition between the two Germanies. Borders, often perceived as a negative, helped justify the existence and expansion of each zoo: "the political and social influence the two zoo directors had in their halves of the divided city was possible only in the context of the Cold War" (p. 5). This helps contextualize why reunification proved so difficult and why divisions remain in Germany even today between "Ossis" and "Wessis." As Edith Sheffer argues, this "wall in the head" was constructed on all fronts, and Mohnhaupt shows that zoos were no exception.[2]

The Zookeepers' War is targeted at a general audience, although historians may feel uncomfortable with the level of hyperbole in the text and the lack of engagement with scholarship in zoo studies and animal studies. Often the animals themselves are just collateral to Mohnhaupt's narrative; the book is human-focused and neglects the ethical issues involved zoology. Were the two zoo directors too focused on competition and not enough on ethical animal care? What were zoos' priorities in this period: entertainment or preservation and scientific study? More depth in this regard would have helped create a theme that could bridge the gap between popular and academic histories more successfully. Nonetheless, *The Zookeepers' War* is an enjoyable read and helps to explain the depth of the division between East and West as well as the role that ordinary Germans (and extraordinary animals) played in creating and sustaining that divide.

Notes

[1]. Melanie Arndt, *Gesundheitspolitik im geteilten Berlin 1948 bis 1961* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2009), 14.

[2]. Edith Sheffer, *Burned Bridge: How East and West Germans Made the Iron Curtain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.

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Citation: Samantha Clarke. Review of Mohnhaupt, J. W. *The Zookeepers' War: An Incredible True Story from the Cold War*. H-Socialisms, H-Net Reviews. April, 2021.

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