
**Reviewed by** Jessica Bock (Digital German Women’s Archive)

**Published on** H-Diplo (July, 2024)

**Commissioned by** Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

For some time now, research into women’s and gender history from an intertwined history perspective has experienced a certain upswing. New publications have contributed to analyzing the German-German division less as a separate history and more as an interwoven one.[1] Alexandria N. Ruble’s study should be seen in this context. It is dedicated to the negotiations and struggles for women’s and family rights during the Cold War. With the period she has chosen, the 1950s and ‘60s, she looks at a phase that has received less attention in contemporary women’s and gender studies and in the historiography of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Yet this period is suitable for a study of intertwined histories because of the culminating confrontation between the blocs.

Ruble takes up this blank space and examines the politics of emancipation as a process that was shaped between the two states of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the GDR against the backdrop of the Cold War. She argues that “the complicated relationship between the divided Germanys in the early Cold War alternately catalyzed and halted efforts to reshape legal understandings of gender and the family” (p. 5). She does not limit her analysis to a simple comparison but rather embeds the complex developments in a larger context between Eastern and Western Europe and the United States and the Soviet Union.

Regarding the level of actors, Ruble does not only focus on the ministers and members of parliament involved but also includes the women’s movements, because “female activism was alive and well in both Germanys long before the late 1960s” (p. 9). She also considers Catholic and Protestant churches as central forces in the reconfiguration of women’s and gender relations in a divided Germany. The sources she examined include documents from the estates of such individual protagonists as Elisabeth Selbert and Herta Elk, draft laws, transcripts and discussion papers from
parties and individuals involved in legislative debates, articles, and letters from readers in the daily press and women’s magazines.

Ruble presents her findings and interpretations chronologically in five chapters. The first chapter is devoted to debates on the so-called crisis of the family in the respective occupation zones from 1945 to 1947. Against the backdrop of a surplus of women, high divorce rates, and illegitimate births, medical and political representatives argued for a “remasculinization” of society (p. 22). Debates about a postwar gender order not only took place along gender lines but were also influenced by the increasing bloc confrontation between East and West, which “would have lasting effects on discussions of gender, women, and the family in the late 1940s and early 1950s” (p. 38).

In the second chapter, she focuses on debates about the constitutions in both East and West during 1948-49. She traces how women’s associations and politicians negotiated the future gender regime of the two German states on the issue of equal rights. In doing so, actors in the postwar women’s movements drew on their experiences in the Weimar Republic and saw the new constitutions as an opportunity to establish equal rights for men and women. Ruble vividly demonstrates that women in both East and West met with sometimes fierce resistance from men.

By addressing the arguments of church, women’s political, conservative, and social democratic actors, Ruble also reveals how national self-image and national identity were constructed through women and families. The control and functionalization of childbearing played a central role in this. It is therefore even more surprising that abortion is missing from her analysis as an element of interdependence between East and West. This absence is astonishing, as both states negotiated and codified women’s rights and conservative women’s roles and family concepts in the regulation of abortion.[2]

The initially unsuccessful reform debates on marriage and family law in the early 1950s are the subject of the third chapter. Although equal rights for women were a key part of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) ideology, the government of GDR minister Walter Ulbricht hesitated to introduce far-reaching reforms. This hesitation played into the hands of conservative forces, who were critical or even hostile to a further modernization of gender relations. In addition, domestic political crises, such as the people’s uprising on June 17, 1953, contributed to the fact that the deadline for a reform of family law could not be met. Nevertheless, the Mother and Child Protection Act and the Rights of Women came into force in September 1950 at the instigation of the Democratic Women’s League of Germany (DFD), which enshrined the socialist-emancipatory model of women, employment, and motherhood.

In the FRG, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) pursued a re-Christianization policy, “which included the restoration of the family” (p. 77). Debates and reform proposals were an expression of varying interpretations of the term “equality.” While the CDU/CSU (Christian Social Union) and churches insisted on patriarchal privileges, for example, “casting vote[s],” such parties as the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) voted for a middle way to take greater account of the still precarious postwar situation of women (p. 89).

The reform efforts that resumed in the mid-1950s are the focus of the fourth chapter. Although the government of FRG chancellor Konrad Adenauer continued to pursue its conservative plans to implement the Equality Act (Article 3 II of the Basic Law), it was unable to completely overcome internal and external parliamentary opposition. Ruble attributes a strong role to women’s organizations and the first female politicians and ministers, such as Minister of Health Elisabeth Schwarzhaupt. Contrary to the importance that the book attributes to them, the arguments and strategies used by the women’s movements’ actors
remain rather pale, except for a few examples in the chapter. In this context, the latest research, which refutes the theory that women are fighting against men to enshrine Article 3 II of the Basic Law (“Men and women have equal rights”), is not considered.\[3\] Only minor changes to the Equality Act passed in 1957, proving that the influence of women’s organizations and the women’s movements was rather limited.

While the political forces in the FRG were able to agree on a compromise, the SED once again failed to introduce a socialist family law in the mid-1950s. According to the author’s thesis, representatives of churches played a major role in this, as they had appropriated the Cold War rhetoric used by the SED and argued accordingly against the draft law presented by Hilde Benjamin, GDR minister of justice. Ruble presents the population of the GDR as a further opponent, who used the discussion forums and petitions to make suggestions or criticisms. The still deeply rooted conservative values about gender roles expressed here represented an enormous challenge for Benjamin and the SED. In addition, the Politburo prioritized foreign and economic policy, which once again pushed family law into the background.

In “Achieving Equality in East and West Germany,” the fifth chapter, the author looks at the 1960s and ‘70s. The focus here is on the Family Code introduced in the GDR in 1965 and the reforms passed in the FRG in the areas of family and marriage law. Fortunately, the author does not use the narrative of progress that is implied in the chapter title. Although she goes into detail about the reforms and innovations in family and marriage law in the FRG and GDR, she also mentions the inequalities that still exist between the sexes.

As promising as the approaches presented in the introduction read, their application in the chapters is limited. The terms “entanglement” and “emancipation” contained in the book title, for example, are only partially realized in the analysis. A central reason for this is the lack of definitions. What the author means by “emancipation” remains unclear throughout the study. There is also a lack of parameters to make the interdependencies visible. Although the author addresses the mutual perceptions between East and West, the book fails to name or analyze precise moments of connection. Ruble confines the analysis within the book to examining how the Cold War influenced family policy in both places. It is therefore less a history of interdependence than a parallel history. In addition to this conceptual vagueness, the lack of classification of “entangled emancipation” in the political systems of the two states feels incomplete: after all, it makes a difference whether women’s and family rights were negotiated in a democracy or in a dictatorship.

Despite these shortcomings, the author succeeds in portraying the contradictory and tenacious struggle of both states for a (new) order of gender relations in the second half of the twentieth century. Women’s and family policy were central arenas of the systemic competition, which ran not only along the lines of the East-West bloc confrontation but also between different groups of actors in the respective states. The author vividly conveys that men in the FRG and the GDR were only prepared to a limited extent to change their own roles and give up privileges in favor of real gender equality—for women and families.

Notes


Jessica Bock studied medieval and modern history at the University of Leipzig. With a scholarship from the Federal Foundation for the Re-appraisal of the SED Dictatorship, she completed her doctorate, titled “Women’s Movement in East Germany: Awakening-Revolt-Transformation in Leipzig 1980-2000.” Her dissertation was awarded the GenderConceptGroup dissertation prize at Technical University Dresden in 2019 and was published by Mitteldeutscher Verlag in 2020. She has been a research assistant at the Digital German Women’s Archive since 2016. Her research interests include contemporary history, women’s and gender history, transformation, and the culture of remembrance.

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