
Reviewed by Elizabeth Ten Dyke (Kingston, New York)  
Published on H-German (January, 2004)

While the 1989-1990 demise of the German Democratic Republic continues to recede into the past, the specialized sub-discipline of GDR studies remains active. This edited volume of fifteen chapters reflects the contributions of an eclectic group of emerging and established scholars who participated in the Sixth Triennial Congress of the Eastern German Studies Association held in Montreal in 1998. A range of academic disciplines is represented here: history, communication and cultural studies, literary analysis, political science, and museum studies. Not surprisingly, the individual chapters in this volume vary widely in theoretical approach as well as in the kinds of evidence utilized to support interpretations, arguments, and conclusions. The contributions are somewhat uneven in length, level of detail, and analytical sophistication. Nonetheless, they are grouped in a way that supports coherence between the different chapters, and the volume as a whole reflects an arc of inquiry that spans GDR history chronologically, culturally, and politically.

In Part One, "The Betrayal of the Intellectuals?" Wolfgang Emmerich and Marie-Elisabeth Raekel draw different conclusions about motivations driving the work of intellectuals in the GDR. In "Deutsche Intellektuelle: was nun? Zum Funktionswandel der (ostdeutschen) literarischen Intelligenz zwischen 1945 and 1998," Emmerich argues that intellectuals, who are defined through their participation in a historically specific discursive field, were seduced by the promise of utopia. Emmerich claims, through reference to the work of Helmut Schelsky and Karl Loewith, as well as through the very extensive use of religious metaphors, that the seduction by promises of utopianism took on the quality of religious devotion and commitment. Emmerich's point of view is expressed through reference to the work of Helmut Schelsky and Karl Loewith, as well as through the very extensive use of religious metaphors; however, it is not substantiated through other evidence.

Drawing extensively on the work of Johannes R. Becher, Raekel focuses on the way in which the devastation caused by WWII seemed to confirm the prophecies of Marxism and thereby elevate its legitimacy. A polarized view of history and culture emerged in the GDR, in which evil and good were fundamentally opposed. The (East) German people were viewed by the party as requiring a "democratic" (re)education, which would be provided by intellectuals in the service of the state. Raekel paints a portrait of the GDR as a cultural "Besserungsanstalt," in which the inmates have no say over the rules or the process of reform (p. 39). Raekel finds that intellectuals served the party in the GDR because their work was viewed as crucial to the socialist program, because they received material and non-material rewards for doing so, and because hesitation or objections would be viewed as support for the Feind.

In Part Two of the volume, "Dictatorship, Resistance and Autonomy in the GDR," five contributing authors ex-
amine the relationship between the USSR and Germans in what was first the SBZ, later the GDR, and they explore the persistent question of resistance—or the lack thereof. In “Autonomy and Dependence: The East German Regime’s Relationship with the USSR, 1945-1949” Gerhard Wettig develops a theme already introduced in part 1, namely the Soviets’ unique approach to “democracy”: Soviet occupation forces would unilaterally impose what they felt was in the best interests of Germans in the SBZ. Drawing on East German and Russian archival sources, Wettig details aspects of the process through which the SMAG (Soviet Military Administration of Germany) effectively brought the emerging East German political leadership (communists and non-communists) under its control, manipulating the appearance East German autonomy as part of its strategy for domination.

Given the extent of Soviet control over the GDR, to what extent was there the potential for resistance? Gary Bruce examines archival evidence from several German sources (Bundesarchiv, Zentralarchiv, GDR State Security Service archives, and more) in order to ascertain whether two elements, key to revolutionary success, existed in the GDR early in the 1950s: leadership and (following George Rude) a “popular motive behind participation in revolution” (p. 76). In “The Revolutionary Potential of GDR Society in 1950-1955” the author presents case studies of conflict, or potential conflict, between ordinary East Germans and police or politicians beginning with the elections of 1950. A second case stems from the summer of 1951 in Saalfeld (Thuringia), when police arrested two workers for disorderly conduct. The uprising of June 17, 1953 is addressed as well. Bruce concludes that inadequate leadership hindered the revolutionary potential of East Germans. Unlike Emmerich and Raekel who (in Part One) view GDR intellectuals as having been co-opted by the state, Bruce states that “[p]otential sources of leadership had either, as in the case of the intellectual community, left the GDR, or had been driven underground and dispersed, as was the case with the non-Marxist parties” (pp. 89-90).

Jeffrey Kopstein’s chapter, “Does Everyday Resistance Matter? Lessons from the Two German Dictatorships” can be read in part as a response to Bruce. Given the lack of organized leadership in the GDR, what potential was there for the resistance of ordinary East Germans to have an impact on the course of GDR history? Kopstein summarizes the (controversial) “everyday resistance hypothesis” (James Scott): namely, that the mundane attitudes and actions of ordinary people may affect both a nation’s domestic and international affairs (p. 97). He summarizes criticisms of Scott but also asserts “the question of the conditions under which everyday resistance matters remains an empirical one” (p. 100). In this chapter the author compares and contrasts the role of everyday resistance in Nazi Germany and the GDR only in “an introductory form” (p. 98). As a result, he does not muster empirical or archival evidence to support his claim that GDR leaders made certain policy decisions in part because they were anxious about the possibility of a general strike.

In “The Pleasures of Unanimity in the GDR” Randall L. Bytwerk discusses fora in which quasi-critical discourse did occur, namely the satirical magazine Eulenspiegel, the Leipzig Pfeffermühle (cabaret), and the July 1989 Statt-Kirchentag in Leipzig. Presumably, Bytwerk means the title to be read ironically for there was pleasure to be had in covert critical discourse. However, there was little to no pleasure in the experience of state strategies for control over free expression, which are actually the focus of the chapter. The GDR is portrayed as a church of Marxism-Leninism that could not tolerate dissent, a cliche that has already made an extensive appearance in this volume in Emmerich’s contribution on German intellectuals. However, Bytwerk also introduces Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann’s notion of a “spiral of silence,” a more subtle and analytically valuable approach to the public and private mechanisms that produce discursive conformity.

While Bytwerk passes on the opportunity to explore the pleasures of dissent, David P. Harding presents an interesting case study of the political utility of historical reinterpretation. In “The Demoralization of the East German Officer Corps and the Prussian Military Tradition” the author explores the experience by members of the National People’s Army (NVA) of “fissures” resulting from “pressure to adapt to changing domestic and international situations” (p. 125). Members of the NVA’s “intellectual vanguard” (p. 126), military historians in particular, experienced a crisis of purpose upon recognizing the ultimate dangers of nuclear war. This crisis, coupled with the recognition that the army might be called upon to repress internal dissent, led certain historians (Edgar Doehler and Karl-Heinz Riemann are discussed in this chapter) to find a new set of lessons in old Prussian history: lessons that pointed to the fear of political leaders for their own people; the value of strong ties between the Germans and the Soviets (this in the Gorbachev era); economic liberalization; and the importance of popular support for the state. Harding’s chapter points to the impor-
tance of recognizing how some members of the GDR elite tried to work within their positions, using those forms of influence available to them, to effect a political shift late in the 1980s.

Part Three of the volume focuses broadly on cultural perceptions of the past and present. Karen Ruoff Kramer observes that as human memories of the GDR fade, the more than 750 feature films produced by DEFA will take on greater significance in defining public perceptions of East Germany. In "Imag(in)ing the GDR: Gender in Projected Memory" Kramer examines five of these films (Lots Weib, Das Kaninchen bin ich, Bis, dass der Tod Euch scheidet, Der Dritte, and Die Legende von Paul and Paula) for their depictions of gender. A familiar set of facts pertaining to gender in the GDR is evident in the films: high rates of female participation in the labor force, low rates of male participation on the domestic front, exceptionally high rates of divorce and, therefore, high numbers of female-headed households. The author also observes issues in GDR gender relations that beg further inquiry: the persistence of betrayal and violence in domestic relationships, the victimization of women (by boyfriends, husbands, and the women themselves), and continued, unashamed female longing for loving, supportive partners.

In "Medien der Zeitgeschichte: Die Aufarbeitung der DDR-Geschichte am Beispiel des Herbstes '89" Bernd Lindner divides the documentation, memorialization, and historicization of the Wende and the GDR into three phases. The first phase (from the summer of 1989 through the spring of 1990) was characterized by the production of eye-witness reports, photographs, banners, and slogans primarily for the purpose of self-comprehension and motivation. The phase of politische Aufarbeitung began in the summer of 1990 and included the printed word (books, chronologies) as well as TV and video productions. The third phase, Historisierung, extends from approximately 1995 to the present and is characterized by tensions between forgetting, repression, and "musealization." Lindner notes that as a "wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter am Zeitgeschichtlichen Forum Leipzig beim Haus der Geschichte der BRD" (p. 181) he is biased toward the latter process. He contrasts three museum exhibits, two which were burdened by poor planning and cliches, and a third that was received very positively by its East German visitors. The author does not describe or evaluate the third exhibit, stating that since he participated in its preparation this is for others to do. Despite this gap, Lindner’s contribution sheds light on the constantly shifting and controversial nature of working with and through the past in the former GDR.

Roswitha Skare analyzes literature produced by East German authors since the Wende, focusing on the distinctive and growing sense of a separate East German identity. The title of her chapter, "Reality Within the False One: Manifestations of East German Identity in Post-Reunification Texts" suggests tensions experienced by the subjectively perceived East German self who lives in a united Germany dominated by West German cultural ideals and expectations. Drawing on examples from Daniela Dahn, Thomas Rosenloecher, and Hans-J. Mis- selwitz, Skare examines the puns and allusions of book titles, the expression of an "East-We" (p. 188) identity, and the use of anecdotes and sayings that illuminate the persistent, even growing, self-differentiation of East Germans vis-a-vis the West. Skare’s chapter sensitively raises many open questions on individual and collective psychological consequences of German unification.

The last section of the volume, Part Four, shifts to a political scientific perspective in an effort to understand aspects of the transition since 1989. Lothar Probst’s contribution, “Transition from Community to Society?" redresses many of the identity issues raised by Skare and Probst offers, this community-oriented identity has its roots in the unique history of the GDR. Thus, what appears to be sentimental Ostalgie may actually be symptomatic of the real loss of important interpersonal relationships through which the East Germans structured their worlds until 1989. Probst observes that the liberal-democratic West is experiencing a growing crisis of legitimacy. Perhaps it is time to rethink the old political-scientific models, such as modernization theory, that have been used to explain the collapse of the GDR and consequences of German unification.

In “Eastern German and Czech Democratization from the Perspective of Local Politics” Catherine Perron draws on three years of field research at the city council level to compare post-socialist political processes in the Czech Republic and the former GDR. Perron evaluates the extent of continuity or change in political personnel, in political systems, and ongoing support for the old communist parties. She finds that the political and economic stability created by German unification allows East Germans to take greater risks than the Czechs; for example,
Meredith A. Heiser-Duron develops the theme of PDS success in the former GDR but brings greater specificity to it by critically examining explanations for this phenomenon in the specific case of each East German state. In "PDS Success in the East German States, 1998-1999: 'Colorful calling card from the Forgotten Communist Past?'" Heiser-Duron groups the five new states and Berlin into three categories: poor (Sachsen-Anhalt and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern), wealthy (Thueringen and Sachsen), and "de-stabilized" (Brandenburg and Berlin). Following David Patton she presents four theories for PDS success, the first of which is that the PDS represents a distinctive East German culture or "milieu." However, analysis of PDS membership and voting patterns suggests a level of commitment to the party that cannot be explained simply by situational factors. Other theories propose the PDS represents East Germans who feel they are the real or symbolic "losers" of unification, or that the party fills a "representation gap" in the East. Finally, some think the PDS may fill a gap on the left created by SPD and Green movement toward the center. After discussion of specific circumstances in the five new states and Berlin, the author concludes that no one explanation is satisfactory: "Diversity has become a permanent feature of the East German political landscape [...] the PDS will continue to defy explanation through any one theoretical approach" (p. 262).

The diversity of the new German states is the focus of Jennifer A. Yoder’s study. In "The Regionalization of Political Culture and Identity in Eastern Germany: A Study of State Parliamentarians in Three "Laender"" Yoder presents the results of field research that included interviews with over eighty parliamentarians. As she writes, "it is time for a more nuanced examination of the new states of Germany" (p. 271). She observes, "While common interests and challenges may distinguish the eastern states from the western ones, it is important to recognize that the east is not as homogenous as many analyses and commentaries once assumed" (p. 283).

Finally, concluding Part Four of the volume, Astrid Segert evaluates explanations for the persistent under-representation of East Germans in pan-German elite positions: in politics, in the military, and in the justice system. In "Allokationsprozesse deutscher Eliten: Diskussion der Kolonialisierungsthese" the author discusses data collected in a 1997 study at Potsdam University. Out of 2,341 “elites” interviewed for the study (“Es wurden nach dem Positionsansatz Fuehrungskraefte aus den wichtigsten Organisationen aller gesellschaftlicher Sektoeren ausgewahlt” [p. 305]), 272 were East Germans. This proportion, 11.6 percent, is just over half the 20 percent of East Germans in the general population. Of the 272 East German "elites," only 33 held positions in West Germany. However 40 percent of 402 positions surveyed in East Germany were held by West Germans (pp. 288-89). Segert argues that the data are best explained by a combination of factors including negative perceptions of East German university education and diplomas, the (West German) expectation that family obligations will be subordinated to careers, and (following Bourdieu) the possibility that East Germans lack the cultural capital of their western colleagues, evidenced for example through styles of dress.

In sum, the fifteen chapters in this collection clearly evidence the continuing diversity of approaches to East German studies. This reader finds that the promise implicit in the volume’s title is best fulfilled by those chapters based on recent empirical or archival research. Old questions, such as those pertaining to the consolidation of communist power in the East after 1945, are given new light through the interpretation of relevant archival materials. Several chapters in the volume offer a refreshing discussion of differences between the East German states. Finally, contradictory conclusions drawn by many of the authors, and unanswered questions that are raised throughout the volume, point to areas that present rich research opportunities for the future. As Laurence McFalls writes in the introduction, "The GDR is dead! Long live the GDR!" (p. i).

Copyright (c) 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.