



**David F. Crew.** *Consuming Germany in the Cold War*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2003. 209 S. \$99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85973-766-8; \$36.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-85973-771-2.



**Reviewed by** Pamela Swett (Department of History, McMaster University)

**Published on** H-German (February, 2005)

## **Coca-Cola, Plastics, and Trade Fairs: Consumer Culture in East and West Germany, 1949-1968**

David F. Crew begins this useful volume by noting how much the narratives of the GDR's history have developed in the past decade. Yet he questions whether the two stories of post-1945 Germany will ever become one; perhaps they will continue to co-exist simply as separate pasts. Though his questions cannot yet be answered, Crew emphasizes the similarity between the challenges faced by the two emerging states, and by the Germans within each set of borders, as the 1950s began. Each administration wanted to cast the other as the ideological successor to Nazism, just with new window-dressing. Ordinary Germans, on the other hand, were less concerned with the ideological battles and more focused on the hunger and homelessness that accompanied defeat and occupation. Citizens in the East and West, then, measured success by the extent to which the system in place could help them in their plight.

The GDR failed this test, explains Crew. Fueled by the need to produce for export, dependence on poor Russian raw materials, rearmament aims, and a host of other problems intrinsic to the planned economy, the GDR neglected consumer needs. Though the East boasted the

strongest economy in the Soviet Bloc, by the 1980s the costs of inefficiency and the state's social programs were more than the GDR's industry could bear. To stave off collapse, the SED turned to the exportation of goods that were attractive in the West and relied increasingly on the sale of expensive Western goods within the GDR's *Inter-shops*. The status afforded these precious commodities, and the black market trade in them that also flourished in the last decade of the GDR's existence, only served to undermine further the ideals of the "people's republic." The West German administration, however, was able to improve the quality of life of its citizens dramatically and gain the popular legitimacy the GDR could never claim. Nonetheless, the success the West enjoyed remained ambiguous, notes Crew, because the FRG never had to struggle for human rights.[1]

The collection's first three chapters focus on the GDR. We expect to find three failed attempts to respond to citizens' needs and desires. In Katherine Pence's chapter on the Leipzig Fair, however, the story is not quite that simple. She begins by pointing out that the Leipzig Fair remained important after division and that the East

German regime intended it to serve as an international showplace for socialism, improving the reputation of all “people’s republics” and the position of the GDR within this club. There was no way to avoid comparison with the West, however, especially after the Hanover fairgrounds opened in 1947. Though the products on display in Leipzig often failed to meet visitors’ quality standards, and almost always disappointed in terms of quantity, Pence warns against concluding too quickly that the Fair had no positive repercussions for the regime or its people. Instead, she maintains that the feedback requested by fair planners provided an avenue for female citizens to participate in the project of building socialist consumerism. They were the experts on household chores, just as their western counterparts were, and could therefore critique the impracticality of some goods and the lack of availability of most others. One has to wonder, however, whether the sense of respect and inclusion wore thin when they recognized that their suggestions only very infrequently led to the desired changes. Pence also argues that illicit behaviors associated with the Fair, such as black market trading and prostitution, did not have the effect of undermining the regime, because their existence offered proof of the cosmopolitan, dynamic nature of the city.

Like Pence, Judd Stitzel aims to demonstrate that the SED, despite its never-ending shortages and low-quality goods, did take seriously the job of creating an alternative to Western consumerism. Surprisingly, he stresses that the SED admired the designs of the French *haute couture* industry as cultural goods and a tradition that could be emulated without betraying the party’s anti-capitalism. Clearly Berlin’s runways were not those of Paris. However, the regime used East German fashion shows, like the Leipzig Fair, to convince East Germans and others that their system could “represent the German nation” (p. 54). Yet, as Stitzel explains, the SED did little more than replicate the same bourgeois standards of “good taste” and femininity portrayed in the fashion shows of the West. Even then women criticized the regime for promising designs that never became available to shoppers. Since the SED-sponsored fashion shows made the same promises as those in the capitalist West, East German citizens judged them on the same terms. Individual consumption was never satisfied and social consumption, which was the GDR’s strength, was taken for granted. This left the regime between a rock and a hard place, concludes Stitzel.

In the last chapter on the GDR, Eli Rubin turns to the role of plastics in the East. Unlike the first two chapters, which allude to similarities between East and West,

Rubin insists that plastic consumption in East Germany was imbued with meanings particular to this society. Instead of associating plastic household goods with cheap *Ersatz* goods that could be thrown away without second thought, as was the case in the West, the SED encouraged the population to see plastics as better than natural materials—more colorful and easier to clean. Rubin explains that the introduction of plastic goods into daily life was central to the regime’s larger “Chemistry Program” and represented a significant step forward in the construction of the socialist society. Once again, women were mobilized to accept state propaganda about the many advantages of rationalized living through plastics. However, the petroleum it took to run the plastics factories, which had to be imported at great loss of hard currency, made plastics precious commodities. The highest grade of plastics was therefore reserved for industrial use, while the least durable were left for consumers. East Germans did criticize the kitchen utensils that wilted over the heat of the stovetop. Yet the author finds that most complaints were aimed at plastic products that by definition were throwaways, like beverage bottles. Though the SED’s grand plans for the “Chemistry Program” remained largely unrealized, from the public’s reaction, Rubin concludes that plastics did symbolize a new socialist consumer culture separate from the West—one that, like plastic goods, was not to be disposable.

Beginning with the chapter by Jeff Schutts, we see how firmly the FRG was situated within the culture of Western Europe. Coke became a lightning rod on the continent, argues Schutts, for anything people disliked about the Marshall Plan’s reconstructed Europe. For conservatives, Coke’s presence signified the “dawning of a god-less feminized materialist consumer mass society.” For communists, it was a “weapon in the establishment of an oppressive capitalist *Pax Americana*” (p. 123). However, Coke was not really all that foreign. Schutts reminds us that Coke had been produced in Germany since 1929 and that the nation’s production plants were all owned and operated by Germans. Germans had kept their empty bottles through the war to remember a time when “everything was available,” and by 1965, the FRG had become the second largest Coke market in the world. The soft drink’s success was not a simple case of American imperialism. Rather, Schutts argues that West Germans were able to “creolize” Coke to fit their own ideological needs. On the surface, then, Coke’s renewed presence in West Germany (“*Coca-Cola ist wieder da!*”) symbolized peace and eventually economic recovery, but it also promised “metaphysical redemption” for individuals

and German national identity. By 1955 the ad campaign was built on the slogan “*Mach mal Pause*” (Take a break once in a while), which implicitly congratulated Germans for their legendary work ethic and success in rebuilding their nation. The slogan also reassured Germans, argues Schutts, that they deserved a “refreshing” break—spiritual salvation from the troubling past.

In S. Jonathan Wiesen’s chapter “Miracles for Sale,” we again see the desire for spiritual renewal among the West German population. According to Wiesen’s essay, West Germans found refreshment not through the purchase of caffeinated sugar water but through the consumption of images of “personal and national abundance” (p. 151). As the author carefully explains, the production of this new consumer good, the Economic Miracle, began in 1948 and became the omnipresent slogan of the 1950s as represented in books, newspaper articles, and politicians’ speeches. The concept had its critics from the beginning, but debate only put the catchphrase in more headlines, and the population responded by searching for evidence of this miracle in their midst. It would be quite some time before the imagined abundance would be a daily reality, but until then the masses could flock to the trade fairs to capture “anticipatory visions of mass consumption” before it was available to most (p. 156). Ironically, as soon as the consumer society was realized, politicians and consumers alike started to question the consequences of the Miracle, growing nostalgic about the hard work and dignity of austerity that marked the early 1950s and turning against the producers of the images (advertising and marketing professionals) of wealth and luxury. This suspicion too would fade in time, as West Germans, somewhat bewildered at first by their good fortune, learned that economic patriotism could stand at the center of a democratic Germany.

The final chapter, on drug consumption in 1960s Hamburg, by Robert P. Stephens, is a useful way to wrap up this volume, because it reminds the reader (as did Wiesen’s contribution) that the West German government too worked hard to regulate consumption among its population. The drug scene is presented to us largely

through the eyes of the welfare workers and police who sought to dissuade young people from this form of consumption, and Stephens rightly sets their work in the tradition of youth protective legislation and surveillance that predates the Nazi state. But what really interests Stephens is the motivations of young drug users. He argues that the generation coming of age in the 1960s had a wholly new relationship with consumption. They knew it could be pleasurable and sought to experience that pleasure in ways they believed rejected the oppressive capitalist materialism represented by their parents’ dutiful participation in the creation of the Economic Miracle. The irony, argues Stephens, is that in seeking ways to circumvent the market’s power to shape cultural norms, young drug users succeeded in creating a new global drug market. This chapter also shows us a variant of consumption not tied up with national identity, except through its rejection of that national past and present. Instead, Stephens quite convincingly illustrates the international nature of the drug scene, long before the days of the internet.

*Consuming Germany* is a well-written collection that joins a growing list of books on the history of consumerism in Germany. There is still much work to be done before we can understand fully just how consumer culture has influenced German society before or after 1945. For example, as Crew suggests in his introduction, those West Germans who did not enjoy the fruits of the Economic Miracle are still waiting for a scholar to address the challenges they faced. Even the work presented in *Consuming Germany* is just a taste—we will have to be content for now knowing that all six of these authors plan monographs that build on their contributions to Crew’s thought-provoking collection.

#### Note

[1]. Here Crew refers directly to Michael Wildt’s “Changes in Consumption as Social Practices in West Germany,” in Susan Strasser et al., eds, *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 315.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Pamela Swett. Review of Crew, David F., *Consuming Germany in the Cold War*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. February, 2005.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10248>

Copyright © 2005 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 any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).