

**Michael Meyen.** *Denver Clan und Neues Deutschland: Mediennutzung in der DDR.* Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 2003. 232 S. EUR 19.90 (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-86153-310-8.



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

Media researcher Michael Meyen presents us with a lively investigation of East German public opinion on the media and the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) in the mid-late 1980s. This book marks a first attempt to trace a broad picture of the media universe of the late German Democratic Republic (GDR) through reception of research since the dismantling of the GDR media system in 1991.[1] Despite its entertaining subject matter and sometimes conversational tone, Meyen seeks to overturn the conventional wisdom that approaches the East German media as simply an unpopular instrument of a politically repressive regime. For Meyen, this understanding of GDR public opinion actually emerged in the pre-*Wende* Federal Republic (FRG) with the publication in 1977 of a *Spiegel* article detailing the work of West German television's GDR correspondent Lothar Loewe. Loewe depicted a world in which East Germans took their leave of the GDR each evening before the television set, turning instead to the "more truthful" West German broadcasts.[2] This image of a population set against its government and its media became further entrenched with the work of West German media researcher Kurt Hesse, whose interviews of GDR refugees in 1985 suggested that the West German evening news programs *Tagesschau* and *Heute* were not only East Germans' "window on the world," but ultimately would help bring down the East German regime. Meyen sets out asking simple questions:

what did East Germans really think about the media in the GDR and how did they make use of it? The answers defy the impression of a population that widely rejected the political system and its media products and reveal a society that sought, above all, information and entertainment that spoke to their everyday lives.

The book lays out the field of investigation in a short introductory first chapter, then proceeds in roughly three parts. Chapter 2 sets out Meyen's methodology for the study, which is based on a set of interviews conducted among (East) Germans in 2000-2002 as well as extensive archival research. Chapter 3 lays out some of the general findings of the study regarding media use—what kind of expectations did East Germans have, to what extent did they believe the media (in East and West), and how did they incorporate a variety of media into their daily lives? He then develops these broad ideas in three chapters that focus more narrowly on television, daily newspapers, and radio, periodicals, and film respectively. These two parts first sketch out a general picture of East German media use, then break that picture into its constituent parts—the experiences of individuals.

The final part brings the pieces back together: based on the interviewees' general expectations of the media and their position on the SED's *Medienpolitik*, Meyen identifies a set of *Mediennutzertypen* that brings some

order to the chorus of voices introduced in the previous chapters. Finally, in a short epilogue Meyen tackles the question that has engaged public opinion researchers since the Wende—why do former East Germans use the media differently than those from the former Federal Republic?

The basis of Meyen's work is a set of 100 interviews undertaken as seminar work by students from Dresden, Halle, Leipzig, and Munich in the years 1999-2002. In the interviews, some of which lasted two hours or more, interviewers asked the subjects to speak to a variety of pre-determined topics by detailing their *Lebenslauf*, reconstructing a "normal" day from the late 1980s, describing the home in which they lived at that time, and identifying topics that interested them (such as sports or politics) and television programs they remembered watching.

These interviews pose some sticky methodological issues. For one, memory work is unstable and imprecise by the standards of social "science," and this project asked interviewees to remember things that they had thought and felt at least 15 years before. One subject recalled that she liked to read the *Grüne Woche*, which Meyen interprets as a misidentification that amalgamated the *Grüne Post* of the Nazi period and the SED's *Wochenpost*. Others could not recall whether the radio stations they tuned in were "West" or "East." Moreover, we can question whether it is even possible to get at the broad spectrum of opinion with only one hundred interviews. Meyen's group sought to address this methodological problem through the principle of "theoretical saturation"—that the variety of experiences is not infinite, but rather can be generally understood by expanding the interview base until the interviews seem to provide no new information. Thus the project sought out men and women of all ages and from all walks of life in the former GDR. Some left the GDR (legally and otherwise) in the 1980s; others still live in its former territory.

Some might quibble with Meyen's approach to what is essentially oral history, but what really pulls it all together in a convincing way is his broad use of supplemental archival research, culled from both East and West German sources. This material includes public opinion polls conducted by the East German television service (DFF), the SED Politburo's Institute for Opinion Research and the West German institute for opinion research, Infratest; periodicals such as the television guide *FF dabei*, and the satirical *Eulenspiegel*; and audience letters collected at the German Broadcasting Archive in Berlin-Babelsberg. Each of these types of evidence has its problems: respon-

dents in the GDR might have distrusted the promise of anonymity in SED opinion research, for example, while research in the Federal Republic was conducted primarily among East German refugees, a self-selected, unrepresentative group. Indeed, some of the reception research appears highly questionable: some polls conducted in the FRG, for example, asked West Germans upon their return from visiting relatives in the GDR to reflect upon their experience there, take on the persona of "Uncle Kurt" or "Aunt Erna," and answer questions as to Kurt/Erna's use of the media. Yet taken together, these disparate and what we might expect to be contradictory pieces of evidence support each other in surprising ways. Even East German refugees for example, considered the party organ *Neues Deutschland* or the local paper an important part of their day.

The interviews come into sharp focus in the second part of the book, in which Meyen also introduces important information on East German everyday life and the historical context of the media. Thus the book focuses primarily on the period 1985-1989, but those who want some sense of the historical roots of the media will not be disappointed. Some of this material will be familiar to readers: East German daily life was characterized by an earlier, longer work day, a greater degree of *Häuslichkeit*, a collective, communal spirit and access to inexpensive cultural goods (newspaper subscriptions, museum visits, movie tickets etc.) Meyen argues that East German media use, far from being exceptional, followed the general trend of other industrial societies: television was the most significant medium, reaching well over 93% of the population in 1986. East German households took on average 1.5 newspapers, though a significant number took 3 or more. Radio reached the entire population (and had since 1956); periodicals (of which there were 543 titles in 1989) were in high demand; and youthful audiences made films from the West the highest grossing titles in the 1980s (the American films "Beverly Hills Cop," "ET," and "Dirty Dancing" took this honor in the last three years of the GDR). Like most audiences, East Germans most valued *Realitätsnähe*—representations that closely approximated their daily lives on subjects that mattered to them—crime, topical issues and, above all, anything on subjects of local interest. These are also the things that many missed in the media: GDR television news, for example, offered few crime reports and rarely reported "breaking" news—only party conventions were broadcast minute by minute. Neither did newspapers satisfy the desire for topicality and timeliness (*Aktualität*): subscribers received their papers by

mail almost everywhere in the GDR, sometimes days after publication. On the other hand, West German media often disappointed even the interviewees most disgruntled with the GDR and its media, because it failed to speak to their everyday lives.

Meyen's general conclusions regarding East Germans' daily experience of the media might surprise some readers. Material conditions were more important to most respondents than the SED's media policy. This state of affairs may have arisen because most seemed to perceive "entertainment" (the DFF's *Kessel buntes* or *Polizeiruf 110* for example) as relatively free of SED control, while "information" (television programming such as the nightly news *Aktuelle Kamera*, the "propaganda" show *Schwarze Kanal*, most daily newspapers and some periodicals) as more directly controlled. Contradicting the idea that East Germans predominantly watched West German television, Meyen shows that, on average, the East German television audience watched more of their own "prime time" programming, and that they watched the same kinds of programs regardless of which channel they chose. Most East Germans could not receive ZDF until the arrival of cable in the late 1980s. By that time the taboo around watching West television had fallen away. The West German media provided an important *Gegenpol* in offering a different point of view, but by no means did it enjoy a *Grundvertrauen* or *Glaubwürdigkeitsbonus* among the East German audience, which saw ideology in both East and West media. The most popular West German media were not the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Die Zeit*, or even *Tagesschau*, but rather department store catalogs (among women, who used them to design and make trendier clothing than was otherwise available to them), Bayern 3 (a radio station that featured European and American hits), television sports and programming such as crime thrillers (though *Tatort* turned some people off because of its depiction of *knallharte Verbrechen* and, by the standards of East German television, more brutal representation.)

It is impossible to do justice to the wide range of opinion in the subjects' interviews within the confines of this review. Certainly interviewees initially affirmed the familiar picture of the media: that it was "all lies," that "no one" believed in it. But the general picture that these broad statements suggest (that "everyone" felt or thought certain things about the media) quickly broke down as subjects' detailed their individual habits. Some respondents never subscribed to *Neues Deutschland* or joined the FDJ or the SED, and felt no pressure to do either. Others spoke of the need to read up on the party line.

Some watched *Aktuelle Kamera* or *Schwarze Kanal* without irony, while others could only do so occasionally, with friends and several bottles of the local brew.

This complexity is reflected in Meyen's final chapter analyzing *Mediennutzertypen*. Meyen identifies six types that run the gamut of the ways in which the interviewees approached the media and the GDR. Meyen defines each of them in turn: the *Zufriedene*, the *Überzeugte*, the *Engagierte*, the *Frustrierte*, the *Distanzierte* and the *Souveräne*. The first three types used the GDR media as their point of reference, but only the *Engagierte* was interested in information or politics. By contrast, the *Zufriedene* and the *Überzeugte* used the media for entertainment or diversion. The latter two relied more on the West media for their point of reference, the *Distanzierte* most heavily. The *Souveräne* used both East and West media intensively, skeptical of both but believing most in the importance of being informed. Meyen then deliberately offers us a few extended excerpts from the interviews that demonstrate both the distinguishing features and the limits of each type.

Ultimately the factors that most influenced respondents' attitudes towards SED *Medienpolitik* and the media were related to gender, generation, and social standing. Women, especially those with children, enjoyed little free time but were satisfied with their living standard—or at least felt they would have had a harder time in the West—and were thus more likely to be satisfied with the media. Yet their opinions proved more malleable, often influenced by their partner's attitude towards the GDR and its media. Similarly, the broad spectrum of opinion presented in the second part of the book seems to break down by generation. For example, East Germans born in the 1950s and 1960s were less likely to have any experience of the protests in 1953 or 1968 and participated disproportionately in both the mass flight from the GDR in the summer of 1989 and the demonstrations that autumn; they also were more likely to disapprove of the media and SED *Medienpolitik*. Finally, education, social mobility, and material conditions were definitive factors. Those less affected by the economic situation of the late 1980s thought more positively about both the media and SED policies: these include army officers, policemen, or teachers, for example. On the other hand, well-educated engineers and clerical workers with little social mobility (or those whose path to higher education had been blocked) were much more likely to disapprove or even oppose the media and the SED.

Since 1989, East Germans have continued to defy

(West) German expectations of their media use. They watch more television, listen to more radio programming and read different papers and periodicals than other Germans. They generally eschew the national dailies, the weekly *Die Zeit*, political magazines such as *Der Spiegel* and even *Bild-Zeitung*. (Of course, so do most other Germans.) They have helped raise the ratings for commercial television channels, especially RTL, and favor the “third program” (regional channels) over ARD or ZDF. To explain their behavior, market researchers have concluded, for example, that East Germans do not consider “quality” papers and periodicals as intended for them; that they feel swamped by the available information; or that they have not been socialized to follow political discussions, that they reject heated political debates as fights, and such fights don’t fulfill their need for “harmony.” Meyen argues instead that peoples’ use of the media is determined not by politics, but by the needs of their everyday lives. People search out the media that perform an important function in their daily routine: helping them obtain weather or traffic information, keep up with community news, or obtain diversion at the end of a long work day. In this, East Germans’ media habits have not changed much since the 1980s.

This is a book that, due to its title, may have been overlooked by many in the historical field, but its significance goes beyond media studies. It revises the conventional understanding of East German media and reception that is only just beginning to move beyond notions of a monolithic propaganda machine, rejected by all but the most ardent advocates of socialism. But there are

hints of another argument here as well. For one, it seems that East Germans were drawn to local media above all—local papers and regional radio, or even DFF television—suggesting perhaps that media often considered tools of nation-building are, at best, tools of community-building. For Meyen, East German reception is parallel to that of other modern industrial societies; this is an argument that I would have liked to see developed more fully. This book could be frustrating for scholars who hope to find themselves left with a set of precise conclusions or a clearly defined continuum of opinion. Meyen does not weave the interviews into a grand narrative, but rather lets the interviewees speak on their own behalf. This is perhaps one of the major strengths of the book.

#### Notes

[1]. Works that look at GDR public opinion and the media in a more limited way include Ina Merkel, *Wir sind doch nicht die Meckerecke der Nation! Briefe an das Fernsehen der DDR* (Berlin: Schwartzkopf & Schwartzkopf, 2000); Heinz Niemann, *Hinterm Zaun: Politische Kultur und Meinungsforschung in der DDR* (Berlin: Edition Ost, 1995); Hans-Georg Stiehler, *Leben ohne Westfernsehen: Studien zur Medienwirkung und Mediennutzung in der Region Dresden in den 80er Jahren* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2001).

[2]. Lothar Loewe, “Abends kommt der Klassenfeind” *Der Spiegel* 33:7 (1977); Kurt Hesse, *Westmedien in der DDR: Nutzung, Image und Auswirkungen bundesrepublikanischen Hörfunks und Fernsehens* (Köln: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1988).

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**Citation:** Heather Gumbert. Review of Meyen, Michael, *Denver Clan und Neues Deutschland: Mediennutzung in der DDR*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2005.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11121>

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