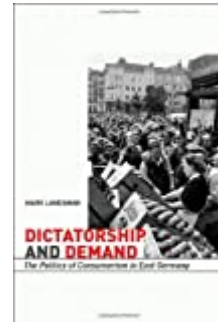


Mark Landsman. *Dictatorship and Demand: The Politics of Consumerism in East Germany.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005. 310 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01698-9.



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Mark Landsman's book stands at the crest of a coming tide of books in English concerning East Germany, consumption, and questions of how to explain the intertwined fates of politics, economics and everyday culture on the other side of the Berlin Wall. If Landsman's book is any indication of where this field is heading, scholars of East Germany and modern Germany in general should be in for some very good summer reading in the next couple of years. Landsman's book is, like many dissertation-turned-monographs, inspired by some of the pioneering work done on the question of consumption in the GDR—an important question despite, and because, it is counter-intuitive—in the last decade by German scholars such as Ina Merkel, Annette Kaminsky, Andre Steiner, Patrice Poutros and Phillip Heldmann. It serves a dual purpose: to convey to American and English-reading audiences the fascinating debate that originated in Germany concerning the relevance and role of consumers and consumer policies under a productivist-oriented socialist regime, but also to add a new argument to that debate. Landsman's book accomplishes the first task with aplomb—setting the bar very high for future work on this subject; the second task he accomplishes as well, though I have a few questions concerning his argument in its broadest scope.

The basic premise of the book is that of an ongoing

tension within the East German government concerning how importantly the Party leadership, and therefore the state as its sometimes unruly instrument, should take the needs, wishes, and *demands* of consumers in the GDR. The SED, led by Ulbricht, followed a consistently Stalinist, productivist bent, believing that self-denial and sacrifice were necessary for all East Germans in order to build the conditions necessary for socialism, a socialism in which presumably there would be no more shortages or complaining or bad service in restaurants, all hallmarks of consumer life in East Germany. However, after the June 17, 1953 uprising, it became clear that an even more fundamental prerequisite for building socialism in East Germany was that the Socialist Unity Party actually stay in power. And to accomplish this, the Party would have to appease the population's appetite for at least basic consumer goods like nice clothes and decent food. Thus, Landsman portrays the SED as caught in a serious dilemma as it worked towards building socialism: if they pushed too hard, they would lose power, but if they bent too far backwards to appease the every wish and need of consumers, they would never get around to the main goal of building socialism.

Landsman's argument then is that the one side of the tension was caused by a group of officials and organizations *within* the government, and to some extent

the Party, pulling the behemoth SED and GDR government apparatus towards the needs of consumers. Landsman calls this the “consumer supply lobby” and this is important because in past literature on this subject a kind of false dichotomy has been set up pitting the “people” against “the state,” replete with divided camps of “top-down” and “bottom-up” GDR historians (Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk against Andreas Ludwig, for example). Landsman is attempting here to show first that the situation was more complex, and second, that there is a large middle between the top and the bottom in which the real tensions played out, in which the fate of the GDR—which hinged to a large extent on the GDR’s ability or inability to overcome the consumption/production dilemma—was to a large extent determined.

The structure of Landsman’s book proceeds from this thesis by focusing on moments of crisis in the first sixteen years of the Soviet Sector/GDR, each one precipitated by or involved with the contradictions between productivism and consumerism. The first chapter, “Production and Consumption: Establishing Priorities,” focuses on the very early days of the Soviet occupation, and does a wonderful job of laying out very clearly the productivist approach of the pre-GDR state apparatus, the Deutsche Wirtschaftskommission (DWK), essentially a puppet of the SMAG high command. The crisis of these first few years was simply life itself, as he puts it: “Deprivation, demoralization, and despair continued to shape the life of the Soviet zone.” It did so for many in the allied zone as well, but the differences were already shaping up, as American players like General Lucius Clay were convinced that food had to come before industry, whereas the Soviets and their KPD puppets were convinced of exactly the opposite, as Landsmann helpfully points out. It was only after several groups, such as officials within the state labor union, the FDGB, complained to the DWK that workers simply could not work while suffering from hunger, that the SMAG issued the notorious order 234, which was the first of many failed attempts to square this circle by doling out more calories—but only for those engaged in the kinds of productivist work favored by the Soviets and the SED (heavy industry).

Chapter 2, entitled “The Contest Begins: The Currency Reform, the Berlin Blockade and the Introduction of the HO,” introduces the importance of external pressures on the SED, as well as pressures from within the Party. The 1948 currency reform has a bit of an over-glossed patina, as Landsman points out, and it was not exactly as though all store shelves filled magically overnight with a cornucopia of modern con-

sumer goods. Nonetheless, the East German leadership promptly buried their heads in the sand of the collected writings of Marx and Lenin, predicting with confidence that the whole thing was a sham and would end in massive unemployment for the western zone—whereas the Soviets promptly told them to start upping the supplies for consumers and enlarging Order 234 for more workers. This was not the only point in time at which the Soviets would put pressure on the SED to start paying attention to the needs of consumers. Various SMAG officials complained about the total lack of courtesy and *Kaufkultur* in East German stores. Considering that for a long time Russians generally thought of Germany as a quasi-paradise of the good life, and that the USSR’s master plan was to ship its raw materials to East Germany and get top-quality manufactured goods in return for its own citizens, the fact that *Russians* had to tell *Germans* to pull their act together on the consumer front ought to tell us how bad the situation in East Germany for consumers really was. (And Landsman cites numerous other examples of Soviets chastising East German officials for not having nice stores, not having enough jewelry, and so on—all small vignettes that Landsman delivers beautifully.) Once again, East German authorities bowed to the pressure but the solution they delivered was half-hearted at best. The HO stores they created to dry up the black market were a nice try, but the prices of the goods in them were kept exorbitantly high (ostensibly to absorb excess purchasing power), and even though they came down later, the HO never fully became an organization that was solely about the consumer. The customer was never king.

It should be clear that the dichotomies between the forces pushing for better treatment of consumers on the one hand and the forces concerned with “building socialism” on the other repeat themselves in the series of crises that Landsman considers: the provisioning crisis of the forced collectivization in 1951 and 1952; the June 17 uprising; the turmoil in 1956 involving Poland and Hungary and the ascent of Khrushchev; and the renewed provisioning crisis following the second attempt at forced collectivization in 1960, leading to the Berlin Crisis and the building of the Wall in 1961. In all cases, the song seems to remain the same: enormous pressure from the West, the East, and “below” forced the SED to do something about the travails of East German consumers, but each action they took seemed designed to placate rather than solve problems of provisioning. There is an organization for “needs research” (*Bedarfsforschung*)—something one might consider to be a major necessity in a planned

economy (without a market, how else can a government know what to make and how much?)—though one would be wrong, since, as Landsman shows, it never really mattered how much “research” was done by this one area of the government, the needs they uncovered never really were met anyway.

In his conclusion, Landsman hints at a broader and more fundamental argument not really voiced clearly in his introduction: that in a planned economy, the consumer “lobby” could never have won. The deck was stacked against it—there was no way that a socialist government could ever have truly put consumption as its priority. At the end of the day, socialism was always about maintaining power through control of the means of *production*, not the means of consumption, and so industry would always have the upper hand in the titanic clashes Landsman documents between the consumer lobby and industry. Industry did not want to play ball with trade; so industry did not have to, and whole towns and districts repeatedly did not get the things they needed and wanted, making life in the planned society a profoundly unplanned and unpredictable experience.

This book is eminently researched, crisply written, with a narrative that flows and is quite easy to read. Moreover, Landsman does such an excellent job of explaining the highly confusing structure of the East German Party-State structure, that for this reason alone this book ought to be a fixture on the shelves of any researcher on the subject of East Germany or Soviet-style regimes in general. The byzantine, labyrinthine workings of this government and society are very daunting for those trying to get a handle on this new field of German history, and for that reason this book should be on every reading list having to do with post-1945 German history.

Despite the overall high quality of Landsmann’s work, however, I retain a few reservations concerning his overall thesis. In general, these center on Landsman’s use of the term “consumer supply lobby.” It seems at times to include “trade officials,” “those working in trade” or whichever unfortunate figurehead the SED placed in charge of consumer issues, from Elli Schmidt to Fred OelÅner to Erich Apel. The term is actually not used very often, and I wonder if it is too slippery a concept to apply to the kinds of back-and-forth tensions Landsmann describes so vividly. In fact, Landsman himself argues that “trade” in general suffered in its longstanding war with “industry” in general because it could not present a united front. Without a united front one wonders what

there is about it to call it a “lobby.” One aspect of this slipperiness is that organs involved in “trade,” such as the Ministry of Trade and Provisioning, were just one of many ministries and organs and institutions all vying with each other for a piece of the pie in the GDR. This sort of conflict is common to totalitarian regimes in general: infighting behind the doors of the bureaucracy. Frankly, the trade side of things was no less united than the industry side. Different VEBs, and later VVBs, along with different FAs and small private factories, and the different industrial ministries, all fought tooth-and-nail for precious resources in the jungle of the East German planocracy. There was nothing united about “industry” when an imported shipment of lumber arrived. Who needed it more? The toy factory? The chair factory? The construction industry? It was often every organization for itself, and “trade” was just one more mouth to feed. This state of affairs, perhaps, is more the “demand” that the title implies.

After all, being a “lobby” implies that one is working to represent or benefit some other constituency or clientele, and frankly the “trade organs” did not really represent consumers, just themselves. The Ministry of Trade and Provisioning, the Zentrale Warenkontore, and so on were just as guilty of playing turf battles within the arena of the GDR bureaucracy as any other ministry or organ. If they were “lobbying” on behalf of consumers, why was there so little initiative to come up with novel or even common-sense solutions for consumers, beyond simply demanding more goods? Ideas like creating credit and installment plans, as well as the initiative of the “thousand small things” came from the Party leadership, and the State Planning Commission, not the “trade lobby.” One gets the sense that overall, the bureaucrats of the trade lobby were more interested in getting the complaining consumers off their backs than in really representing their interests.

In fact, of the major players in this book, it reads as though the Soviet officials come closest to displaying real concern about the sad state of consumer culture in the Zone and the GDR. Time and time again it seems that Moscow, or at least Karlshorst, was a more significant factor in the ebb and flow of consumer policy than any internal GDR bureaucracy or institutions. It was the Kremlin that authorized shipments of goods to East Germany, that provided credit, loans, cancelled reparations, issued Order 234, and generally lambasted the SED for the “Sie werden platziert” treatment of customers—and compared to Elli Schmidt or Erich Apel, they seemed to have a lot more influence on Ulbricht. Sure, they were mostly just

concerned with keeping up appearances with West Germany, especially after the war of the kitchens began between Nixon and Khrushchev, but the Russians come out in this book as the most influential and prescient consumer lobby in East Germany. Are they to be considered

in this “consumer supply lobby?” Are they part of it?

But these are questions stimulated by the excellent work Landsman has done here, not aimed at it. This book is highly recommended.

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