



Beatrix Bouvier. *Die DDR - ein Sozialstaat?: Sozialpolitik in der Ära Honecker.* Bonn: Verlag J.H.W. Dietz, 2002. 357 S. EUR 27.80 (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-8012-4129-2.



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Surveying Social Policy under Late Socialism

Most investigation into the social history of the socialist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe has examined the painful process of their creation and consolidation during the 1940s and the 1950s. While some studies have touched on the 1960s as a decade of turbulence and change across the former Soviet bloc, few have attempted to examine the period between 1968 and 1989. Characterized on a formal level by ideological conservatism, the early part of the period represented a repressive retreat from the cultural tolerance of the 1960s, even outside of normalizing Czechoslovakia. Yet in terms of the nature of actual state action, the 1970s were a period at which materialist policies centered on consumerism, and the spread of welfarist measures were at their height. It was this above all that ensured that the region's socialist regimes would come crashing down so spectacularly when faced with the harsh economic climate of the 1980s.

Beatrix Bouvier's book is an examination of social policy in the German Democratic Republic under Erich Honecker in the eighteen years of his rule between 1971 and 1989. It is meticulously researched; the author has examined all of the relevant material available from na-

tional archives—the records of the Ministries of Construction and Labor, the State Planning Commission, the relevant departments of the central committee of the Socialist Unity Party, those of the monopoly trade unions and of the state security agencies. Her treatment of the sources on which she bases her findings and arguments is methodical and well-judged; in addition to her forensic reconstruction of policy, a particularly commendable aspect of her study is the space that she gives to evidence drawn from the petitions submitted by ordinary citizens to the various state and party bodies. Her treatment of the material in the petitions—which she deftly interprets as a mechanism for channeling popular discontent—enables her to show the degree of negotiation that was involved in social policy. Furthermore, she is able to present a balanced account of the popular reception of social policy, and, most tellingly, of both the limited effectiveness of particular measures and its marked limits as a legitimizing tool for Honecker's regime.

Bouvier's book surveys the social policy measures pursued under Honecker, setting his proclaimed attempt to ensure "a unity between economic and social policy"

within a dual context; first in the longer-term history of social policy measures in Germany, and next in the more immediate and important context of the difficulties faced by the GDR in the 1950s and 1960s in delivering the goods and, thus, in securing a degree of legitimacy and authority. Her focus then shifts to a survey of national social policy and the functioning of the mechanisms, especially in the enterprises, through which the regime aimed to deliver the goods. After setting the social policy measures of the Honecker era in their full historical context, Bouvier then concentrates on four key areas. Her examination of labor policy, so fundamental to the GDR's nature as a work-based state, examines socialism at work in the context of the regime's drives to expand the labor supply in the context of shortage, the politics of productivity, and the real limits to the state's full employment policies that emerged over the course of the period. Housing is the second field that she explores in considerable depth, and Bouvier makes a convincing case for the importance of housing to the legitimacy of the regime, given the popular frustrations engendered both by housing shortage and by the inadequacy of much of the housing stock. Bouvier's discussion of pensions is revealing that the workers' state's pretensions to act as a social state were at their most limited when faced with the problems of those who relied on incomes that were not dependent on direct participation in the labor force. The final issue that she covers is the regime's attempts to use

social policy as an instrument to achieve gender equality and its real limits. Bouvier concludes the book by providing a balanced and thoughtful overview of social policy during the Honecker era that demonstrates the degree to which the achievements and failures of the regime can be interpreted through examining the popular reception of its social policy.

Bouvier has produced a fine, thoughtful account of social policy during the last two decades of the existence of the GDR, one that deserves to command the attention of those interested in the social history of late socialism across the Central and Eastern European region. This judgment is possible despite the fact that this book is very much a fine history of social policy, rather than a social history of Honecker's East Germany—something that is still sorely needed. This book would have benefited from a more systematic investigation of the dynamic of the interaction between national level social policy and everyday life at the local level—a kind of synthesis of a history of social policy and a social history of the period under examination here. Lastly, Bouvier confines her analysis firmly within the national borders of the GDR. This is a shame, for had she added a real comparative dimension, her evidence could have contributed a broader and very important debate about the nature of late socialism across the former Soviet bloc—of which the GDR was a central part.

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