



Lothar Mertens. *Unter dem Deckel der Diktatur: Soziale und kulturelle Aspekte des DDR-Alltags.* Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2003. 250 S. EUR 67.40 (paper), ISBN 978-3-428-11142-8.



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Published on H-German (March, 2006)

A Cultural Glimpse into the German Democratic Republic

Unter dem Deckel der Diktatur is a collection of six separate essays, exploring oft-neglected aspects of the former East German regime. The chief strength of these pieces is that they draw attention to the less noticeable social and cultural dimensions of everyday life in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and present new and interesting archival findings. Yet, as Lothar Mertens points out in his brief preface, the contributions derive from a workshop and offer efforts of reconstruction and preliminary assessment—not sustained analyses. The essays are very engaging; however, an introductory and/or concluding essay could have served to not only orient readers but to highlight overarching themes, methodologies and theoretical issues.

The first essay, by Lothar Mertens, examines evening and shift work in the GDR. Mertens bases his study largely on confidential research carried out by scholars in former East Germany. He starts out by contrasting ideological Marxist-Leninist predictions about the emergence of a “communist personality” type among the GDR’s work force. This desired “new human,” qualitatively more advanced than his or her Western counter-

part, would develop all of his or her talents freely and be engaged in life-long self improvement and cultural refinement. Most of all, this personality type would engage in self-directed creative pursuits, no longer regarding work in terms of wage labor but as humanity’s true calling and chief source of personal satisfaction. Naturally, East German factory conditions fell far short of these lofty goals. Yet while official party ideology maintained that East Germany was moving ever closer to transforming itself along these lines, many social scientists in the GDR arrived at more complex and realistic conclusions. Mertens summarizes a significant amount of these findings. Beginning with a consideration of how the East German regime instrumentalized the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels for its own purposes, the author alerts us to how both thinkers had opposed shift and night labor as exploitative and inhumane. The GDR’s Marxist-Leninist regime, however, was obsessed with closing the productivity gap with the West and thus propagated shift and night work as essential to the emergence of a more humane society. Addressing an obvious contradiction, GDR thinkers asserted that shift work was exploitative in capitalist societies, but in socialist

East Germany, shift work would have different and far more positive qualities, given that the means of production were now in the hands of the workers themselves. A worker's willingness to accept night and shift work became a measuring stick for loyalty to the state as well as the achieved level of "new consciousness." East Germans were constitutionally guaranteed the right to work, but at the cost of significantly limiting the choices of where and at what. Mertens points out that shift and night work was designed to further the reach of the regime, fulfilling three main functions: first, to aid the GDR's economic performance; second, to form loyal citizens at an *educational* level; and third, to discipline the workforce, making workers easier to control. These ideological objectives soon collided with reality, however, and the regime was unable to deal with the GDR's developing complexities.

Mertens summarizes the empirical data collected by scholars from diverse institutions, ranging from the sociology research team of the Central Research Institute for Labor at the State Secretariat for Labor and Wage Affairs to the Socialist Way of Life research unit at the Institute for Scientific Communism (centered at the Academy for Societal Sciences at the governing party's central committee). These scholars found much differentiation within East German society, along the lines of education, income and gender. In general, those workers who were less trained and less-qualified were motivated less by the regime's elaborate system of "idealistic stimuli" (i.e. medals, citations in the party newspaper or other forms of propaganda) than by tangible improvements in income. As technologies developed and more technical expertise was required, average workers were less than enthusiastic about embracing new ways of doing things—additional responsibilities were often unaccompanied by higher wages. The growing diversification of values and norms within the GDR was gendered as well. East German scholars noted that men were more outwardly success-oriented, while women placed a higher value on a good working climate and their relationships with fellow workers. Shifts and evening work also hit women more severely than men, inasmuch as they also had to balance a larger share of household and family obligations.

Mertens observes how socio-economic arrangements within East Germany in general discouraged innovative thinking. Tinkerers were perceived as troublemakers, and workers knew that their jobs were secure, regardless of individual or company performance. The main criterion for promotion was political and ideological loyalty,

which thus bred incompetence and corruption. Mertens continues his line of inquiry by examining how night and shift work affected child rearing and health as well as diet and living conditions. Mertens concludes that East German society was exceedingly centered on the workplace. Forty to forty-two hour work weeks combined with lengthy commutes were common place. Mertens argues that a lack of Western-style amusements and distractions placed additional stresses on the family, resulting in a high divorce rate, which further enhanced the importance of the work environment as a substitute family. All in all, this failed to create the new Communist personality—the stresses of night and shift work added to what Mertens deems (by quoting the playwright Heiner Mülller) the serf-system of the GDR.

While Merten's essay is very engaging, it is at times somewhat polemic. He is certainly justified in highlighting the regime's exploitation of East German workers. Yet, a greater degree of nuance would have offered additional insights. For example, Mertens pays little attention to changes over time or to regional differentiation. Mertens could have situated shift work within a larger context, with comparisons with other Soviet-style societies or Western countries. He could also have reflected on the methodologies involved in those "confidential East German dissertations" and elaborated to what end they were kept "confidential." How was the collision between party ideology and empirical findings negotiated by the authors of those dissertations? What in-built conflicts within the research paradigms came to light during his examination?

Annegret Schuele—a trained historian with a strong interest in social history whose research focus is not only in East Germany but also industrial history—has contributed an excellent piece on female workers in the GDR's cotton-weaving industry. The author of a well-researched monograph on the experiences of female cotton-weaving workers in Leipzig, she focuses her chapter in this volume on the everyday life and cultural world of workers' brigades at the VEB Leipziger Baumwollspinnerei. Her well-structured article probes how "socialist brigades" were intended by the regime to be germinal to the formation of workers' identities. Schuele points out that the ruling party and most workers agreed on the central importance of workers' brigades to their self-perception. Far from being associated simply with labor (and thus income), workers' brigades became a sort of second family (a home away from home), with whom participants not only worked but socialized and relaxed with after hours. Schuele notes that East German party

ideologues as well as Western-trained sociologists curiously concur on how the regime supposedly succeeded in achieving complete control over the workers via workers' brigades. Schuele offers a more differentiated perspective, drawing on Alf Luedtke's now well-known concept of *Eigensinn*. Following Luedtke, Schuele charts a broader range of reactions by participants in workers' brigades than previously considered, including accommodation, keeping a distance and the open rejection of the regime's agenda. In considering this range, Schuele does not romanticize her research subjects. On the contrary, she concludes that despite hopeful signs during the 1950s and 1960s, workers' brigades did not represent workers' interests to the company hierarchy. Most female employees came to accept their powerlessness in dealing with management. However, this state of affairs did not translate into utter passivity, as women workers more successfully concentrated their efforts on improving day-to-day environmental conditions, such as lunch breaks.

Schuele is sensitive to changes over time and takes complex dynamics into consideration when examining the interaction between everyday life and workers' brigades. Her carefully examined case studies illuminate what it meant for those brigades and their members to "work, learn, and live according to socialist principles" (ADD PAGE NUMBER). In addition, her chapter benefits from being well versed in the scholarly literature on the subject matter, as her references to such experts as Peter Huebner and Joerg Roesler exhibit.

Annette Kaminsky, an expert on the cultural and social history of the GDR, has written an engaging chapter about the private donations of West Germans to their less prosperous East German relatives. She succinctly chronicles the real impact as well as the perceptions regarding West German gift packages within GDR society, seeking to understand how and why most East Germans attributed a higher value to Western products than their own, even when the qualitative differences were at times more a matter of packaging than of substance. She begins by comparing American CARE packages in the West with the much leaner offerings from Soviet troops in the East after World War II. From the outset, East Germans had to content themselves with basic foodstuffs, such as bread and soup, while Western powers could impress those in their sphere of influence with more desirable items, like cigarettes, coffee, chewing gum and chocolate, among other things. The introduction of the Marshall Plan also contributed to an increasingly visible accumulation of consumer goods in what became West Germany,

while the fledgling East struggled to catch up. Over the four decades of the GDR's existence, catching up became an uphill battle. It is refreshing, however, to observe how Kaminsky offers a more complex understanding of East German economic developments, paying attention to improvements in the East while also pointing out how these improvements, impressive as they were on their own terms, were always evaluated by most East Germans in contrast to the more successful West Germany (as opposed to the much less-developed Soviet Union or other Eastern European countries). Kaminsky also takes note of change over time. During the early decades of the GDR, Western products were vilified and even used as a way to criminalize those portions of GDR society that the regime wanted to check, such as independent shopkeepers and owners of bed-and-breakfasts. Yet in later decades, the regime came to realize a growing dependence on those gift packages—as their content compensated for shortages in the East. A case in point was the so-called Coffee Crisis of 1977, when the regime compensated for the dramatic increase in coffee prices by liberalizing the conditions for private West-to-East coffee gifts. However this liberalization also further undermined the legitimacy of the regime, inasmuch as Western products—and even the emptied packages—became status symbols within East Germany. In order not to alienate East German consumers who lacked the luxury of Western relatives and friends, the regime established so-called *Delikat* stores, intended to offer higher quality and attractively packaged goods. Yet these more expensive stores became a source of discontent, as "ordinary" products disappeared from normal stores and resurfaced in the specialty outlets.

Among the many strengths of Kaminsky's essay is her tendency to look at developments in the East within an all-German and West German context. She makes this comparison especially when probing how excessive East German complaints to Western relatives in letters led the latter to assume that East Germany continued to lack even basic goods decades after the end of World War II. Thus well-meaning Westerners included more basic products, like butter, in their gift packages. Naturally, the East German recipients of these packages, expecting more exotic Western goods, were often disappointed at such inclusions. Yet East Germans failed to appreciate how their disappointments were the result of their own outward projections regarding conditions at home. Too often life within the GDR is examined in isolation, when, more accurately, it was symbiotically linked with its West German counterpart. Moving even beyond the East Ger-

man/West German comparative context, some implications of Kaminsky's work have larger comparative implications. When the author looks at East Germany's efforts to hold its own in the radio music pop-cultural sphere, she points to the regime's seemingly quixotic efforts to permit only 40 percent Western content, thus defending 60 percent East German musical content. Such efforts were not singular to East Germany. France and Canada also devised somewhat similar policies to preserve their cultural autonomy. Finally, on a technical note, Kaminsky's contribution would have been more user-friendly if it had included a more developed bibliography. Some of the footnote sources need extra contextualization to be fully comprehensible, such as on pages 100 and 106.

Ilse Nagelschmidt, a professor of literary studies at the University of Leipzig, looks at GDR fiction's references to everyday life through the lens of gender. She considers the emergence of an interest in and discourse regarding everyday life in East Germany since the 1960s. Whereas the cultural climate of the 1950s emphasized heroic storylines, interest in the ordinary became more important with Brigitte Reimann's 1961 watershed short story "Ankunft im Alltag." After a brief excursion into how the subject matter of daily life was explored by East German literary theorists, historians, sociologists and cultural anthropologists, Nagelschmidt turns to a more detailed examination of Reimann's literary development in the 1950s and 60s. The enigmatic writer is placed into a context with several of her well-known peers, foremost Christa Wolf and Irmtraud Morgner. Nagelschmidt proceeds to link the health problems of Wolf, Morgner and especially Reimann with the pressures of political and aesthetic conformity as demanded by the East German state. Reimann struggled to accommodate herself to life in the GDR but paid a high price, eventually succumbing to cancer in 1973. Nagelschmidt's theoretical perspective is shaped largely by Judith Butler's approach to gender and the gendered body; she argues for the centrality of the culturally encoded body to gender roles. She also makes brief references to other thinkers, such as Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault. However, Nagelschmidt's discussion of theoretical issues is less developed than her exploration of Reimann's writings. There she focuses on classic examples of Reimann's prose, the novel *Franziska Linkerhand* and Reimann's diaries, published during the GDR's existence as well as after its fall. These pieces deal with issues of loss, alienation, identity confusion and Reimann's struggles with the physical and emotional violence of life within East Germany but also as a part of modernity more generally.

While Nagelschmidt's essay is rich in promising ideas, her discussion of Reimann needs to be more effectively integrated into her general remarks on GDR discourses of daily life. One would also wish for a more developed conclusion than the one currently provided. However, these shortcomings do not overrule the overall readability of her essay as an engaging introduction to Reimann's place in the literary and cultural landscape of East Germany.

Christian Sachse, a Protestant minister in the former GDR who has since become a political scientist with research interests in right-wing radicalism has contributed a chapter dealing with East German mandatory paramilitary training. Given his personal involvement as a scholar analyzing a now-historical phenomenon and his active participation in the events he now studies, Sachse has succeeded in balancing both.

He carefully considers how the theory and practice of paramilitary education and training supported as well as undermined the regime's legitimacy, and he is mindful of changes within the structure and function of such training. During the formative years of the GDR's existence, paramilitary training was meant to mobilize the population behind the regime and encourage extraordinary efforts—especially when it came to the construction of otherwise unfeasible projects, such as the Sosa water reservoirs. Voluntary construction brigades were organized along military command models. Paramilitary units were also among those deployed to build the Wall in 1961. Military discipline and a chain-of-command-style attitude were desirable to the regime in its efforts to construct a Socialist society along Soviet lines. Yet starting in the mid-1960s, the regime refined its tools for maintaining power and relied less on the coarse threads of physical intimidation: carrot dangling replaced the earlier, more militant approach. Generous support, including professional promotions, was awarded to those who served in the paramilitary units integrated in most East German companies. Individuals who voluntarily extended the mandatory one-and-a-half year military duty to three were far more likely to attend university in lucrative areas, such as medicine. Yet certain forms of militarism continued to intrude into diverse aspects of life. A case in point is the school system, which introduced mandatory civil defense courses and summer paramilitary camp training programs. Elementary and high school students frequently had to assemble in military-type formation before classes and listen to rehearsed tirades about the "aggressive potential" of the Western imperialists, as contrasted with the benign and peace-

loving countermeasures of the Warsaw Pact.

Curiously, the GDR's emphasis (on bringing about new socialist personality traits via militarizing significant parts of society) collided with its official rhetoric about peace, disarmament and the longstanding socialist pacifist tradition. Sachse, whose paper is much stronger in terms of general observation than specific case studies, could have examined such innate conflicts by looking at particular situations, such as the one that occurred during the late 1980s at the Ossietzky high school in Berlin. There a group of students was expelled for criticizing the regime from a pacifist vantage point. Interestingly enough, the regime had paid homage to pacifism by naming this school after the pacifist activist Carl von Ossietzky. Thus the students argued in their own defense that the GDR with its militaristic practices was betraying its own ideals.

Another issue that Sachse could have engaged at least in passing is how East Germany's militarism was situated within the larger context of Communist and, here especially, German Communist traditions. After all, the party had placed its efforts into the tradition of Communist paramilitary units, such as the Weimar Republic *Rotfrontkämpferbund*. Similarly, given that the GDR was not just part of the Soviet sphere of influence but also a German state, Sachse could have considered what continuities and discontinuities linked East German practices with those of, say, Prussian militarism. In short, engaging a somewhat broader context would have benefited this otherwise very interesting piece. Finally, one again would also have hoped for a more sustained conclusion.

Tobias Wunschik (an expert on left-wing extremism, terrorism, and the Stasi secret service) has contributed a chapter on the activities of the West German-based, Maoist Communist Party of Germany/Marxist-Leninists (KPD/ML) in East Germany. This tiny party, established in 1968, boasted few more than eight hundred members and about eight thousand voters. Influenced by a mixture of the thought of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, as well as that of Stalin and Mao, the KPD/ML came increasingly under the spell of the Albanian leader and ideologue Enver Hodja. This party (as hostile to the West as to the Soviet Union and its East German satellite) worked towards a revolutionary transformation of both German states into a "proletarian" republic. Wunschik focuses on the various ways in which the KPD/ML sought to undermine the East German regime, which the party regarded as "revisionist" and at odds with a true workers' state. This tiny party possessed a disciplined circle of activists,

who recruited members in the East with considerable energy and ingenuity, establishing a clandestine network of cells. Nevertheless, all of this was done on a very small scale. For example, in 1976, the KPD/ML had only about ten followers in the GDR, despite the party's efforts to found an East German section. This number increased to less than forty by 1980, together with about sixty sympathizers. They received instruction from about fifty Western party operatives, who crossed into East Germany disguised as visitors or business people. The GDR regime responded by massively penetrating this party with informants, who either posed as new converts or were established KPD/ML cadres "turned" by the Stasi. If one adds the number of informants to that of full-time secret service personnel who worked on the KPD/ML, one learns that those people involved in spying on this party outnumbered its actual members. Thus one has to ask why the East German regime devoted such resources to a numerically insignificant enemy with next to no influence on either side of the Iron Curtain. The answer is two-fold. The GDR was a highly ideological state and could not tolerate alternative groups. Since the KPD/ML competed with the ruling SED regime over the claim of knowing and pursuing the best course toward socialism and communism, it was perceived as an especially insidious challenge.

Another consideration might have elucidated why the regime found this numerically insignificant group so dangerous. While most East German dissidents were on the Left and thus committed to maintaining the GDR as a socialist alternative to capitalist West Germany, the KPD/ML thought and acted according to an all-German agenda. They were truly interested in creating a united Germany along their utopian lines, and this outlook was repugnant to the ruling East German party. On the whole, Wunschik's contribution is well written and engaging. Among its strengths is a longer conclusion.

In addition to being the editor and contributing the first essay, Mertens also offers the last chapter in this collection. As an expert in Jewish history, but also in science, education, and the experience of exile, Mertens provides a well-organized overview of the return of some anti-Nazi scholars and intellectuals to postwar Germany—more specifically to the GDR. Hitler's rise to power in 1933 amounted to Germany's intellectual self-decapitation, as many of its best scholars, writers and artists were forced out due to antisemitism and political repression. Mertens provides detailed biographical sketches (especially in the appendix) and quantitative data, examining issues such as which universities and,

more specifically, what departments were affected by the forced emigration of professors. He also considers what countries were most preferred by those emigrants, and in what sequence emigrants returned to Germany after the defeat of the Nazis. Mertens reminds us that only a small portion of these professors and assistants returned to Germany. Out of those who did, many chose to wait for several more years in order to ascertain whether post-war Germany would really break with Nazism. While Mertens is certainly correct in pointing out how the East German regime sought to instrumentalize the returned scholars, artists and intellectuals for its own ideological ends, he could have engaged the very rich literature on the difficulties that returned exiles had experienced in the West. After all, East German history cannot fully be understood without correlating it to events in the West. One strength of this chapter lies in Mertens' willingness to

allow for complexity and nuance. A case in point is his treatment of such well-known re-emigrants as the historians Alfred Meusel and Juergen Kuczynski. While both were Marxists, deeply committed to the GDR, they also resisted the narrowness of life there.

Unter dem Deckel der Diktatur is exactly what it promises to be in its foreword. Its chapters offer preliminary research results regarding a variety of aspects of daily life in the GDR. One can look forward to more developed versions of those papers in future publications, which will hopefully also confront, in a more systematic fashion, the theoretical issues of East German history in its wider context. At this point, however, the present volume is best for those interested in and already familiar with East German history. Within those parameters, I recommend it.

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Citation: Axel Fair-Schulz. Review of Mertens, Lothar, *Unter dem Deckel der Diktatur: Soziale und kulturelle Aspekte des DDR-Alltags*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. March, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11575>

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