



**Peter Vodosek, Wolfgang Schmitz.** *Bibliotheken, Bücher und andere Medien in der Zeit des Kalten Krieges.* Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005. 216 S. EUR 59.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-447-05287-0.



**Reviewed by** Jens Gieseke (Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung, Potsdam)

**Published on** H-German (May, 2007)

## The Cold War in Libraries

The cultural dimension of the East-West conflict has become the object of intense research in recent years. Writing a general account of the Cold War that confines itself to the military, diplomacy, and high politics would be virtually unthinkable nowadays. Revelations of vigorous activities on the part of western agencies in propagating their view of the “free world” through the promotion of writers, publishers, periodicals, and, sometimes, by means of restrictions have played no small part in underlining how intense these cultural interchanges really were, particularly during the most acute phase of confrontation in the 1950s and 1960s. One need only mention the enlistment of such famous writers as George Orwell in the cause. Books and other media, and hence libraries as well, played a key role in this conflict.

The Wolfenbütteler Arbeitskreis für Bibliotheksgeschichte picked up this topic at its twelfth annual conference in 2002, at the famed Herzog August Bibliothek in Lower Saxony. Thirteen essays are collected in the conference anthology, which focuses on the inter-German state of affairs and, in particular, the development of the Cold War’s front-line city, divided Berlin. References to

framework topics and the current state of debate are variously pronounced. The phrase “In der Zeit des Kalten Krieges” was taken by some authors to be synonymous with “post-1945” rather than as an analytical framework.

Particularly noteworthy are articles by Louise S. Robbins on American libraries in the Joseph McCarthy era; by Eva Welsch on the founding and early history of Hessian newspapers, especially the left-leaning *Frankfurter Rundschau*; and by Edgar Lersch on the various course-setting events in broadcasting policy in both East and West, each side aiming to disseminate their own point of view in the respective other Germany. Robbins describes McCarthy’s ultimately failed attempt to purge the libraries of State Department-run Amerika-Häuser and information centers of books by “any controversial persons, Communists, fellow travellers, et cetera” (p. 120). A protest movement of librarians emerged in response that succeeded in preserving the “right to read” and to access free information, providing an occupational group seldom in the political spotlight with an experience of self-awareness and pride. Welsch recounts the early years of the *Frankfurter Rundschau*,

which as a decidedly left-wing paper was not only continually suspected of communist subversion, but also had to contend with the threat of having its license revoked. Edgar Lersch provides an overview of the development of radio stations for the express purpose of reaching the other Germany, more specifically, RIAS, Deutschlandfunk, NWDR and SFB on the one side, Berliner Rundfunk, Deutschlandsender, Deutscher Freiheitssender 904 and Soldatensender 935 on the other. He leaves no doubt as to which stations were more popular, but at the same time points out the inflated hopes concerning listening behavior and the overall effectiveness of these broadcasts.

These highly analytical, source-heavy articles are balanced by a series of insider reports, predominantly from the inner workings of East German libraries, archives, and newspaper editorial offices. The various authors all complain about the patronizing approach of the authorities and their own more or less crafty, more or less successful attempts to create a space for freedom of thought and intellectual nourishment. One such account is Claudia-Leonore TÄschner's retelling of her experiences in the university library in Leipzig, in which she describes the acquisition and lending procedure for the politically noxious books locked away in the *Giftschrank*. Wolfgang Hesse reports on the efforts of the (East) German Photo Library (Deutsche Fotothek) to uphold professional standards of photographic documentation while maintaining inter-German contacts to press photographers with significant collections. Karlheinz Blaschke rounds off these perspectives with an overview of the SED's monopolization and centralization of East German archives. The consequences of being put under control of the Department of the Interior are "UngläÄckssterne Ä¼ber der vierzigÄ¼hrigen Geschichte des DDR-Archivwesens" (p. 208). The result was a prevailing obsession with secrecy and unscientific methods. Particularly onerous was the way archives were used as a dumping ground for superannuated party and police cadres, who as a rule were utterly lacking in the requisite professional skills.

A unique contribution here is that of Reiner Oschmann, a former London correspondent for the SED's central organ, *Neues Deutschland*. He, too, notes the patronizing manner of the paper's editorial office, yet describes it as an "East German side effect" (p. 146) of the Cold War, advancing the view that British newspapers were similarly stereotyped and unfree in their reporting on the GDR. Still, however revealing his inside perspectives may be, he nonetheless consistently manages to dodge the question of his own role in the "Cold War."

These field reports are supplemented by two studies on the conflicts and changes of loyalty characteristic of the early postwar years. Friedhilde Krause gives an account of the first director of the Äffentliche Wissenschaftliche Bibliothek in Berlin and Rudolf Hoecker, while Alexandra Habermann concludes the volume with an article on East-West and West-East migrants in the library scene. Again and again, it becomes apparent that East German librarians found themselves in a balancing act between their love of books and the pressure to conform. Finally, not to be overlooked, along with the introductions by both editors, are the articles on political caricature by Wolfgang Marienfeld and library review services by Otto-Rudolf Rothbart which, admittedly, make little use of the new perspectives and research opportunities opened up since the end of the Cold War.

All told, it is a pity that some authors in this anthology hardly grapple with the current state of debate on the cultural Cold War and that others did not even provide their manuscripts with the most rudimentary documentation to back up their claims. A list of author biographies is also wanting, making it difficult to learn about the authors' varied professional backgrounds. Unfortunately, the volume unwittingly makes a case against the surfeit of redundant, ill-conceived, and poorly edited conference anthologies. One can only hope that the book's rather interesting inquiries into the cultural dimensions of the Cold War are nevertheless given the hearing they deserve.

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

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

**Citation:** Jens Gieseke. Review of Vodosek, Peter; Schmitz, Wolfgang, *Bibliotheken, Bücher und andere Medien in der Zeit des Kalten Krieges*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. May, 2007.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13233>

Copyright © 2007 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).