



**Esther von Richthofen.** *Bringing Culture to the Masses: Control, Compromise and Participation in the GDR.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2009. ix + 239 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-458-6.



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**Published on** H-German (November, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Susan R. Boettcher

## Cultural Agency in State Socialism

Examining the role of individual agency under state socialist dictatorships presents a quandary to the scholar: where to draw the line between adaptation and complicity, manipulation of the system and capitulation to it, and clever pursuit of private interest and perpetuation of a regime? Esther von Richthofen's book on the organization of cultural activity in East Germany purposely blurs this line. She takes explicit issue with analyses that imply a stark choice between withdrawal, dissent, and cooperation under dictatorship. East Germans in the cultural sphere, she argues, did not choose between retreating into a "niche," voicing opposition, or becoming acolytes of the regime, but rather learned to make demands on the system and forced it to respond. Through shifting strategies of complaints and connections, exploiting official positions and rules, and simple stubbornness, the cultural policy of the government softened from high-concept plans for proletarian poets to more prosaic activities that appealed to a growing appetite for personal enjoyment. Richthofen's contribution makes a welcome contribution to GDR scholarship in English and comple-

ments a small but growing number of works dealing with everyday life in the GDR.[1]

The modest dialogue documented in this book between citizens and officials about cultural policy helps account for the relative stability and continuity within the GDR, a context that offers an often neglected background for more dramatic analyses of revolt and collapse. Richthofen gives voice to the mechanisms and machinations of cultural politics that formed a central part of East German everyday life as seen from the perspective of people from members of factory worker's brigades to choir members and stamp collectors in the Potsdam district bordering West Berlin. Adopting a social history approach, she explores the role of mid-level cultural officials in mediating between local desires and central government fantasies of cultural control. Interactions between members of local cultural groups, district officials, and more distant administrative bureaucrats allowed for feedback loops that helped normalize state-led cultural activity. This structure strengthened the regime, but it also highlighted the limits of its policies and provided a

basis for reform.

The key years in the author's analysis are the 1960s and 70s, the "middle period" of the GDR, but her narrative spans the entire period from 1949 to 1990—from the early days, when the state worried about continued participation by former National Socialists and Prussian landholders in rural singing groups, to the last years, when the center became hopelessly estranged from local needs, inviting open sarcasm and a fatal breakdown in communication. Throughout it all, the state was forever caught between its promotion of high culture as a form of socialist *Bildung* and people's consistent desire for "lowbrow" culture. Richthofen uses the German term *Eigen-Sinn* to describe how individuals and groups doggedly followed their own ideas of culture, mainly in the form of hobbies, festivals, and excursions, and effectively undermined state attempts to re-educate them through opera, theater, and writing groups. The government eventually gave in, sanctioning "lowbrow" culture in the 1970s under Erich Honecker. But even this, Richthofen argues, represents more continuity than might meet the eye at first, for despite notable periods in the late 1950s and mid-1960s, during which hard-liners had the upper hand, Honecker (who had opportunistically been a hard-liner himself) essentially continued reforms that had been interrupted. In all these cases, she argues, local demands exerted more influence on central plans than either the party or many observers today would care to admit.

The book scrupulously portrays GDR citizens as possessing agency when it comes to cultural life, a welcome antidote to common prejudices about socialist subjects as immobilized by structural and political factors. Her examples show individuals maximizing their private interest in fairly standard ways, whether through mastering the rules of the game in negotiations with officials or selectively enjoying events and ignoring the less interesting or ideological components. Richthofen terms such activity "exploitation" of officials and cultural structures by citizens. It is perhaps somewhat overstated, however, to claim that because the central government's

unrealistic plans were forced to adapt to real-life conditions, power was "not, therefore, exercised in a top-down model" (p. 212). She uses the term "grass-roots" fairly loosely to mean local level practices and pressures, though the term is more often used in scholarship on popular action to imply a level of reflective political mobilization and coordination absent in the cases at hand.

Richthofen's choice of the Potsdam district as a case study is well justified by its regional diversity, its proximity to West Berlin, and its Prussian heritage, though some comparative evidence within the GDR would have made her narrative even more convincing, for example in its analysis of group membership or the significance of decreasing popular complaints to the authorities about cultural matters from 1974-88. Lastly, she eschews the results of oral history out of concern for historical objectivity, putting first-person experience tantalizingly out of reach for the reader, save for flashes through brigade diaries or reports. Perhaps her future work can mine what must certainly be rich oral history material even if "tainted by hindsight" (p. 20) after 1989—or precisely because of this. Though the book could have benefited from closer editing to help reduce repetition and enhance the flow of her argument, in it, Richthofen shows empirically how key actors functioned within the constraints of the system to produce cultural policy at the local level, and this contribution is an important one.

#### Note

[1]. See, for example, Katherine Pence and Paul Betts, eds., *Socialist Modern: East German Everyday Culture and Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008); Donna Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic: Women, the Family, and Communism in the German Democratic Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Konrad H. Jarausch, ed., *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-cultural History of the GDR* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999); see also Mary Fulbrook, ed., *Power and Society in the GDR, 1961-1979: The 'normalization of rule'?* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009).

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**Citation:** Jonathan Bach. Review of Richthofen, Esther von, *Bringing Culture to the Masses: Control, Compromise and Participation in the GDR*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. November, 2009.

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