

## The People's State. East German Society from Hitler to Honecker

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**Reviewer:**

Josie McLellan

Consider two of the most intriguing facts contained in this book: while around one in six East Germans disliked their country so much that they left it permanently, one in five adults were prepared to become a member of its ruling party, the SED (Socialist Unity Party). The first fact will come as a surprise to nobody. The second fact is rather more unexpected, but what is perhaps most interesting of all is the majority of the population who neither left the country nor wore a membership badge. This book tells their story, paying particular attention to the insistence of many former East Germans that they led 'perfectly ordinary lives'. How can one explain this, given the undoubtedly dictatorial nature of SED rule, and the countless lives that were ruined by state repression? This is what Mary Fulbrook terms the 'people's paradox', which she takes as the starting point for her social history of East Germany.

Fulbrook, of course, is uniquely qualified among Anglo-American historians to tell this story. She has written extremely widely on East German history, and indeed could be forgiven a measure of judicious recycling. But one of the most appealing features of *The People's State* is its author's generous and admirable unwillingness to repeat herself. On topics such as the role of the churches, and the GDR's troubled relationship with the past, readers are directed to previous books such as *Anatomy of a Dictatorship* and *German National Identity After The Holocaust*. This results in a fresh, flowing, and thoughtful account, which is surely her best work yet.

This is an immensely readable book, due to Fulbrook's clear, accessible style, and the book's inviting structure. Part 1 deals with different aspects of what she calls the 'East German social revolution': consumerism, home and privacy, leisure, health and death, youth, and gender. Part 2 turns to the three main social groups in East German society: elite functionaries, the socialist intelligentsia and the nebulous 'working class'. Part 3 explicitly conceptualises the structures of power and participation in the East German dictatorship, with chapters on the diffusion of power, the socialist public sphere and the culture of complaint.

All fourteen chapters are seemingly brief, but contain a deceptive amount of material and analysis. Fulbrook makes creative use of the secondary literature where it is available, but switches seamlessly to archival material in areas where the research is thinner on the ground, particularly in the superb chapter on health and illness.

If Fulbrook's book has one main theme, it is that of 'participatory dictatorship'. This term nicely captures the tension between the sometimes brutally coercive nature of SED rule and the fact that millions of its citizens (Fulbrook estimates 8-16 per cent of the population) took on significant functions in one or other of the organs of the party and state: trade unions, cultural organisations armed forces etc. Not all of these people did so out of political conviction, and Fulbrook is particularly good on the shifting and ambiguous motivations for participation. For some, the desire to contribute to the community was paramount, for others the unspoken rewards of participation played a greater role, whether jumping the queue for an allotment or preferential access to higher education. Joining in did not necessarily mean that one bought into state socialism. 'It was possible', Fulbrook concludes, 'both to have participated in the structures of power, and yet simultaneously to have been openly critical of the regime – even well before 1989' (p. 236). Nowhere was this clearer than in the letters of complaint sent to the regime in their millions where citizens prefaced their coruscating critiques of East German housing, food and social policy with lengthy testimonials to their socialist credentials. Here, membership of the SED or mass organisation was often used as a means of proving oneself as a deserving citizen.

But this is not to imply that participation was merely or always cynical. There is much evidence to support Fulbrook's assertion that 'distinct traces of socialist idealism as well as Western consumerism' were to be found among the East German population (p. 140). Work on environmental petitioning, for example, indicates that not all letters to the state written with complaint in mind. In the early 1970s, almost one third of petitions about the environment were ideas and proposals, rather than grumbles or queries, for example the suggestion that all young East Germans be made to do six months' service in an 'environmental protection troop'. This proportion fell sharply, however, from 30 per cent in 1972 to 14 per cent in 1976, and just eight percent in 1979. By 1981 it had reached an all time low of 0 per cent. (1)

Fulbrook's explanation of the people's gradual estrangement from 'their' state is a convincing one. If the GDR can be said to have had a golden age, it took place in the 1960s. With the privations of the immediate post-war period behind them, East Germans were able to enjoy the first fruits of consumer socialism. Paradoxically, the building of the Berlin wall prompted attempts at domestic social reform, although their success rate was mixed at best. Economic and technological innovation created opportunities for those from modest backgrounds to climb the social ladder. But the gains of the later Ulbricht period, along with the Western TV pictures beamed into almost every East German household, ultimately raised expectations to unachievable heights. As both the economy and the social revolution stagnated in the 1970s, and the Biermann affair demonstrated the illusory nature of Honecker's rhetoric of liberalisation, East German society became more individualistic, and its members more disillusioned. What utopianism may have existed was replaced by materialism, and constructive suggestions turned to complaint and outright hostility.

This is above all a humane history. Fulbrook has sympathy not only with the woman driven to write to the regime by the fact that seven members of her family had to sleep in a two room flat, but also with the stressed out lower level functionary whose job it was to answer her letter. The discussion of the motivation of Stasi informers is particularly sensitive. How to explain the 500,000 East Germans who informed on their families, colleagues and neighbours in the Honecker era alone? A discussion of the diary of writer Brigitte Reimann, approached by the Stasi in 1957, shows that idealism, adventure, and coercion could all play a role. Reimann soon realised what 'swine' her Stasi contacts were, and had the strength of mind to break with them. But how many others have lacked her courage?

*The People's State* is a wonderfully assured social history of the GDR. But it is more than just a synthesis. Indeed, one of its great strengths is the future directions it suggests. Perhaps most intriguing of all is Fulbrook's description of how power worked in the GDR. 'Power', she writes, 'spread like a dye through the wider fabric of society, colouring great patches of all areas of professional occupation and social activity, in

some areas visible and benign, in others dark and disturbing' (p. 249). In some ways, this sounds tantalisingly close to a Foucauldian conception of power, particularly Foucault's claim that 'power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations'. (2) It would also be interesting to know how this relates to some of the recent work on the Soviet Union such as Stephen Kotkin's *Magnetic Mountain*. Kotkin places a far greater emphasis on a positive identification with the regime, describing Stalinism as a 'set of values, a social identity, a way of life'. (3) Fulbrook does not go this far, but she shares Kotkin's interest in participation, the diffusion of power and the interaction between regime and population. The decision to avoid lengthy historiographical or theoretical discussion in *The People's State* was a sound one, which undoubtedly makes a significant contribution to the book's readability. But it would be fascinating to see Fulbrook further explicate her conceptualisation of power in another forum. The term 'participatory dictatorship' is also one that could be fruitfully tested on other authoritarian regimes. What was the nature of 'participation' in the Third Reich, for example, when taking part in Strength through Joy holidays or writing to their local NSDAP office? This is not to criticise Fulbrook's term in the slightest, but to point out its potential usefulness as an analytical tool beyond the boundaries of the GDR.

The chapter on gender also suggests intriguing directions for future research. Fulbrook gives a wonderfully differentiated account of the experiences of women, whose attitudes towards work and family varied radically depending on their age, job and expectations. While women as a whole benefited from state subsidised childcare and the chance to be financially independent, workers in traditionally female, poorly paid factory jobs may have felt less than emancipated. Fulbrook does not deny the gains, but concludes soberingly that

the majority of women continued to lead extremely hard lives, concentrated predominantly at the lower levels of any hierarchy, where they had lower social status and less control over their work than did their male superiors; and they continued to rush around in an often-frenzied attempt to accomplish, in addition, the majority of mundane tasks required to keep families and households functioning (p. 174).

What role men played in all this has yet to be explored. Fulbrook's claim that male gender roles remained relatively static seems plausible. But future historians of the GDR will need to further examine the role played by masculinity, both the continuation of the misogynistic traditions of German communism, and the ways in which a powerful image of masculinity was used as a strategy of rule. Women were appealed to as both workers and mothers, and presented with flowers and chocolates at the annual, vaguely patronising celebrations of International Women's Day. But what role did the muscular, uncomplicated masculinity favoured by the regime play in winning men over to cooperate or participate? Given the male dominated nature of East German power structures, might it have been counterproductive to challenge gender roles in ways which might have been uncomfortable for men?

Since the collapse of the Berlin Wall, popular fiction and non-fiction accounts have presented East Germany as a cold, inhospitable country, where every move was shadowed by Stasi agents, normal family life was an impossibility, and innocent pleasures were few and far between.(4) This was, of course, a reality for those unlucky enough to fall foul of the state, many of whose lives were ruined or cut short. But there is more to East Germany than this 'Stasiland' view of history might suggest. As Fulbrook puts it, 'Of course it was a dictatorship. But it was not only a dictatorship' (p. 11). *The People's State* goes a long way towards helping us to understand this curious mixture of the extreme and the everyday. Above all, this empathetic account puts East Germans back into their own history. As such, it will surely act not only as a standard work on GDR society, but also as a model for the emerging social history of post-war Europe.

## Notes

1. Leon Quinn, 'The politics of pollution?: Government, environmentalism and mass opinion in East Germany, 1972–1990' (University of Bristol PhD thesis, 2002), pp. 101, 342. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge. The History of Sexuality: vol. 1* (Harmondsworth, 1990), p. 94. [Back to \(2\)](#).
3. Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley, Calif., 1995), p. 23. [Back to \(3\)](#).
4. Two recent examples are Anna Funder, *Stasiland* (2003) and Nicholas Shakespeare, *Snowleg* (2004). [Back to \(4\)](#).

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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