

Bringing Culture to the Masses: Control, Compromise and Participation in the GDR

Review Number:

902

Publish date:

Friday, 30 April, 2010

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ISBN:

9781845454586

Date of Publication:

2009

Price:

£55.00

Pages:

256pp.

Publisher:

Berghahn

Place of Publication:

New York, NY

Reviewer:

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If one surveys post-1989 scholarship of the GDR, one puzzle cannot but catch the eye. Totalitarianism theory, nourished by the wider political climate, has been in rude health, and yet, study after study has exposed its inadequacies. Meticulous archive-based research has shown that grassroots interests influenced the behaviour of middle-level functionaries and even central policy makers to a considerably greater extent than the totalitarianism model allows. While the ruling Communist Party (SED) did attempt to shape and control important facets of the everyday lives of East German citizens, their behaviour exerted a significant influence upon its prescriptions, and they were able to evade or (less frequently) to defy them. Histories of GDR industrial relations, for example, abound with accounts of planners and managers yielding to shop floor resistance, and of officials agreeing to negotiate and compromise. At times, the authorities encouraged workers to voice their opinions and articulate their grievances – so long as they did not express overtly political criticisms of the regime. In the 1960s, as Jeffrey Kopstein has shown, workers' resistance was a significant factor that contributed to the curtailment and ultimately the collapse of a reform programme, the 'New Economic System' (NÖS). As a consequence of workers' recalcitrance, the history of labour in post-war East Germany resembled less the imposition of a master plan of sovietisation than perpetual crisis management.

In the field of culture, something similar applies. Deviations from the SED's value-system could be countered with brute intimidation but, equally, could provoke the regime into moderating its position. By way of illustration, consider rock music. When in the 1950s and 1960s jazz, rock 'n' roll, beat, and jeans began to gain mass appeal, campaigns were launched against them. The SED suspected these Western

musical and sartorial trends of being a Trojan Horse in which those cultural ambassadors of imperialism – Elvis, the Stones, the Beatles – had brought ‘NATO’ fashions, lyrics and glamour into the homes and dreams of East German youth. Rock fans were branded as deviants. (‘Unkempt, dirty, long shaggy manes; ragged trousers. They stink ten metres down wind’, railed the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*.⁽¹⁾) And these responded in kind: they would “combine their demands for rock ‘n’ roll with depraved ravings against our leading comrades”, one functionary complained.⁽²⁾ In its battle against Western popular music the regime steadily lost ground over the course of the 1960s. (Indeed, argues Toby Thacker, it was ‘fought and lost even before the Wall was built’.⁽³⁾) In retreat, the regime attempted to neutralise the challenge through the promotion of domestic rock bands and by setting up ‘song clubs’ under the auspices of the Free German Youth (FDJ) and DT64, a youth radio station. Although only partially successful – because the sounds and lyrics of approved bands were so bland, so lacking in passion and authenticity – the earlier adamant anti-rock position did soften, and was ultimately abandoned.

It is culture, understood broadly, that forms the subject of Esther von Richthofen’s study. She begins by placing the SED’s approach to culture in historical context, specifically with reference to two major influences. One was ‘the cultural revolution in Soviet Russia of the late 1920s and early 1930s’ (pp. 5–6). At that juncture the previous ‘liberal cultural model’ of the early years of Bolshevism ‘came to an end with Stalin’s cultural revolution’, which heralded ‘a new phase of cultural intolerance’, a set of attitudes that the SED dutifully took on board. The other consisted of (p. 4) a German tradition of the subjection of leisure activities to institutional control. It spanned at least the first half of the 20th century. Whether under Wilhelmine, Weimar or Nazi auspices, ‘the ruling classes as well as the bourgeoisie feared that the workers would engage in disreputable behaviour in their free time, which could culminate in social unrest’. State control of mass culture offered a means by which the threat could be countered. Nor was this simply a pre-war phenomenon. In post-war Germany, politicians of both East and West revealed a penchant for politicising culture. Both groups (p. 4) showed pronounced tendencies ‘of narrow-mindedness and intolerance’, and, more generally, ‘petit bourgeois attitudes towards cultural activity’.

This last point echoes the Leipzig philosopher Ernst Bloch’s aperçu, that the SED sought to impose ‘the dictatorship of petit-bourgeois taste in the name of the proletariat’.⁽⁴⁾ Like their conservative counterparts in the West, SED functionaries distrusted rock ‘n’ roll for its hedonism, sexuality, aggression, excess and rebellious flair. Like their ‘brothers’ to the East, they embraced a conservative aesthetic in their domestic environment, surrounding themselves with chintz curtains, thick pile carpets and polka-dotted tea cups. There was a Victorian flavour to the pious and patronising manner in which they would preach to the population: on the virtues of pursuing a career, founding a family, and working diligently and uncomplainingly for the good of the country. If in the 1950s there was fervour in the sermonising, by the 1980s that had faded – but the pieties remained, contributing to that stolid, stiff and stuffy quality that characterised official East German culture in its final decade. Stefan Wolle’s term ‘Socialist Biedermeier’ captures the tone very well.⁽⁵⁾ SED leader Eric Honecker excelled at pedagogical preaching. He would, for example, admonish his flock that ‘Our German Democratic Republic is a clean state, in which there are unshakeable standards of ethics and morality, of propriety and decorum’.⁽⁶⁾ Cleanliness and propriety were, likewise, at the heart of what Minister of Culture, Kurt Hager, defined as ‘working culture’ (p. 178). In order for a workplace to be a ‘cultured environment’, he lectured, there had to be ‘order and cleanliness at the workplace, in the factory grounds, at the construction site ... Where they are not being strived for, there can be no mention of socialist culture. It is a question of a worker’s honour to produce punctually, with high quality, and in a tidy workplace’.

Whether within and without the workplace, the focus of von Richthofen’s study is on leisure-time pursuits. By controlling the leisure sphere, the SED (p.2 15) hoped to reach ‘people’s hearts and minds and secure their support’ for its rule. The intention was to provide a limited and specific range of cultural pursuits that promised to instil citizens ‘with intellectual qualities, to increase their productivity at work by providing recreation and relaxation’, and to counter ‘potentially damaging Western cultural influences’ by ensuring that they only engaged with SED-approved practices. ‘Cultural mass work’ thus formed a central pillar of SED policy, and sustained efforts were made to establish ‘wide-ranging state-organised cultural structures’

throughout the country.

In the first phase of its rule, the SED's focus in the mass-cultural arena was upon promoting highbrow activities. Art and literature were regarded as means by which popular consciousness could be moulded. But through the late 1950s and 1960s 'the understanding of what constituted cultural activities was broadened considerably' (p. 7). It now came to include 'a variety of lowbrow activities, as well as hobby activities', and the pedagogic emphasis declined. Von Richthofen surveys a range of 'lowbrow activities', including for example the collection of 'the packaging around differently sized containers for igniting material' – i.e. matchboxes. (Evidently, allowing citizens' nerdier tendencies to thrive was not seen by the SED as a potential threat.)

Did the engagement by individuals in leisure pursuits such as matchbox collecting signify a rejection of public life in favour of the private niche? This sort of conclusion is favoured by totalitarianism theory, but von Richthofen repudiates it. She maintains that choice was not restricted to that of withdrawing into niches, on the one hand, and bowing one's head obediently to the dictatorship, accepting its manipulation of one's desires, on the other. Those who posit this dichotomy ignore the simple fact that 'organised cultural activities in the GDR satisfied people's personal interests' (p. 96). And while the SED aspired to deploy 'cultural mass work' to oversee citizens' free time, it could never fully succeed. Cultural life in the GDR, she insists (p. 13) 'was not a homogeneous, state-controlled affair'. Ordinary citizens were able to exert a considerable influence upon policy, especially during the 1960s and 1970s, during which decades the SED was obliged to moderate its attempts to fit popular cultural practices into its ideological mould, and instead adapted its aspirations to popular culture. A case in point is rock music (mentioned above, and in von Richthofen, p. 103). Another is the celebration of carnival (p. 183). Whereas in the 1950s, carnival was regarded as a degenerate remnant of Germany's bourgeois past, by the 1970s a turnaround had occurred. By then the state, recognising the popularity of carnival, had set up carnival clubs in order to channel revellers into circles organised by itself.

Ordinary people, von Richthofen shows, were able to play the system. When they engaged in state-organised cultural activities the chief motivation was their own 'personal cultural inclination' (p. 105). Keen to realise their desires, they were prepared to integrate into regime structures, and this included negotiating and cooperating with lower- and middle-level functionaries. But (p. 147) this was not necessarily a sign of loyalty to the regime; it could betoken nothing more than the pursuit of a personal agenda. They would pay lip service to the ruling ideology while pursuing their private agendas.

The processes by which individuals and groups made their interests felt are the focus of some of the most interesting passages in *Bringing Culture to the Masses*. For example, in the 1970s workplace 'brigades' were obliged to commit to 'cultural plans'. A typical strategy (p. 129) was to favour 'lowbrow' activities – such as trips to the countryside with colleagues and family members, sporting weekends, festive events with music and alcohol, or card-playing – but to include highbrow activity, such as a trip to the theatre, in order to win official approval of the plan. In some cases, where functionaries let them down, workers were confident enough to register vociferous and robust complaints (e.g. p. 132).

Playing a role in all of these stories were lower- and/or middle-level functionaries. They are the central actors in von Richthofen's book. She does not see their role as particularly crucial in the early 1950s, when repressive techniques of rule loomed particularly large, to which citizens responded with withdrawal and emigration. In the subsequent 20 years, however, relations between rulers and ruled became more complex, differentiated and flexible, with dialogue and communication between ordinary people and middle-level cultural functionaries gaining in importance (p. 17). The role of the functionaries was to ensure that participation in cultural activity was enabled for culturally active people, but simultaneously that cultural life functioned without presenting a serious challenge to the supremacy of the SED. Many showed an ability to compromise, to adapt their tactics in order to enable cultural policy to engage more closely with the interests of citizens. Not all of them, by any means, functioned as obedient cogs within the state machine, and some were quite stropy towards their superordinates. They were not, von Richthofen insists, 'simply regime puppets' (p. 72), and many of them 'tried to circumvent the "political-ideological" content of the cultural

activities they organised' (p. 77) in order to avoid alienating people. (Others were only reluctantly prepared to tolerate concessions to the populace – as for example one SED regional official who complained about working with the FDJ, an organisation which seemed only to be concerned with organising dance events (p. 138).)

Much of the documentary evidence that von Richthofen has marshalled is relevant and interesting. But, it seems to me, she has been too indulgent towards her materials. There is an abundance of trivial detail; stories that occupy much space while shedding little light. By way of illustration, consider the tale of a Karl-Marx-Stadt stamp collector, who requested assistance from the state in retrieving some money that he had rashly lent to a fellow philatelist. The point of the story is that the functionaries involved were less than overjoyed at receiving this request. Is this even noteworthy, let alone remarkable? Functionaries expressing impatience at a trivial request? Does this tell us anything at all about the GDR?

But there is worse. The platitudinous nature of some of the empirical evidence is coupled with a banality of analysis. For example, following a discussion of a workers' cultural plan, in which they insisted that time be allocated to card games (skat), the author concludes that, 'In terms of its celebration of playing skat and of socialising, this highlights the fact that there was some continuity between the middle and the later period of the GDR' (p. 198). Elsewhere we learn that the 'Biermann affair' of 1976 (in which the dissident chanteur Wolf Biermann was expatriated) 'showed that the broadening of the cultural structures [of the 1960s and 1970s] had -not brought with it unending levels of tolerance' (p. 184). (Really?!) And in the book's conclusion the reader learns that 'As a result of the prevalent [*sic*] position of functionaries, it is not useful to divide the GDR into 'state' and 'society' and to characterise these as dichotomous entities that existed either in isolation or in juxtaposition with one another' (p. 216). At other times the author is prone to exaggeration, as in the assertion that in East Germany 'a great deal of freedom was infused into young people's cultural lives' (p. 160). These instances of flat-footed, clunky, or ill-considered analysis are not exceptions; there are too many of them, and they detract from a book that in other respects reads well, and which could become a standard reference for scholars researching the 'mass-cultural' policy of the SED.

Notes

1. Per Ketman, *Anders Reisen DDR* (Hamburg, 1987). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship: Inside the GDR, 1949–1989* (Oxford, 1995), p. 164. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Toby Thacker, 'The fifth column: dance music in the early GDR' in *The Workers and Peasants State: Communism and Society in East Germany, 1945–71*, ed. Patrick Major and Jonathan Osmond (Manchester, 2002), pp. 227–43. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Erich Loest, *Durch die Erde ein Riss : ein Lebenslauf* (Hamburg, 1981), p. 265. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Stefan Wolle, *Die heile Welt der Diktatur* (Berlin, 1998), p. 230. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Heinz Brandt, *The Search for a Third Way*, (Munich, 1970), p. 269. [Back to \(6\)](#)

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