WRITING EAST GERMAN HISTORY:
WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES THE CULTURAL TURN MAKE?

Conference at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, December 5-7, 2008. Co-sponsored by the GHI Washington, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), and the following institutions at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor: Eisenberg Institute for Historical Studies, International Institute, College of LSA, Department of History, Department of German, Center for Russian and East European Studies, and Office of the Vice President for Research; as well as the College of Arts and Sciences and Department of History at Western Michigan University. Conveners: Uta Balbier (GHI), Benita Blessing (Ohio University), Geoff Eley (University of Michigan), Heather Gumbert (Virginia Tech), and Eli Rubin (Western Michigan University). Participants: Melanie Arndt (ZZF Potsdam), Dolores Augustine (St. John’s University), Paul Betts (University of Sussex), Monica Black (Furman University), Kathleen Canning (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), April Eisman (Iowa State University), Jennifer Evans (Carleton University, Ottawa), Krisztina Fehervary (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), Donna Harsch (Carnegie Mellon University), Erik Huneke (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), Justinian Jampol (Wende Museum), Sandrine Kott (University of Geneva), Alf Lüdtke (University of Erfurt), Heather Mathews (Pacific Lutheran University), Scott Moranda (SUNY-Cortland), Jon Olsen (University of Massachusetts, Amherst), Jan Palmowski (King’s College, London), Kathy Pence (CUNY-Baruch), Andrew Port (Wayne State University), Hedwig Richter (Stiftung Aufarbeitung, Berlin), Annemarie Sammartino (Oberlin College), Leonard Schmiding (University of Leipzig), Lewis Siegelbaum, (Western Michigan University), Scott Spector (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), Alice Weinreb (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), Albrecht Wiesner (ZZF Potsdam).

As we approach the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, a new generation of GDR scholarship is emerging on both sides of the Atlantic. In the 1990s, historians of the GDR revived totalitarianism theory to explain the emergence, persistence, and subsequent fall of the East German state. Increasingly, the GDR came to be understood as the “second German dictatorship,” comparable to Nazi Germany in the goals, means, and practice of power. Such studies often seemed driven by an ideological commitment to delineating the boundaries between the “democratic” FRG and the East German “Unrechtsstaat”. But the integration of social history and Alltagsgeschichte began to break down this top-down narrative of repression and dissent. The rhetoric of dictatorship shifted as social historians considered the ways in which the regime attempted to build consensus for its rule. By the late 1990s, historians had begun to delineate the “limits of dictatorship,” including the difficulties East German authorities had in overcoming the continuities
of the past, as well as the problems posed by postwar political, social, and economic upheaval. Building on the tradition of the history of everyday life, scholars at the Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung (ZZF) in Potsdam, in particular, began to investigate the “social practice of authority,” revealing the complicated ways in which the regime and its citizens exercised power. More recently, there has been an explosion of GDR scholarship that is informed by post-reunification debates about the coercive power of the dictatorship but is strongly influenced by the cultural turn. This new work has expanded the field of investigation to previously under-appreciated areas of research, not in order to negate the history of repression that preoccupied older studies, but in pursuit of understanding the history of power in new, more nuanced ways.

In the interests of exploring this new work, the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor hosted a lively and, at times, impassioned conference on the problems and perspectives of “Writing East German History” during the first weekend of December 2008. Over three days, thirty-one participants discussed pre-circulated position papers on topics as varied as sports, elections, art exhibitions, sexualities, infidelities both sexual and political, land use, food, medicine, television, death, hip-hop, and post-reunification museum practices. This report will explore a few of the broader themes that emerged in the submitted papers and subsequent discussions. More information on the conference can be found on the web at http://web.me.com/calytberg/WEGH/WEGH.html.

The purpose of the conference was to open lines of communication within a diverse and transnational community of scholars whose work seems to encapsulate the new approach to the GDR outlined above. Some of the participants are well-established scholars in the field, while others recently published first books, and still others are only at the start of their careers. In particular, the (largely North American) conference organizers convened the conference to assess the impact of the cultural turn on GDR studies. Central questions included the following: To what extent do cultural analyses help us understand the GDR? Are there a variety of (national) “schools” of GDR studies after the cultural turn? The conference began on a provocative note, with participants staking out distinctive and often defensive positions in their papers. It was clear that the contributors expected a certain amount of resistance to their ideas (and, paradoxically, even to the study of the GDR). Yet the papers taken as a whole represented not a cacophony of discordant voices, but a vibrant picture of the GDR. After two days of discussion, contributors overcame their initial sense of isolation to recognize a common ground.

Keynote speaker Sandrine Kott set the tone, questioning the existence of a “French” school of thought on the GDR, while recognizing that there were
differences in French-language historiography of the GDR, which remain largely unknown in North America and Germany. She described French work as “pre-cultural,” claiming that French scholars are more indebted to the legacy of social history (and the work of Michel Foucault, Arlette Farge, Roger Chartier, and Daniel La Roche). Culture, she argued, is integral to the social and, if one takes social history seriously, then meaning and subjectivity matter without taking the cultural turn into account. French work on the GDR also is less likely to construct communism as a “radical other,” informed as it is by the French experience of a strong, native communist movement. And, of course, the stakes of French work on the GDR are different from those in Germany, where study of the GDR is still beholden to “normative West German perspectives.”

Discussion persistently returned to these themes in the following two days as participants hashed out the meanings of the terms “culture,” “the cultural turn,” and the relationship of culture and cultural analyses to other, more traditional approaches. Contributors held remarkably different ideas about these concepts. While art historians hewed to a narrow model of “culture,” (referring primarily to “the arts”), others asserted a much broader, more anthropological model (culture as a whole way of life). Some questioned the analytical power of the cultural turn, which, as commentator Scott Spector pointed out, “doesn’t have the program or infrastructure of other methodologies … or even a body of privileged theory.” The consensus reached was that historical work after the cultural turn does not ignore the methods and sources of political, social, or military history, but combines these with the study of culture, broadly defined, in a new way, while recognizing the socially and culturally constructed nature of things. That so much of this kind of work currently is being done in the field of GDR studies is perhaps because it enables us to understand better the lifeworld of the GDR, a society that lacked a vibrant social and cultural life that was independent of the state. It was also suggested that students of the GDR are more attracted to the notion of the socially and culturally constructed nature of things because the GDR is West Germany’s Cold War “other.”

Discussion often returned to the question of the “exceptional” nature of the GDR. As suggested above, in the 1990s historical understanding of the GDR focused on the study of the totalitarian state that relied on an apparatus of terror to maintain power, a characterization that drew a significant line in the sand between the GDR and the Federal Republic and has tended toward the creation of a new German Sonderweg. Having considered several other aspects of East German state and society, many of the participants challenged the ostensible exceptionalism of the GDR. Commentator Kathleen Canning,
among others, reminded the participants to avoid “excising the GDR from (important) continuities,” both spatial and temporal, exhorting the field to continue to push further into comparative studies—both to compare (Cold War) East and West, and to locate the GDR in the longer history of modernity. De-Germanizing the GDR—thinking about it in comparison with Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, Scandinavia, or even North America—points to the relative “normality” of the GDR. Temporal continuities also erode any perception of the exceptional nature of the GDR. Canning noted that even the language of the “failed experiment” that has been used widely to describe the GDR has its precedent in debates about the Weimar Republic. For some time, scholars have sought continuities between the Third Reich and the GDR, but they have done so largely with respect to the political regimes. Emerging studies show that the persistence of rituals, ideas, and values of the bourgeois past in what ostensibly was a new social order was just as important.

In that vein, several contributors asserted the need to approach the GDR as an attempt to create an “alternative socialist modernity” and as but one example of multiple, contested, “entangling modernities” (Lewis Siegelbaum). This was a state project, to be sure, but citizens participated as well with their own, sometimes competing, visions of “socialism.” The discipline and subordination of this modernity required its fair share of bargaining and bribing and, like liberal-democratic societies, relied on the unifying power of social rituals. Further, participants noted that there is a certain amount of pleasure to be derived from the disciplinary regime, which allowed, for example, for social differentiation, if not by the liberal-democratic standards of material wealth. Scott Spector reminded us that we should not be afraid to approach the GDR as an ideological project and to use a wider array of theoretical perspectives to interpret that project, going beyond Foucault to incorporate the thought of Althusser, Zizek, or Gramsci. Contributors also sought to break down the duality of the language of state/society, often simply correlated to bad/good. We often assume, for example, that “the state” degraded the environment, while “the people” sought environmental protections or that “the state” drove the persecution of homosexuals, when in some cases it was the petty bourgeois values of “the people.”

If there are particular schools of thought on the writing of East German history, they appear to be defined primarily by the conventions of the scholarly context. As indicated above, the stakes of studying the GDR are entirely different for Germans writing in Germany than they are for other Europeans or North Americans who are essentially “writing other peoples’ history.” In particular, participants discussed the “politics of the citation,” noting that in certain national or historiographical contexts there are authors that cannot not
be cited. The “din” of such citations is matched by the silences created by the absence of particular sources (targets of the thoughtless or willful destruction by those making decisions about preservation), or by what we as scholars think we cannot say. Albrecht Wiesner noted that the words “niche society” would never be heard at the ZZF. The existence of “schools” of thought also seems to be the outgrowth of the structural difficulties of “knowledge production and circulation,” shaped by such obstacles as language barriers, employment practices, and access to historical writing due to the limits of funding for research, archives, and libraries.

One of the legacies of the cultural turn is, of course, that it is hard to say that we can show the GDR as it “really was.” At best, perhaps, we can define a continuum of experiences, expectations, values, and world views shaped in part by a strong set of cross-border imaginaries. This explanatory uncertainty is further obscured by the current state of that spectral society—a defunct state that lives on to shape post-reunified Germany. But as many of the participants reminded us, culture is not essential; instead, it is always in a state of becoming. Perhaps the strength of GDR studies is that we can recognize L.P. Hartley’s dictum that “the past is another country” precisely because the East German state no longer exists and the legacy of its social order is contested. Moreover, although the struggles of the 1990s have abated somewhat, the GDR continues to be not just an object of study, but a vessel into which historians pour their own agendas. At the least, we can be keenly aware of these agendas.

Heather L. Gumbert (Virginia Tech)