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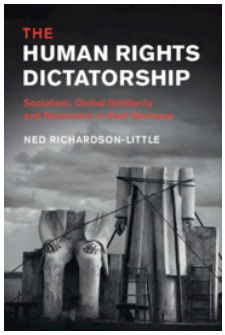
Ned Richardson-Little

The Human Rights Dictatorship

Review by: Jane Freeland



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In the thirty plus years since the collapse of state socialist rule, the historiography of the German Democratic Republic (GDR or East Germany) has gone through various iterations. Following the immediate transition to democracy, historical scholarship was marked by an emphasis on the illegitimate – if not totalitarian – nature of the Socialist Unity Party's (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, SED) regime. Surveillance, control, oppression, and of course the work of the Stasi, all dominated the field. But this slowly changed in the mid- to late-1990s. Research work carried out by Thomas Lindenberger, Alf Lüdtke, Konrad Jarausch, and Mary Fulbrook among others, increasingly revealed a more complex and nuanced vision of life and politics in the GDR. This work detailed the relationship between socialist state and society, showing both how the SED legitimized and propped up its rule and the ways in which common East Germans participated in and negotiated the dictatorship.

These approaches opened new avenues for thinking about the GDR in a global context, and within frameworks most commonly associated with the liberal West. Paul Betts explored the evolving notion of «privacy» and «the private» as way of understanding changes to the East German social contract in the 1970s. Josie McLellan similarly used the concept of sexual revolution to explore the liberalization of gender and sexuality in East Germany. Recent work on global socialism similarly places East Germany into a broader history of socialist rule that decenters the Eastern bloc and highlights the diversity of experiences and regimes of socialism.

Ned Richardson-Little's book *The Human Rights Dictatorship* echoes these developments as he explores the seeming contradiction between the GDR as an illegitimate dictatorship and the SED's self-perception as a «champion» of human rights both within and beyond East Germany. As Richardson-Little highlights in the book's introduction, human rights under socialism is a topic we still know very little about. Despite an increasing body of work on the development and elaboration of global human rights, humanitarianism and NGOs, as well as of international treaties and declarations, the socialist world has remained on the margins. According to Richardson-Little, by ignoring the socialist world's contribution to human rights, the field risks concretizing human rights as a «grand narrative of eventual Western triumph» (p. 11).

In contrast, examining the history of human rights across the forty years of socialist rule in the GDR, Richardson-Little reveals both the importance of human rights for the GDR, and the importance of the GDR for nuancing the history of human rights. In particular, he makes three key interventions. Firstly, he shows the importance of individual people – both socialist elites and common East Germans – in making human rights a part of socialist rule. Even before the foundation of the Democratic Republic in 1949, the SED had assimilated human rights into its platform «even as it shed its support of electoral democracy and embraced authoritarian methods of rule» (p. 17). The integration of human rights into East German socialism was no coincidence: rather they were brought in strategically by high-ranking SED members, most notably SED theorist Karl Polak and East German Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl, to build up and legitimize the SED and the East German state in the face of division and Cold War isolation.

Despite the presence of human rights discourses in East Germany from the very beginning of division, it was not until the 1960s that GDR citizens took them up. This is the second important intervention made by Richardson-Little: he carefully details how common East Germans translated human rights to fit life under socialism and used them to call for reform and negotiate their place within the state. Using the example of the 1968 *Volksaussprache* (mass consultations held on the new GDR Constitution), the book shows how citizens used the official language of human rights to call for changes with respect to freedom of religion, and the rights to travel and speak freely. In the consultation window between February and April 1968, the constitutional commission received over 12,000 letters offering feedback on the new law, and the examples provided in the book offer a fascinating glimpse into the nature of political communication and complaint under state socialism. However, the popularity of human rights frameworks in East Germany did not result in the same kinds of revolutionary changes seen across other states in the 1970s. This is in part due to the co-optation, marginalization, and suppression of those bodies – especially the Catholic and Protestant Churches – and individuals who most radically used human rights to call for change. As Richardson-Little underscores by 1980 there was «not a single independent human rights organisation in the GDR» (p. 138).

This changed in the 1980s and *The Human Rights Dictatorship* thirdly adds important depth to historical understandings of the social and political developments that led to the rise of a mass protest movement in 1989 and the crumbling of the SED. Tracing the transformation of human rights discourses across the 1980s, Richardson-Little shows how they moved from being a lynchpin of the SED dictatorship to part of its undoing. Not only did human rights become a central concern of the growing dissidence movement, but the very notion of socialist human rights made the SED seem increasingly outdated. In a world where human rights were dominated by notions of individual freedoms and civil rights, SED rhetoric of anti-fascism, anti-imperialism, and self-determination no longer held the political sway they once had. In the context of deepening economic and political crises – many of which were fuelled by divisions within the SED about human rights – by the late 1980s human rights «acted as a unifying concept bringing together diverse constituencies of East Germans» (p. 221). While human rights may not have brought down the SED, they did contribute to the transition of East Germany during the *Wende*.

By matching a focus on the development of human rights within elite SED circles with their elaboration by East German citizens, Ned Richardson-Little details the landscape of everyday political life in the GDR while also historicizing the very concept of human rights. In doing so, *The Human Rights Dictatorship* makes a uniquely important contribution to the history of the GDR.