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**Abstract**

Private life in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) is often seen as having been virtually non-existent, simply another East German commodity forever in short supply. In part this had to do with the common perception that private life and state socialism were at odds by definition, to the extent that the private person has no legal identity or political standing outside the socialist community. The East German regime's infamous surveillance techniques, best illustrated in the notorious exploits of the state's sprawling security force - the Stasi - and its reserve army of 'unofficial collaborators', further dramatized the full penetration of the state into the private sphere. Within Walls takes a different perspective. Paul Betts shows how, despite the primacy of public identities, the private sphere assumed central importance in the GDR from the very outset, and was especially pronounced in the regime's former capital city. In a world in which social interaction was heavily monitored, private life functioned for many citizens as a cherished arena of individuality, alternative identity-formation, and potential dissent. The book carefully charts the changing meaning of private life in the GDR across a variety of fields, ranging from law to photography, religion to interior decoration, family living to memoir literature, revealing the myriad ways in which privacy was expressed, staged, and defended by citizens living in a communist society.
In Within Walls, Paul Betts tackles the vexing questions that have become increasingly important to the maturing scholarship on the German Democratic Republic (GDR). How do we best describe the relationship between state and society? Did some form of a civil society or common civil discourse ever emerge in a state known for surveillance by the Ministry of State Security (Stasi)? Did East Germans simply retreat into private social worlds largely untouched by socialist engineering or collective concerns? An array of intriguing answers to these questions has appeared recently, from "Private life--generally associated with liberal society--assumed," he argues, "its most political power and personal value under authoritarian regimes" (p. 3). This "power" emerged in the early 1970s. With shorter workdays as well as more and better (if still limited) consumer choices, East Germans of the early Honecker era could hope to create a socialist good life--in private. In arguing that a socialist private sphere came into its own in the Honecker years, Betts's interpretation overlaps heavily with the concept of the "niche society" put... Citation: Donna Harsch. Review of Betts, Paul, Within Walls: Private Life in the German Democratic Republic. H-German, H-Net Reviews. June, 2013.