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Sean Eady, *Four Color Communism: Comic Books and Contested Power in the German Democratic Republic*, Berghahn Books, 2021.

The passing of more than 30 years since the fall of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe created a favourable context for recovering memories and experiences of lived socialism. People from all over the Eastern Bloc who did not oppose or collaborate with state authorities or refused to find refuge inside their homes remembered leading perfectly normal and ordinary lives. The latest research concerning mostly the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) approached the subject and tried to analyse and understand the normality of everyday life. Thus, the focus is on how the party-state designed means and methods of control that excluded the use of repression and coercion against its citizens and also how people pursued their interests and even negotiated with officials the meeting of their needs without becoming a target of state-sponsored repression. Sean Eady's latest volume *Four Color Communism: Comic Books and Contested Power in the German Democratic Republic* capitalises on these recent gains in addressing the subject of comic books. These publications are analysed as part of everyday life and they became not only a point of intersection between state power and children's interests but also a means for child readers to express and pursue their interests.

Holding a PhD in history from Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, on the subject of comic books in the GDR, Sean Eady is an independent researcher and also a part-time professor in the Department of History at Trent University. His research interests are related to comic books and their representations of Holocaust, fairy tales and time travel and historical representation in the work of Hannes Hegen, the creator of one of the most successful East German comic books, *Mosaik*.

As stated in *Introduction*, the author's main thesis is that comic books published in the GDR were a point of interaction between the East German state's (benign) power, and children. Aware of their popularity, the SED (Socialist Unity Party) regime aimed to use the huge potential of comics in modelling the socialist personality of children. As a result, it had to consider not only the educational (and ideological content) of the comics, but also the children's need for entertainment. This favoured an increased tolerance toward Western influences in comics. Lastly, comic books became a means for the regime to peek into the private life of children, as the publishing house(s) favoured an exchange of letters with them, and official bodies collected information on the preferences of the readers.

In order to capture the complexity of meanings assigned to comic books in the GDR, the author resorted to Mary Fulbrook's distinction between *benign* and *malign* power. While malign power refers to coercion and repression employed by the state against its citizens, benign power is less visible and very

difficult to detect, as it is woven in the fabric of everyday life. Thus, for Sean Eady, comics were an instrument of SED's benign power, as their content was influenced by ideological imperatives that managed to break through the privacy of children's homes. In this regard, the author considers Michel Foucalt's Panopticon to explain the effects of *benign* and *malign* power on people's lives. The East German regime considered comics to be aspects of this Panopticism, as they were used to self-regulate youth's behaviour and enforced their conformity with the state's policies. When addressing the children's responses towards the state's benign power, the author introduced two concepts: *Eingaben,* which refers to the practice of sending letters, complaints or petitions to authorities, and also *Eigensinn* (a sense of one's self), which allows individuals to pursue their own interests without clashing with the state's interests.

The purpose of this review is to explore the manner in which the author covers the issues announced in the book's introduction, as well as the way in which the volume contributes to the understanding of comics as power constructions that were constantly questioned through daily and mundane practices of addressing the authorities with letters and petitions and/or of meeting personal needs. The bibliography of the volume contains an impressive list of archival materials and library collections, in addition to the full series of comic books printed in the former GDR, film and television programmes and also secondary sources.

The book contains five chapters preceded by an introduction and followed by conclusions, an extensive list of references and index of names, institutions, events, and concepts.

Chapter one, *Comics and the Crisis of Kultur in the SED State,* traces the birth of comic books in East Germany. Intended to counter the increased popularity of Western comic books among children, the East German comic books created during the mid 1950s, including *Atze* and *Mosaik von Hannes*, found inspiration in similar Western publications. This brought them huge popularity, but also raised questions about their proper educational (ideological) content. The author discussed how those comics avoided political subjects at first and how the regime struggled to bring them under its control. This was the result of reconsidering the role played by children literature in creating a socialist personality among children as future citizens of East Germany. The trend was even more strengthened with the erection of the Berlin Wall in August 1961, which created a captive audience and blocked the flow of Western cultural products into the GDR. The chapter examines how during the 1960s the SED regime searched for and tested new means for ensuring a proper ideological content of the comic books, while making them attractive for child readers. This resulted in employing different strategies in respect to those publications. On the one hand, the GDR authorities turned a blind eye to the weak ideological nature of the comics published in *Mosaik* as a means

to maintain its huge popularity, all the more so as the comic book became a test case for export to the West in 1968. On the other hand, *Atze* changed its editorial board during the mid-1960s in an attempt to conform its content to the cultural norms of the SED regime.

The second chapter, entitled *State Power and the East German Zeitgeist*, explores the relationship between the private and the public space in the GDR and uses comic books to underline its complexity. Questioning the concept of *niche society* with its clear separation between the private and public, the author adopts Mary Fulbrook's distinction between benign and malign power to show how comics represented a (benign) intrusion of state power into children's (private) life. Based on a retrospective report drafted during the 1980s about the evolution of comic books, Sean Eady shows how the SED regime came to consider them as a valuable means to educate children. At the same time, the content analysis of *Atze* and *Mosaik* made by the same report underlines how their creators managed to skilfully align them to the official line without sacrificing the readers' needs for entertainment. This created the illusion that comics were an "ideologically-free zone" that not only increased their popularity among children but also facilitated the learning of socialist values by their readers. Using the pretext of travelling through time and space, the comics introduced children to other worlds, the characteristics of which reminded readers of the contemporary realities. The utopian fiction spoke of a conflict between two worlds that hinted to the contemporary Cold War, unmasked in the same context the inhumanity of evil imperialist forces or projected a social reality where class and not race differentiated between people, an obvious reflection of the socialist East German worldview.

Chapter three, *Power, Eigensinn, and the Construction of Space through Comics,* analyses how comic books facilitated the state's presence in the private life of child readers. While the previous chapter demonstrates how comics managed to promote and enforce the socialist ideals among its reader base, this chapter discusses how those publications and also children's magazines offered to the SED regime an opportunity to peek into the domestic niches and thoughts and feelings of young people. To address this complex issue, the author resorts to *Eigensinn*, a concept coined by Alf Ludtke and used to describe any type of nonconformist behaviour in the GDR. For Sean Eady, Eigensinn refers to agency that allows individuals to craft their own spaces in the public sphere in which they can pursue their own interests. This created an illusion of living a *normal* life that was arguably free of state interference. In order to prove how comic books favoured *Eigensinn,* the analysis focuses on children's letters sent to magazines (comics included) and on official reports compiled based on those letters from the beginning of the 1970s. This correspondence proved that child readers unconsciously accepted the state's benign power, even though it was for meeting their own needs, e.g., winning a prize

or expressing their grievances about the quality of the educational materials sold by those publications. Children's letters are interpreted as mirroring the adult practice of addressing letters, petitions, complaints to the authorities to have their issues solved (*Eingaben*). While observing essential conditions of *speaking socialism* and not criticising the regime, those letters performed a double function: they offered the regime a glimpse into the private life of the children and monitored how they understood and interacted with the meanings of those comics and magazines. This conclusion is only partially supported by the examples provided by the chapter, which also fails to take into consideration the very nature of sources on which it is based. The analysed reports are official documents drafted for the purpose of measuring and assessing the readership of those publications. Similar documents were compiled everywhere in the Eastern bloc considering people's preferences in media products, especially as those regimes were genuinely interested in gaining legitimacy based on their capacity of satisfying the consumption needs of their population. To what extent the East German reports spoke about children's real private life and preoccupations is also debatable. As the author mentions, the reports cited letters addressing educational topics of interest for the regime and its mass organisations, including issues with classrooms, class trips, school work, learning experiences, etc. Although letters might have offered a valuable insight into how children saw and interpreted those educational experiences, relevant examples are missing. Also, the subjects approached in those letters concern the social life of children and they might be indicative of their mastering of speaking socialism. The complaints were few and, as the example provided showed, they regarded the publications' failure to provide high quality educational materials. Age that resulted in a partial understanding of the social and political reality and maybe fear of reprisals determined children not to approach sensitive issues or openly criticise the regime. If the magazines were to receive correspondence critical of the regime's performance, those letters were most likely forwarded to the STASI and, thus, excluded from publication or inclusion into the official reports. Finally, the examples provided of the letters sent to magazines say little of children's Eigensinn.

Chapter four, *Escape, Escapism, and the Cultural Imperialism of Comic Book Travel in Mosaik and Atze,* examines the meaning of travelling in comic books. Travelling in time and in geographical space was the foundation of *Mosaik* and *Atze*, two of the most popular comics in the GDR. The characters – the Digedags (and later on Abrafaxe) for *Mosaik* and Pat Reiseabenteuer for *Atze* – were explorers and adventurers and also emissaries of socialism. The comparison between their role as figures that brought socialism and political awareness wherever they went and Comintern is exaggerated. Not only because the author fails to mention the institutional successor of Comintern, which was Cominform, established in 1947 and dissolved in 1956, but also

because the role of the Communist Internationals was to ensure the subordination of the national communist parties to the Soviet Union and its interests. As mentioned above, travels brought the comics' characters in different historical settings, where they fought against class-based oppression, rectified problems left by the capitalist influence, rescued people and protected local natural resources from exploitation of imperialism. Their actions to improve the local populations' quality of life showed the possibilities and potential of socialism and indirectly praised the technological achievements of the GDR. The educational content was further enhanced by local characters, who accompanied the Digedags or Abrafaxe and Pat Reiseabenteuer in their adventures. The presence of those characters introduced child readers to local history and problems that became the perfect background for their intervention in rectifying the social and political wrongs. According to Sean Eady, the civilising intervention of the Digedags or Pat Reiseabenteuer led to the infantilisation of local populations that were in need of socialist influence to overcome exploitation or technological underdevelopment. Besides their educational drive, travel comic books fulfilled another unintended purpose: they provided the children with the opportunity of an imaginary trip abroad as a means to escape the lived experience of socialism and cemented their withdrawal into private niches.

Chapter five, *Western Influence, Popular Taste, and the Limitations of the FDJ's Publishing Regime,* traces the evolution of *Mosaik* from the early 1960s until 1975, focusing on the struggle between its creator, Hannes Hegen, and the publishing regime to take over its control. Created at the end of 1950s as a means to counter the American comics, *Mosaik* gained popularity because it followed American inspiration, instead of ideological objectives of the youth organisation, the FDJ. Thus, the chapter shows how East German authorities tried to gain control over *Mosaik* by demoting Hannes Hegen, changing the publication's headquarters, its editorial team, bringing it under the control of the FDJ and finally removing Hegen from *Mosaik* because of his opposition to the demands of the FDJ's editorial demands. The need to maintain *Mosaik*'s readership and also to be able to compete with the American comics on the external Western markets postponed any drastic changes until Hegen's dismissal in 1975.

To conclude, Sean Eady's volume approaches comic books in East Germany from an original perspective: it considers not only their content but also their function as power construction in everyday life. Aiming to counter the supposedly harmful influence of American comics, the SED regime created its own brand of comic books. The author demonstrates how the regime used comics to foster the formation of the socialist personality among children, and also to create a channel through which the regime could peek into and learn about the private life of their readers. Though examples are needed, the idea

of comics as an object of contestation by children – who wrote to their editorial boards to complain about the quality of educational materials – and also as a means to meet their own (educational) needs is a very interesting one and worth further elaboration.

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