Envisioning Socialism

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Published by University of Michigan Press


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Introduction

I had been in the archive not more than a month when I found a peculiar fragment of the past. In the late 1950s the East German television service had received a letter from an enthusiastic viewer proposing the scenario for a new show. The action revolved around a strong, male protagonist who fought for justice, vigilante-style, settling scores in a manner akin to a cinematic gangster. Television staff had passed on this “riveting” piece of work, which they deemed as wholly inappropriate material. Though it was not more than a fragment—literally a scrap of paper—that I barely recorded in my archival notes, it was incongruous and yet evocative enough that I have remembered it for more than a decade. On the face of it, the letter is hardly evidence of anything, but it is highly suggestive of different threads found throughout this book. First, it suggests the emergence by this time of an active and interested audience willing to help shape the future of East German television programming. But, and this is a second important theme, the story this viewer suggested troubled television staff: with its lone wolf protagonist and abundant representation of violence, it flew in the face of the kind of stories the DFF had been trying to tell for some time, drawing instead from the narrative treasury of the capitalist West. Somehow, this clearly avid viewer had failed to get the message they sought to convey.

This is a book about television and the power it exercised to define the ways in which authorities, audiences, artists, and others could envision what socialism meant in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). It traces how, when, and in what ways television emerged to become a medium prized for its communicative and entertainment value. It explores the difficulties GDR authorities had defining and executing a clear vision of the society they hoped to establish. It explains how television helped to stabilize GDR society in a way that ultimately worked against the utopian vision the authorities thought they were cultivating. To this end, this book considers television as a technology, an institution, and a medium (or mediator) of social relations and cultural
knowledge; it examines television from the perspective of television producers, audiences, technicians, and regulators; and it explores narratives by and about television.

At first glance the GDR may not seem the most likely ground for a fruitful study of television and its power and influence in the postwar world. By the end of the Cold War, both the state and its television appeared to be woefully backward, the product of an older, authoritarian, boring, and less colorful time. GDR television was unmoved by the commercial television explosion of the 1980s that had resulted from the emergence of cable television, for example, and, since 1969, had offered programming on only two channels. By the time the Berlin Wall fell, the lion’s share of this programming was still broadcast in black and white. More important, popular and scholarly interpretations held that GDR television was both closely controlled by the state and unable to command significant audiences from among its own citizens.

This picture fits with, and was shaped by, post-reunification scholarship on Germany that argued for the exceptional nature of the GDR in comparison with its normative West German other. In the 1990s, historians of the GDR revived “totalitarianism” as a way to explain the emergence, persistence, and subsequent end of the East German state. The fall of communism in Europe encouraged some historians to reassert the fundamental illegitimacy of the East German state, a position that had been undermined in scholarship during the era of Détente. Increasingly, the GDR came to be understood as the “second German dictatorship,” comparable to Nazi Germany in the goals, means, and practice of power. Early works focused in particular on the repressive apparatus of state power and political histories investigating decisions made on high. Such studies often seemed driven by an ideological commitment to delineating the boundaries between the “democratic” Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the “illegitimate” East German state. Not only the Nazi state but also the Soviet Union have figured prominently in studies investigating the administrative and cultural origins of the East German state, with early works presenting the East German state largely as a product of the aims and intentions of the Soviet Union.

But the vision of a straightforwardly repressive and bureaucratically regimented police state has been steadily challenged since the mid-1990s, as scholars more interested in social history and the experience of everyday life have considered the ways in which the regime attempted to build consensus for its rule. The GDR came to be understood variously as an “education dictatorship,” a “modern dictatorship,” or a “welfare dictatorship,” for example. 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 Center for Contemporary History (Zentrum für zeithistorische Forschung, or 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. At the same time, Anglo-American research began to appreciate the contingent nature of the development of East Germany both before and after the establishment of the Republic in 1949.

The most recent scholarship presents a very different picture of the GDR, one that is much more dynamic and even “modern.” Though informed by post-reunification debates about the coercive power of the dictatorship, this scholarship is most strongly influenced by the cultural turn. It uses cultural analyses to explore previously under-appreciated areas of research, examining a variety of aspects of the lived experience of East German socialism, complicating the oft-imposed juxtaposition of state and society, and revealing the existence of a much more vibrant society than previously assumed, characterized by “a surprising amount of conflict and texture.” Studies of East German fashion, sport, women, plastic consumer goods, and popular customs, for example, have made the case that social and cultural change was both more prevalent and much more influential in guiding policy than has previously been recognized. The government achieved significant social transformation, altering class relations, gender relations, and regional and national identities, for example, but not without adapting their program of social change to the needs and desires of people living the GDR. A new, specifically East German society emerged from the forge of the Ulbricht years, which offered a certain degree of stability to the state. But even this seemingly harmonious state of affairs held within it the seeds of its own destruction: the state could not imagine—much less envisualize for East Germans, or bring to fruition—an alternative to liberal-capitalist modernity. Not just East German citizens, but also the state itself, persistently held the GDR up against the example of the West, which gradually eroded the legitimacy of the state. This recent literature has begun to “normalize” the study of the GDR, moving beyond the framework of dictatorship to suggest ways in which the GDR fits into the larger framework of the history of modern industrial societies.

This book similarly rejects the interpretive framework of “two dictatorships,” which compares the GDR to Nazi Germany and suggests that both were aberrant stages on Germany’s long path to Western liberal-capitalist democracy, instead situating the GDR firmly in the history of Western modernity. In
this way, my book fits into a growing, multidisciplinary literature that seeks to reclaim the modern project from the triumphalist liberal narrative that emerged at the end of the Cold War. Writing ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Susan Buck-Morss pilloried the “often-repeated story of the West’s winning the Cold War and capitalism’s triumph over socialism” and argued instead that “the historical experiment of socialism was so deeply rooted in the Western modernizing tradition that its defeat cannot but place the whole Western narrative into question.” That is, the story of modernity is not just the story of liberal capitalism; it is the story of liberalism and socialism and their relationship to one another. More cautiously, and looking at the specific context of the GDR, Katherine Pence and Paul Betts have sought to “broaden the idea of modernity” by interrogating the ways in which the GDR can be seen to have been fundamentally modern. Works by Buck-Morss and Pence and Betts identify the program to reshape society as one of the central characteristics of modernity, but locate that program not (just) in the spheres of politics or economics, as most studies of “modernization” do. Instead, they demonstrate the centrality of culture to the creation of the “dreamworlds” of socialist modernity.

Central to the creation of twentieth-century dreamworlds are the modern mass media and television in particular, and the GDR thus provides a good context within which to examine the operation of the media in the postwar period. The GDR was a modern industrial society with a well-developed (and well-received, as I will show) television service. That service was embedded in a number of different contexts, including a longer history of media development in Germany before the Second World War, a cross-border competition (and exchange) with the fraternal FRG, and a similar competition and exchange with the countries of the Eastern bloc. It operated as a mediator of political, cultural, and social knowledge and power in ways comparable to the Anglo-American context. If it seems to the Anglo-American reader to be more heavy-handed and, above all, political, than in other contexts, that reveals more about our notions of what television is “supposed to be” and, in particular, what we define as political. East German television participated in the attempt to revolutionize the values and worldviews of an entire nation of people, and its story exemplifies the possibilities and limits of mediated cultural change. Finally, for the historian, the source base is as complete as it could be, given the opening of the entire archive of the defunct state in the 1990s.

What did the dreamworlds of the twentieth century look like? Pence and Betts argue that we find them not in elite, avant-garde culture but in the lived experience of socialism, where East German identities were formed and articulated. They seek the sites of lived experience in “private life,” among particular
social groups, and in consumption practices. “Popular music, fashion, consumption, and film,” they argue, are “particularly telling sources for exploring the individual articulation of identities.” Film and other mass media appear only briefly in the volume, despite their centrality to the question of identity formation, individual and collective. It was, after all, the “audiovisions” of the GDR that saturated East Germans’ waking lives and were the increasingly important means by which they ordered and understood their worlds. Part of the editors’ reticence to consider the mass media is likely due to their (paradoxical) fear that the GDR was, in fact, aberrant. For example, they claim the GDR “largely did away with civil society and a classical public sphere, which liberal theorists have long viewed as fundamental to the formation of modern selfhood”; it was “a nonsocial society, a de-politicized polity, a nonpublic public sphere.” This view builds on the work of Jürgen Habermas, who theorized the inception and transformation of a “public sphere” that was specifically bourgeois and played a decisive role in the development and, in the twentieth century, deformation of the political process. Significantly, Habermas’s work on the public sphere set out to explain the rise of National Socialism, among other problems, at a time when scholars interpreted Nazism as a failure of modernity, rather than, as it is now understood, as a “pathological” variant of modernity. Critics maintain that Habermas’s conception of the public sphere is, at best, partial, because it is exclusionary—women and minority groups were denied the kind of participation in public life that was fundamental to Habermas’s conception of the bourgeois public sphere—and argue that it was but one example of what were likely many competing public spheres. Pence and Betts suggest, then, that without a political public sphere, challenges to the state had to be found in sites of consumption, privileging individual experience and the performance of individualized identity, and certainly not in world created by the “state-controlled” media. A much more fruitful conception of the operation of the media in modern societies is found in the work of Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci similarly sought to explain the success of fascism, and his work explored the ways in which particular social groups could seize and, more important, maintain power. Gramsci’s thought does not present a fixed model of power but rather suggests possibilities for interpreting state power based on shifting blocs and alliances. This is particularly important for the study of modern state power, for three reasons. First, it undermines the ideologically laden rhetoric of malicious (specifically state socialist) manipulation of society, since the balance of consent and coercion described above results from any given regime’s need to legitimize itself; second, it suggests that the transmission of power in regimes across
Eastern and Western Europe can be theorized the same way; and third, it allows us to explore the extent to which citizens exercised agency and constructed their own meanings.26

Gramsci is but one of many influences, including the Frankfurt School, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, and others, that have shaped two generations of cultural studies. I see this book as a contribution to what Scott Denham, Irene Kacandes, and Johnathan Petropoulos call “German cultural studies,” a field that has recently come into greater focus.27 Similar to Anglo-American cultural studies, though less well known, the German variant explores the nature of culture, power, and communication. For Kacandes, specifically German cultural studies should be defined by (collaborative) interdisciplinarity, an interest in texts, and scholarship that does the “theoretical and analytical (work) required to position specific cultural practices.”28 Among German historians, it has taken some time for cultural studies approaches to emerge, due, in part, to the political implications of exploring the culture of “dictatorships.”29 Hopefully this book will contribute to overcoming any divide (real or perceived) between German studies scholars and historians, dispelling the notion that “historians can’t do culture.”30

It is time that historians overcome their fear of cultural studies and, given the centrality of the media in twentieth-century culture, television as well. We must historicize television, so that we can better understand—and indeed, reevaluate—the history of the postwar period. Despite its power and influence since the Second World War, historians have largely ignored television.31 There are a number of reasons for this. First, television history is difficult. “Television” is conceptually slippery: it is a technology of communication, but also a medium of entertainment and information. The conditions of its production and transmission have changed fairly drastically over the last sixty years. It operated within a set of industrial relations, ideological structures, and commodity flows that were historically specific and defined by differing geopolitical contexts (sometimes deceptively easy to identify), yet also part of a larger transnational flow. Second, writing about television forces scholars to mobilize a number of different questions, methods, and approaches. It involves the study of institutional structures, regulatory frameworks, and infrastructural factors, while it also demands that we find effective ways to “read” programming, ask conceptual questions about the medium, and get some sense of audience reception when we can.32

More important, for historical work, is the problem of breadth and depth of archival sources. Early broadcast-era television was ephemeral and therefore is hard to come by: it was relatively cheap to perform and transmit live, but
was also immediately lost. Early production documents often disappeared as well. On the other hand, there was a lot of material produced for television, so looking at a significant “sample” can be daunting. Moreover, if material produced for television still exists, it is often considered proprietary and thus is difficult to access. In the GDR, for example, few efforts were made to preserve the artifacts of early television. In the first few decades of television service, the only documents the DFF routinely kept were lists of shows transmitted on any given day. Few production documents have been archived, and only a fraction of the mail that the DFF received from viewers still survives. Many of the production documents that made this book possible were relics of Cold War conflict. German broadcasting authorities in both East and West “recorded” (by means of kinescope) and, in some cases, transcribed fragments of programming transmitted by their counterparts on the other side of the border. These were returned, archived, and (at least partially) catalogued after reunification, providing historians of early German television an enviable treasure trove of sources.

As early as 1974 Raymond Williams wrote one of the first, best books tracing the emergence and impact of television in the broadcast era, which has long provided scholars with a number of avenues to navigate the difficulties outlined above. In it, he argued against technological determinism—that television’s significance could not be reduced to its technological characteristics—and for the study of television as social practice. That is, the basic science behind television had long been understood, but television did not really emerge as a powerful tool of communication until modern societies found a social purpose for the technology. He theorized television’s “particularities,” including its “flow,” its forms, and television’s ability to provide a stunning, new, visual experience. He considered the numerous forms television programming had taken by the early 1970s, including those it had borrowed and modified from other media and forms that were wholly new to television. He considered the medium, which made possible “moments in many kinds of program when we can find ourselves looking in what seemed quite new ways.” Television could provide “an experience of visual mobility, of contrast of angle, of variation of focus, which is often very beautiful.” These insights flew in the face of the mass communications approach that had dominated television research since the 1940s, and laid the foundation for the study of television as a new field, distinctively different from film studies.

Despite Williams’s early intervention, “television studies” as a distinct field has just begun to coalesce in Anglo-American scholarship. This likely seems a relatively late development to the reader, given that scholars had begun
investigating television almost from the moment of its inception in the 1940s and 1950s. But, by 1989, there was still “no regular forum for current research on television.” By that time, Horace Newcomb’s *Television: The Critical View* was in its fourth edition, but current television scholarship was still published in (primarily) film journals such as *Screen* or *Cinema Journal*. It was not until the late 1990s that the emergence of a “loosely organized protocol for understanding television as a cultural, social, political, aesthetic, and industrial form” pointed to some sort of consensus about what constitutes television studies. There are no “Departments of Television Studies” and few independent professional organizations, but there is other evidence for the emergence of a coherent field: in the past decade scholars have been able to disseminate their work in new journals, such as *Critical Studies in Television* or *TV and New Media*, in the highly regarded online forum *Flow TV*, at the feminist television conference “Console-ing Passions,” or through publication in television series housed at distinguished university presses such as Oxford and Duke.

This rise of television studies, perhaps unsurprisingly, coincided with rising interest in the national audio-visual heritage in a number of Western industrialized countries, which led to government support for television research in the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, for example. Although television is a “young” field, there is some consensus among its practitioners. Proponents of “television studies” do not simply use television as evidence of historical events, but rather place television at the center of interpretations of society and culture. Such scholarship is not about programs, audiences, producers, history, context, or institutions, but it considers all of these in explaining the “operation of identity, meaning, community, politics, education, play,” and so on.

Study of GDR television began in West Germany in the 1960s, when the West Germans still referred to the GDR as “the zone.” This early work was characterized by a Cold War framework of analysis that took the illegitimacy of the GDR as a starting point and sought to ferret out the political implications of a dictatorial television system. East German scholarship on television first emerged in the 1970s, with the work of literary scholars Ingeborg Munz-Koenen and Käthe Rülicke-Weiler and the institutional histories of Heide Riedel. By the 1980s, members of the East German television service and the Association of Film and Television Producers had begun to compile their own history of the East German medium collecting oral recollections of the early period of television. Peter Hoff, who collaborated on this project, became a sort of “dean” of GDR television studies, writing prolifically until his death in 2003. Rising interest in the study of the GDR after the fall of the Berlin Wall
brought some attention to television, but shaped by the politics of the waning Cold War. Scholarly assessments described television as, at best, part of the failed socialist experiment and, at worst, an instrument of dictatorial control.51

In the late 1990s, a number of nostalgic works appeared that began the process of trying to knit back together the German-German televisual past.52 Most recently, the German government-sponsored research group “Program History of GDR Television—Comparative” has examined the East German television service and its programming in more than forty books and other publications.53 The project has performed a great service in laying a foundation for understanding the inner workings of the apparatus of television in the GDR, as well as excavating, identifying, classifying, and interpreting programming that had been more or less consigned to the “dustbin of history” less than two decades before.54 The body of work, at least in the period under discussion in this book, suggests a general consensus that the DFF developed in a manner not unlike other modern television services, although overlaid with a political bureaucracy and mandate that it could not escape. This government was illegitimate and repressed artists, but it did manage to entertain parts of the population and even, inadvertently, transmitted images and incidents that were at odds with the government’s claims to power (Machtanspruch).

Contemporary political debates have shaped this work. In the twenty years since the end of the Cold War, it has been difficult for German scholars to argue a position any less damning than the one above, which would open such scholarly work (and popular memory, in the case of Ostalgie) to the charge of “gilding” and “glamorizing” (verschönern and verschönen), or normalizing the dictatorship, especially in a “soft” field like television history.55 At the same time, the project was guided by the deliberate decision to examine DFF programming specifically in comparison to its West German counterpart.56 That was understandable and even fruitful, but it also suggests that the project (or the government sponsors, perhaps) held GDR television to a normative standard of development (as it did in other areas at the time).57 Certainly, the television service responded to developments in the West, but there is something to be said for approaching it on its own terms, lest we simply conclude that its difference was evidence that it could not live up to a normative Western standard.

It is my intention, in this book, to try to extricate television from the (persisting) politics of the Cold War, while at the same time demonstrating just how, and in what ways, it contributed to those politics. Thus, it is a history of ideas, values, and perceptions, grounded in the structures and material conditions of the (East) German postwar world, and the world of the burgeoning
Cold War that examines both “real” and mediated historical conditions. Since historical scholarship turned toward interpretations that privileged the linguistic and cultural construction of reality, there has been a suspicion of cultural analyses among those who still hew to strictly materialist history. In a recent American Historical Review forum on “historiographic turns,” American anthropologist Gary Wilder noted that the assumption still exists that if “historians by definition analyze archival documents, then historians must be able to answer their questions with archival evidence,” which “implies a certain understanding of actors, agency, and causality . . .” and “means that questions that cannot be answered archivally are not worth asking. . . .” But analyses that mobilize cultural methods have much to say about the history of politics, power, and the structures of social life, especially during the Cold War. In the postwar period, television increasingly shaped people’s understanding of the world, birthing new “imagined communities.” But, paradoxically, given the context of increasing state power in the postwar period, it did so in a way that often undermined states’ ability to define the social world of their nations.

Envisioning Socialism is the first book in English to discuss television as an institution, a medium, and a center of social and political power in the GDR. But more important, it is a contribution to a nascent body of work that demonstrates why the historical study of television—no matter what the domestic political situation—is so important to understanding the postwar world. Television in the GDR was an important component of the SED’s rule. It played an important role in mediating the state’s attempts to shape and discipline competing visions of socialism in the 1950s and 1960s. But the medium that emerged was not defined by its technological characteristics or a repressive political mandate, but rather through the confrontation with the social and political context of the GDR. It took on meaning and became a certain kind of medium in response to a particular set of circumstances. In short, it did not emerge with a set of fully formed expectations and rules, but was “invented” in response to a particular set of ideas, pressures, and aspirations.

It was the specific context of 1952 through 1958, in particular, that allowed television to take the shape that it did in the GDR. While the DFF concluded fairly early on that television could be a medium of political transformation and should be developed in that direction, by 1956 it also became clear that television had to negotiate audience expectations and desires, a tension that persisted throughout the period under examination in the book. Also in 1956, DFF coverage of the Hungarian Revolt laid bare for the ruling SED a certain set of “deficiencies” in television broadcasting, mostly technological and political, that the Party set out to solve. They did so in ways that gave the
television service a narrowly defined (and technologically determined) political mandate and pulled it into the same kind of ideological war that radio had been fighting in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The television service enthusiastically took up the challenge to build socialism and intervened in the Second Berlin Crisis with popular programming that also built a narrative explaining the state’s decision to build the Berlin Wall. As programming reached more viewers, it invited more scrutiny. Discussion of the state of television reached a high point in December 1962, when a showpiece program set off a firestorm of criticism that reverberated through the television service, SED meetings, and the press for months afterward. At the center of this maelstrom was a controversial television opera. *Fetzer’s Flight* was “experimental” (and modernist) in nature, but the crux of the debate really had to do with the emerging notion of the “right” of the viewer to be entertained. The *Fetzer* aesthetic was confusing and non-naturalistic, and the depiction of an “anti-hero” ran counter both to authorities’ desire to see uplifting stories of communist growth and to audience taste. If the battle to discipline artists to accept and develop an effective socialist realist aesthetic that appealed to both state authorities and audiences was under way, in the early 1960s television won this battle, becoming the preeminent medium of socialist realism in the GDR. This victory was short-lived, however. Caught between the ambiguous political mandate to draw viewers, build socialism, and provide uplifting stories of socialism across the “friendly fraternal states” of the Soviet bloc on the one hand, and the ever-increasing pressure of the television schedule on the other, the television service ultimately undermined the nation-building project it had pursued so enthusiastically. Increasingly, the DFF relied on cheap, unobjectionable material. The socialist spectaculars that had played such an important role in building both the television audience and the sense of a particular, East German, culture gave way.

This story is comprised of a number of important threads. In the first chapter, I explore the development of the infrastructure of broadcasting between the 1940s and 1958. Debates and conflicts over transmission towers, receivers, and especially the airwaves of the first decade had little to do with providing a full and entertaining program day. Instead, they represented the SED’s instrumental view of the medium, which defined the development of television transmission (not programming) as the goal of state policy. The “zero-sum” logic of the Cold War spurred this on, defining the airwaves as “territory” to be conquered and occupied in the ideological contest between two opposing worldviews.

The second chapter examines the creation and expansion of the DFF
(Deutscher Fernsehfunk, or German Television) between 1952 and 1958. This was the institution responsible for creating (and transmitting) television programming. East Germans’ early expectations of television, which had been defined by their experiences with older media, quickly gave way to new expectations about the “live” experience television offered. As television producers grew more confident with the new medium, they began to make a case that television could contribute to building socialism through political agitation. During these early years, audiences embraced television for its cultural programming, light entertainment, and representation of the “live.”

In the third chapter, I explore the role of politics and especially the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) in shaping the early development of television between 1950 and 1958. In the early 1950s, state authorities defined television as a medium of transmission. They understood any political missteps as the fault of either undeveloped infrastructure or politically unreliable staff. In response to the June Uprising of 1953, the SED took steps to ensure the political reliability of the service, installing “cadres” specialist Heinz Adameck as director of the DFF. Adameck professionalized the service, making sure that it could fulfill the instrumental task set out for it. But exploiting the “live”—the most anticipated novelty of television—remained difficult, and (non-)coverage of the Hungarian uprising drew the SED’s attention and ire. The government thereafter redoubled its efforts to develop the infrastructure and political reliability of television transmission, while the DFF developed more topical, youth-oriented, entertainment and educational programming that could contribute to building socialism.

The final three chapters trace the emergence of television as an important political and cultural force in the GDR. Chapter 4 examines the cultural influence of television programming. In it, I dissect the interplay between topical, political programming, such as the nightly news Current Camera (Aktuelle Kamera), and entertainment genres, especially the crime thriller, exemplified by episodes of Blue Light (Blaulicht). Both drew from the context of the Second Berlin Crisis, and they did so in a way that naturalized geopolitical conflict and, ultimately, the construction of the Berlin Wall.

In the fifth chapter, I explore the repercussions of the heightened tensions surrounding the construction of the Berlin Wall for television programming and infrastructure. Events of this period, such as the Ochsenkopf campaign (targeting reception of West German programming among East Germans in September 1961) and the censure of the DFF’s Fetzer’s Flight in December 1962, have frequently been mobilized as examples of the repressive nature of the East German state. But both of those stories are much more complex and
reveal, instead, a government that eschewed outright measures of outright coercion in favor of organizing consent. They also illuminate an emerging consensus about the “right” of the viewer to be entertained.

Finally, I place the uproar over *Fetzer* in the wider context of debates raging over cultural policy in the early 1960s. During this period television producers faced the twin challenges of finding enough programming—original or acquired from other sources—to fill the television schedule, just as the boundaries of televisual narratives became clear. The DFF increasingly relied on historical melodramas depicting stories of socialist conversion, as well as topical shows and entertainment spectacles that explored and modeled viewers’ everyday lives, to appease audiences and state authorities alike.

The history of television in the GDR cannot be reduced to the caricature of a deeply unpopular medium and unrelenting repression perpetrated on a largely disinterested public, just as GDR history cannot be reduced to persistent crisis and opposition. Instead, we can find the GDR in the myriad ways the state and its citizens came to terms with one another. In particular, the state leadership’s strategy for socialist success in the 1950s and into the 1960s was constructive, not destructive: their goal was not to repress liberalism but rather to create a society of convinced socialists with well-developed socialist personalities. The story of television is key to understanding the ways in which this enterprise succeeded and failed.