

GERMANY: German Democratic Republic: Publishers

The officially sanctioned role of literature in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was a didactic one, the goal of which was to support the development of a “socialist” society. The official media in the GDR fell under the auspices of the agitation and propaganda section of the Central Committee of the ruling Socialist Unity Party of Germany (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, or SED). Because the SED’s voice was so evident in the official media, literature gained an unofficial role as an alternative public sphere. While many in the GDR looked to literature to represent some sort of truth, the SED devised a series of control mechanisms that, despite various guarantees of freedom in the GDR’s constitutions of 1949, 1968, and 1974, restricted the types of material that actually reached audiences. In order to fulfil its didactic role, literature was “planned”, with all stages of creation and production being placed under some type of state control. Decisions about which texts to publish were coordinated according to yearly thematic plans (*Themenschwerpunkte*) that regulated not only the presentation of new texts and authors, but also the publication of translations and of works by writers that were considered part of the literary heritage.

There was a total of 78 publishing houses in the GDR, 75 per cent of which were state controlled or state related. Of the main publishing houses, Dietz belonged to the SED, while Union, Verlag der Nation, Buchverlag der Morgan, and Verlag Tribüne belonged to the smaller, “block” parties that were closely associated with the SED. Similarly, the Verlag Neues

Leben belonged to the state-approved organization Free German Youth (Freie Deutsche Jugend, or FDJ) and Verlag Volk und Welt belonged to the Society for German–Soviet Friendship. Aufbau, the largest publisher of *belles-lettres*, came under the auspices of the official Cultural Federation (Kulturbund der DDR). State involvement extended to the directorship of the publishing houses: the Ministry of Culture appointed the directors, who were also party members and were made solely responsible for the books they published. This type of state involvement made the control and “unofficial” censorship of texts possible.

In a typical year, Aufbau Verlag published an average of 450 titles. Between 1949 and 1990, all of the GDR publishing houses together published 215,000 titles, or 4 billion books. The average print run was 25,000, although distinctions were made according to the type of book: as in the West, a volume of verse would have a considerably smaller run than a volume of prose.

The distribution of published material fell mainly to a central warehouse in Leipzig, which was responsible for the sale of 85 per cent of all published works. All facets of the book trade were tightly regulated. The SED owned almost all printing presses and regulated the distribution of paper; a paper shortage often served as an unofficial censoring mechanism. Certain government regulations ensured that GDR publishers had sole authority over texts by GDR writers. The initiation of a *Vorlagepflicht* (submission requirement) stipulated that writers

had to present their texts to a GDR publisher first, before offering it to a foreign publishing house. The Büro für Urheberrechte (Copyright Office) would then be notified whether an authorization to print had been granted before a writer received permission to publish outside the confines of the GDR. Beginning in 1973, it was a criminal offence, punishable by a fine of up to 10,000 marks, for a writer to accept money from foreign publishers if the funds were not transferred through the Copyright Office, which kept a percentage of the money.

The overriding factor contributing to the success of the censorship system in the GDR was the centralized control of society. The yearly thematic plans guided the publishing process, including the publication of writings from the past and from foreign countries. Of major significance was the extent to which a text conformed to the SED's vision of literary heritage. For contemporary GDR writers, the censorship process was decidedly more complex. Under the official rubric of *Kulturpolitik* (cultural policy), the SED established a type of normative aesthetics for literary and artistic production. This type of structure went beyond censorship in the narrow sense, to encompass systematic control whereby – as David Bathrick has put it – “restrictive aesthetic codes, communicated normatively through the discourses of socialist realism and ‘official ‘cultural policy’, functioned to legislate value and social identity as a total discursive system” (Bathrick 1995:16). In order to exercise control over literary production, cultural functionaries established a strict licensing and permissions procedure (*Druckgenehmigungsverfahren*), which all writers had to follow in order to ensure publication of their works. Through this licensing procedure cultural politicians created a system that allowed them to steer the direction that literary production would take and guaranteed that the “socialist” point of view would be represented. Indeed, these procedures made it possible for the state to coordinate, control, and license all aspects of literary production. The production of literature became part of the planned economy, whereby the state was able to guide the thoughts of its readers/citizens (Wichner and Wiesner 1993: 15). In addition to promoting an immature reading public, guided “public” reviews of texts or programmed reception (Wichner and Wiesner 1991: 9) instructed readers on the appropriate interpretation of a given text.

In order to reach any type of “public”, texts and writers had to negotiate various levels of control. The hierarchical structure of pervasive control mechanisms extended from the Central Committee of the SED through the Ministry of Culture and down to the individual publishing houses. The Ministry of Culture supervised in turn the Administrative Authority for Publishing Houses and the Book Trade (the Hauptverwaltung Verlage und Buchhandel, established in 1963), the regulatory board responsible for extending the authorization to print or *Druckgenehmigung*. Without this authorization, no printer

could print a text. Before a publishing house submitted a text to the Administrative Authority for licensing, a series of internal censoring steps occurred that involved an editorial committee of the publishing house, a house reader (*Lektor*), and various reviewers (*Gutachter*). At least one internal and one external reviewer were asked to offer an opinion on the appropriateness of the text for the public, and to make a recommendation for or against publication. The Administrative Authority evaluated all of these materials and either awarded the *Druckgenehmigung* or refused it. If a negative decision was made, the publishing house often consulted the author over corrections to any problematic passages in the text, which could then be resubmitted. Because the Administrative Authority was part of the Ministry of Culture, it was under direct government control. While it usually acted as the last instance of power, some critical texts were referred to the Central Committee of the SED, which could grant approval.

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Further Reading

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