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Capturing the East German Mind

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Capturing the East German Mind is about politics, the press and the fashioning of the public mind in East Germany since the Nazi capitulation in May 1945. Many scholars argue that the influence of the mass media has been immense--on political institutions and on the way people think and act politically. But as this study demonstrates, the press is not some self-defined profession and quasi-autonomous institution. The press is at once the subject and object of politics. It is both the primary agent of the political elites in their endeavors to create a new political order and the target of political transformation. The press is important because its job is to create politics and the public to practice these politics.

Political theorists from Max Weber to Antonio Gramsci claim that to gain and hold power, to govern and to lead, a political force must either inculcate belief and support within a significant sector of the population, buy off the opposition or hold the entire population at gun point. This book argues that each of the four east German political systems in place in East Germany since 1945 was in great measure a project of belief, that the primary agenda of politics in each order was to inculcate and sustain belief in the new politics. Each project required a new press and a new vision of a communicative order. To argue that those in power believed in belief, that they sought to convince the populace--all the people--of the legitimacy of their project--this is a

surprising finding. To demonstrate how political elites not once, but four times, actively set about to construct a public from a "problem" Volk--this is a new awareness, a distinctive approach to studying Germany, politics and political cultures.

It is rather common to think of the public and the public will as a natural entity. I challenge the notion of a "natural public," demonstrating how publics are consciously created by the political elite. In the case of eastern Germany, the project was to mould a problem Volk into a politically correct public--an antifascist public, a Communist public, a community of citizens, a "West-oriented" public. The project of politics in eastern Germany from 1945 to 1991 (and beyond) was to capture the East German mind, to create a new citizenry.

In this work I document and analyze the efforts to construct four fundamentally different, self-proclaimed democratic political-communicative orders: the Soviet Occupation antifascist project (1945-1949), the Communist Party's people's democracy (1949-1989), the Round Table antipolitics order (November 1989-April 1990) and the transition to liberal, representative democracy (April 1990-December 31, 1991). Each of these four political projects offered a fundamentally different vision of the ideal society, and a different type and mission of political parties. Each of these political orders required new institutions of ideological formation and elaboration, different networks for disseminating belief, new journalistic practices and new practitioners.

Capturing the East German Mind is the first post-Cold War political history of East Germany from its birth in 1945 to its disappearance in 1990 and challenges some traditional understandings of the Soviet Occupation and early Communist era. In conducting field research as a Fulbright Scholar and a Friedrich Ebert Foundation Scholar in the former German Democratic Republic, I gained access to Occupation era and 1950s documents long unavailable to western analysts. These documents provide at times a very different picture of events than we find in the standard treatment of GDR political history. The study presents an examination of the 1989 overthrow of the Communist regime and 1990 German unification as the east Germans experienced it. I witnessed firsthand the collapse of the Communist political order and the entire transformation of East German society from Communism to unification, from euphoria to despondency. I interviewed over 250 working journalists, academicians, editors, dissidents, artists, East and West German Journalist Association leaders, Communist Party leaders, newly "rehabilitated" and newly "condemned" Communists, clergymen, elected officials. I attended hundreds of political rallies, gathered the campaign literature of each post-Communist political party, poured over the newspapers from their first issuance in 1945, and received the often confidential memos of senior west German political leaders and bureaucrats responsible for transforming the east politics and the mass media.

A number of impressionistic books have been published recently about the fall of the Berlin Wall, the difficulty of reunion. To my knowledge, this is the only scholarly English language study of the 1989 revolt and 1990 unification. I was fortunate to have been in the German Democratic Republic on a Fulbright research fellowship during this period. There were only four exchange scholars in the GDR that year, and until the Communist system collapsed, Americans could only do research in the GDR through such official exchanges. There was a brief moment when all the files burst open. I was there. Now, the files have either been destroyed or are under lock and key. Memories are already

shifting, influenced by the new political realities.