Within walls: private life in the German Democratic Republic


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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.