

Weiß, Peter Ulrich: *Kulturarbeit als diplomatischer Zankapfel. Die kulturellen Auslandsbeziehungen im Dreiecksverhältnis der beiden deutschen Staaten und Rumäniens von 1950 bis 1972*. München: Oldenbourg Verlag 2010. ISBN: 978-3-486-58979-5; 424 S.

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The autumn of 1969 was a tense period in German-German-Romanian relations. Staff at the East German embassy in Bucharest prepared for festivities related to the twentieth anniversary of the GDR, while representatives from Bonn put the finishing touches on a major book exhibition that was to be officially opened by Günter Grass. When it became known that Brown Books were stolen from the East German exhibition, embassy staff accused Bonn of having commissioned the theft. On the other side of the German-German divide, Grass refused to open the book fair in reaction to the Romanian censoring of works by German authors who had fled the GDR, a result of objections made by East Berlin.

These events, recorded by Peter Ulrich Weiß in his dissertation „Kulturarbeit als diplomatischer Zankapfel,“ are clear evidence of the dramatic extent to which East Berlin's rivalry with Bonn made itself felt in the realm of foreign cultural policy. Based on meticulous research in the Foreign Department archives in Bucharest and Berlin, Weiß analyzes the development of a triangular relationship between Romania, the GDR and the FRG in the period 1950 and 1972 and reveals – perhaps not surprisingly – the impact that Cold War dynamics had on cultural policies abroad.

As a socialist country with official ties with both German states, Romania proved an exceptional case. The country had been keen to establish diplomatic ties with the Federal Republic since the 1950s, but without result. Its adoption of an independent foreign policy course in the mid-1960s paved the way for official contacts. In 1967, a West German trade mission was established in Romania and cultural relations soon followed. In Weiß' view,

this was a major achievement of Brandt's Ostpolitik that is often clouded by an emphasis on the subsequent adoption of the Ulbricht doctrine by East Berlin (p. 185).

The East German leadership reacted with shock: far-away Romania, despite its rebellious stance still considered to be a sister republic, turned into an open arena of the German-German *Kulturkrieg*. While the two sides were competing over the image of the better Germany, Romania reaped the material and political benefits of this *ménage à trois*, as it gained most from knowledge transfer, trade relations and tourism revenues. Moreover, Romania's opening to the West enabled Nicolae Ceaușescu to enhance his domestic and international reputation and to consolidate his dictatorship.

Weiß traces the ups and downs of this triangular relationship chronologically and shows how they reflected the more general phases of alternating confrontation and relaxation in East-West relations. Following the establishment of official ties between Romania and the Federal Republic, the relationship between the GDR and Romania experienced an „Eiszeit,“ which would last until the détente of the 1970s and, more in particular, the signing of the Basic Treaty in 1972 by the two German states. Meanwhile, Romanian relations to West Germany developed in the opposite direction. By the beginning of the 1970s, it became clear that Ceaușescu's international image as a liberal reformer was far removed from reality. Following a period of „gesteuerte Liberalität,“ the Romanian dictator started a campaign to strengthen cultural and ideological orthodoxy in July 1971. Moreover, the German minority in Romania was increasingly deprived of its cultural rights. As a result, Bonn's cultural activities in Romania stagnated. The policy of „Wandel durch Handel,“ Weiß argues, had failed (p.392).

With this publication, the author has made an important contribution to the scholarship on international relations with and within the Soviet bloc, a topic that has been underexamined so far. Moreover, his emphasis on cultural foreign policy makes for a welcome change in a historiography that is still predominantly focused on communist politics and the use of terror while leaving the social

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and cultural dimensions of communist dictatorships somewhat unaddressed.

With „Kulturarbeit als diplomatischer Zankapfel,“ Weiß offers a very carefully researched and empirically sound presentation that is dense with historical detail and description. At certain times, however, the analysis fails to go beyond the descriptive level and forwards questions related to such issues as the impact of the German foreign cultural policy on Romanians in general, and the German minority in particular, and the changing evaluation of policies within the FRG Foreign Department.

The aim of the West German foreign cultural policy was to present a positive image of the Federal Republic and to create an atmosphere that was beneficial to the advancement of foreign policy interests. Cultural activities reflected the principles of cultural pluralism as an essential part of democracy. Yet, exactly how primary actors within the Foreign Service judged and justified cultural activities and to what extent they were ideologically motivated remains somewhat unclear. One basic example is the aforementioned decision to expose books by authors originally from the GDR. It would be interesting to know to what extent the decision was a conscious one and whether the sequence of events that followed was anticipated in Bonn.

A second case in point is the relationship with the German minority in Romania. The book tells in some detail about the ambiguous relation between the GDR and the Romanian Germans, the popularity of the FRG – primarily due to its affluence, Weiß argues – and the frequency with which German cultural policies were mentioned in Romanian-German newspapers (close to nil). Yet, while the author states that a key component of West German policy was to defend „die kleinen liberalen Inseln“ (p. 243), he leaves unaddressed the possible connections to Romanian-German artists, some of whom would take an increasingly critical stance vis-à-vis the Ceaușescu regime in the first half of the 1970s. What were these liberal islands and how should they be defended, according to Bonn officials? Did their views with regard to *Ostpolitik* in Romania change as Ceaușescu tightened the reigns of control? It is this more

ideological discussion among state actors that could have taken up a more central place in the book.

A more elaborate treatment of these questions would have enhanced the profundity of the analysis, as is convincingly illustrated by Weiß himself in the excellent and, at times, amusing paragraphs on German tourism (pp. 157-173). Here, the author does address the practical and – sometimes – unexpected effects of official policies and shows that an odd situation emerged: East and West German tourists met each other on the Black Sea coast. Much to the anxiety of the SED leadership, Western tourists were given preferential treatment by the Romanians and, more disturbingly, GDR citizens were exposed to „dangerous“ influences from the West. The book shows that these encounters could prompt criticism of the communist system, especially when East German tourists noted with surprise that their West German counterparts were not wealthy capitalists, but workers like themselves.

The historical analysis ends in 1972, the year in which German-German relations entered a phase of relaxation and rivalry was toned down a bit. Cultural relations between Bonn and Bucharest stagnated in the 1970s, Weiß suggests in his preview, because they were inherently linked to ideology and could prove a hindrance to profitable economic relations (p. 391). At the same time, the defense of liberal islands had become more urgent and difficult than ever. Provided the archives allow for more research, it is certainly hoped that this very interesting study will be continued for the subsequent period.

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