

## [Clarke on Richardson-Little, 'The Human Rights Dictatorship: Socialism, Global Solidarity and Revolution in East Germany'](#)

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**Ned Richardson-Little.** *The Human Rights Dictatorship: Socialism, Global Solidarity and Revolution in East Germany.* Human Rights in History Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 284 pp. \$24.00 (e-book), ISBN 978-1-108-56003-0; \$29.99 (paper), ISBN 978-1-108-44078-3; \$99.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-108-42467-7.

**Reviewed by** Samantha Clarke (McMaster University) **Published on** H-Russia (January, 2021)  
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In this brief yet complex monograph, Ned Richardson-Little contributes a novel perspective on human rights discourse in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). This contribution to the Cambridge University Press's Human Rights in History series joins many of the other series authors in questioning the inalienability of human rights as a concept. Specifically, Richardson-Little challenges the notion that the definition of "human rights" is "timeless, universal, natural—rooted in the self-evident equal moral work of all individuals based on their shared humanity" (p. 255). Instead, he posits that the development of a socialist form of human rights in East Germany demonstrates the existence of multiple divergent and conflicting definitions of what constitutes "human rights"—varying based on economic, political, ideological, and social contexts. According to Richardson-Little, "usual" narratives have treated East Germany as "a state thrown onto the trash heap of history" (p. 1). By historicizing the concept of "human rights," Richardson-Little provides an explanation for how a dictatorship like the GDR could incorporate the concept of human rights into its ethos, while also weaponizing it as a way to critique capitalist nations, such as the Federal Republic of Germany and the United States of America.

The book is organized chronologically into six chapters plus introduction and conclusion. These six chapters trace the development and dissent against socialist "human rights" in the East German dictatorship from 1945 to 1990, and beyond, tackling the erasure of the GDR's human rights after the fall of the Berlin Wall in his conclusion. This book is constructed upon a great deal of archival research, predominantly from German archives, including the Bundesarchiv in Berlin and Koblenz; the state archives of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Saxony, and Thuringia; and specialized archives, like the Archiv der sozialen Demokratie in Bonn and the Archiv der DDR-Opposition in Berlin. It also includes interviews from the Hoover Institution Archive in the United States, conducted with dissident Thomas Rudolph after he left the GDR. It incorporates archival documents in both German and English and engages with the broader historiography in both languages as well.

Richardson-Little explains the apparent contradiction or hypocrisy in the communist collectivist dictatorship in the GDR representing itself as a pinnacle of human rights—founding the first human rights organization east of the iron curtain "two years before the founding of Amnesty International."

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The East German leadership positioned itself in opposition to the National Socialist Party and the Third Reich, claiming (in Richardson-Little's assessment, "not entirely without merit") that the Federal Republic of Germany was run by former Nazis (p. 3). The GDR supported anti-oppressive UN covenants and treaties, often before Western nations. In this way, Richardson-Little challenges orthodox human rights historiography's representation of communist dictatorships by restoring the agency of East German citizens. Instead of "passive recipients" of Socialist Unity Party (SED) propaganda eventually saved by Western activists' "liberal democratic individualism," East German citizens were active in the state's human rights project; they "imagined, propagandised and instrumentalised human rights in the name of a multitude of shifting ideals: socialism, antifascism, anti-imperialism, Christianity, peace, the environment, democracy and ultimately—the creation of a unified German state" (p. 5). Here, Richardson-Little incorporates newer trends that represent the GDR not as a "totalitarian" dictatorship but rather as a "participatory" or "welfare" dictatorship, arguments made by Mary Fulbrook and Konrad H. Jarausch, respectively.[1] Instead of a clear contradiction or clear hypocrisy on the part of the GDR leadership, human rights became an integral part of the state socialist project, where capitalist nations were the ones lacking freedom.

Richardson-Little also takes onus with the "linear narrative" presented by his intellectual predecessors in the field of human rights history, contributing instead to a growing literature that pays more attention to plural definitions of human rights and multiple potential paths toward human rights goals (p. 10). He takes a clear constructivist approach to the study of human rights, exploring "competing genealogies of human rights" rather than "the universal struggle for human freedom" (p. 11). The concept of "human rights" is contingent on its context and the role of individuals in creating and challenging its definition and the political actions taken to maintain a particular form of "human rights." Furthermore, he contributes a new understanding of socialist human rights, which focuses on social and economic rights and contrasts them with Western human rights, in which political and civil rights were prioritized.

Richardson-Little traces the development of socialist definitions of human rights in Germany from the Age of Revolutions to the establishment of "basic rights" instead of Immanuel Kant and other German philosophers' concept of "natural and human rights" after the failed 1848 revolutions. He illuminates its development from the Weimar Republic and fights between left- and right-wing parties about the constitutionally enshrined rights of individuals, to the lack of reference to "human rights" in the writing of V. I. Lenin, to Karl Marx's dismissal of the concept, and through the Ulbricht-Ackermann debate over the implementation of socialism in the eastern zone of Germany.

Following his discussion of World War II and the division of Germany, Richardson-Little focuses his attention on how a dictatorship could incorporate the concept of "human rights" without sparking large-scale protests or revolution based on citizens' recognition that they were not being provided their rights. Part of the reason 1968 was another "turning point [that] failed to turn" was the lack of a concrete definition of "human rights" among East German citizens (p. 139). He emphasizes that, in contrast to Czechoslovakia's decision to implement socialism with a human face during the Prague Spring, which ended in Soviet intervention, the GDR's "process of political reform," which provided more power for the SED, was based on the language of human rights without fully sparking mass movements against socialism. This argument incorporates elements of historian Andrew Port's concept of the *Grumlegesellschaft*: by allowing individuals to complain about perceived violations of "human rights," through letter writing and petitioning, East Germany avoided mass protests

that drew the attention or intervention of the Soviet Union.[2]

Overall, this monograph makes incredibly important contributions to the historiography of human rights in socialist countries. It is provocative in its argumentation, but the evidential support for its claims is robust and convincing. It is likely to spark the ire of orthodox historians of human rights. Though written for an expert audience, incorporating excellent engagement with both the histories of human rights and histories of the GDR dictatorship more generally, the text is accessible since Richardson-Little provides clear and concise introductions to the important actors he discusses. It would make a great addition to a graduate-level syllabus, as it provides both a strong argument and a clear, concise overview of the GDR, from founding to dissolution.

One of the hallmarks of a great book is that it exposes an area that would benefit from focused future research, laying the foundations for the creation of a complex structure of work on the subject. This book does exactly that. Though Richardson-Little tackles a large and incredibly complex topic in only 250 pages, he does so thoroughly and with a great balance between overarching concepts and definitions, and specific and vivid examples from his source base.

*The Human Rights Dictatorship* is likely to spark much future research in the field, raising many questions about how specific groups challenged and enforced specific types of human rights: environmental protection, women's rights, and racial equality seem like especially fruitful areas for future research which can build on the foundation created in this text. How did women's experiences in the GDR differ? How did the GDR's criticism of American race relations transfer into practice in its own territory? As well, how did East German incorporations of "human rights" differ from others in the Soviet orbit? Richardson-Little provides hints in his coverage of the Prague Spring, but his high-level overview of such a broad time period leaves little time to consider experiences of subgroups within the GDR or broader Warsaw Pact conversations about human rights in detail. This is not necessarily a criticism of Richardson-Little's monograph, as these are not his research questions, but rather a suggestion that more work in this field would be beneficial to our understanding of the GDR. It is likely we will see many future works reexamining more specific topics using Richardson-Little's framework for understanding East German human rights.

#### Notes

[1]. Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State: East Germany from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005); and Konrad H. Jarausch, "Care and Coercion: The GDR as Welfare Dictatorship," in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad H. Jarausch (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 47-70.

[2]. Andrew Port, *Conflict and Stability in the German Democratic Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 115.

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