

## Culture from the Slums: Punk Rock in East and West Germany

**By Jeff Hayton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp. xvii + 364. Hardcover £81.00. ISBN: 978-0198866183.**

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Jeff Hayton narrates the story of German punk from the earliest acts around 1977, such as the bands Male from Düsseldorf or PVC from Berlin, up to former Federal Chancellor, Christian-conservative Angela Merkel singing Die Toten Hosen's song "An Tagen wie diesen" to celebrate her re-election in 2013 and by doing so engaging in German punk's very last swansong. While the latter is an amusing anecdote mentioned in the conclusion, Hayton's focus is on the punk scenes in East and West in the late 1970s, when U.S. and British punk first was introduced to German youth, mostly through the media, as well as punk's developments during the 1980s, up until the Berlin Wall came down. Despite the addition of "Rock" to his book's title, Hayton describes punk not only as a musical genre, but as a scene and as a "field of production" (7) that comes with certain ideals and practices. He argues for "punk [as] a useful lens to explore divided Germany" (3), since it had the means "to challenge existing orthodoxies and create new certainties, a revolt which upended the status quo" (7).

The book features eight dense chapters, some of which have been published as scholarly papers before, each one focusing on a different paradigm, such as "Wall Jumping and Repression" or "Commercialization and Crisis." While some chapters deal with the scenes on both sides of the Iron Curtain simultaneously, explaining punk's origins and its productiveness in East and West, other chapters – as the above-mentioned titles suggest – focus on just one. Being embedded in two completely different political and societal contexts meant facing different sets of conflict situations. It should go without saying that punk life in the GDR differed immensely from the one in the FRG. Still, it is worth delving into those differences by comparison, as Hayton does. Punks in the West could go to and play shows, consume, record, and distribute music, publish fanzines, and in doing so leave traces for peers and fans to collect and for historians to research. Hayton tells this story in a diverting manner, introducing certain established protagonists and key figures, spaces, and topics, trusting the anecdotes he has collected from his many sources. "Unlike in the West, alternative media did not play a prominent role in the Eastern subculture because publishing was strictly controlled by the state" (148). The same goes for records, concerts, and even looks. The body of source material is accordingly thin, hence the perspective Hayton had to take on punk in the GDR is quite different from the one on the FRG. Investigating the punks in the East, he had to rely on official documents by the Stasi mostly, making sense from memoirs and rare footage, some of which he shares in his book, which is an asset.

Punk as a transnational phenomenon has not only been translated into these unique German historical contexts, but also into the German language, culminating in its very own playful and commercialized offspring: the Neue Deutsche Welle. Hayton writes a whole chapter about "Language and Identity" and examines some of the specifics of German pop culture. An idea that Hayton leaves out is how Frank Apunkt Schneider has described the coming of British and American pop music to Germany as the "actual zero hour" ("die wirkliche Stunde Null"), for it was freeing for German youth to dive into a language (and a culture) that was not the language of their perpetrator parents following World War II and the Shoah (see Schneider, *Deutschpop halt's Maul* [2014]). The idea of pop

music not being “incredibly strange” (33) when sung in German, as with Schlager, only vanished with somewhat cool acts like Ton Steine Scherben and Udo Lindenberg around 1970. For German punk, Hayton stresses: “The native tongue . . . gave punks a new syntax to voice the present with a critical eye, a grammar that was unvarnished and truthful, one that restored the ability of artists to grapple with contemporary Germany in a more meaningful manner” (102). Taking this statement seriously could have meant printing the well-chosen epigraphs which introduce each subchapter, mostly stemming from German lyrics, actually in German instead of choosing to translate them. It is in the nature of things that meaning gets lost or shifts through translation. Rhythm, flow, play on words get lost as well, e.g., when Hayton translates Slime’s “Bullenschweine” to “pigs” only, omitting the fact that “Bullenschweine” is a very specific insult for police forces. Having the actual German words in there could have transported a bit of the productive rupture that listening to German punk might mean to those with other mother tongues.

Jeff Hayton has made an immense effort to examine varied contemporary documents, ranging from rare samizdat, self-produced fanzines, to lyrics, cassette- and record-sleeves, video footage, interviews, memoirs, newspapers and magazines, exhibition catalogues, to academic papers and official documents. To do so, he has visited national archives as well as the who-is-who of German archives related to grassroots movements and sub- and pop culture, such as the Archiv für alternatives Schrifttum in Duisburg and the Archiv der Jugendkulturen in Berlin. His findings are interwoven into an entertaining text, which makes this book a very readable introduction to the specifics of German punk informed by the most recent German history. First and foremost, however, it is of interest to readers who are not fluent in German. There is a lot to explore, for sure: “While Germans did not invent punk, they did make it their own” (30).

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