WERKSTATT*GESCHICHTE* 2025/1 Heft 91
https://doi.org/10.14361/zwg-2025-910116

## Ulrike Winkler, Menschen mit Behinderungen in der DDR

*Ulrike Winkler, Mit dem Rollstuhl in die Tatra-Bahn. Menschen mit Behinderungen in der DDR: Lebensbedingungen und materielle Barrieren, Halle (Mitteldeutscher Verlag) 2023, 240 S., 32 €*

Ulrike Winkler's monograph is an important text. It traces how the barriers to accessibility faced by disabled people in housing and public spaces were created and negotiated in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Issues of transport and mobility are addressed less, despite the title ›Going by wheelchair onto the Tatra tram‹. The book extends research on disability in state socialism by considering the lives of adults with disabilities who sought to live, work and rest like other citizens in the 1970s and 1980s, thus going beyond typical scholarly interest in the experiences of children or war veterans with disabilities in the mid-twentieth century. The research formed part of a larger project on persons with disabilities in the GDR that also studied media representations of disability and families with disabled children.

Winkler studies inaccessibility in two contrasting East German urban environments: the historical city of Halle and its modern satellite town of Halle-Neustadt. Halle was an old bourgeois city in decline whilst Halle-Neustadt was built during the late 1960s as a ›model of socialist life and living conditions‹ and had an unusually young population. These locations were selected as typical of the two forms of built environment in many GDR cities: prefabricated panel buildings (so-called *Plattenbau*) or traditional brick-timber construction (*Altbau*).

The book is organised into seven chapters. A compact introduction presents Disability History as the book's major approach and outlines the source material. Background chapters explain official understandings of disability in the GDR and the housing and construction policies that shaped approaches to accessibility. The bulk of the empirical material comes in two long chapters that consider barriers faced by disabled people (largely wheelchair users) in the built environment and transport, first in Halle and then in Halle-Neustadt. A shorter chapter considers how a self-help group of people with multiple sclerosis in Halle – which had to be badged as a ›patient support group‹ (*Betreuungsgruppe*) due to controls on independent organisations – became a national contact point for information, advice and efforts to improve accessibility. The conclusion offers a recap and makes brief but valuable points, for example that persons with disabilities had greater possibilities to achieve change than is often recognised in GDR historiography.

The careful archival research is the major strength of this study. Winkler clearly spent extensive time in archives of public authorities and disability associations at city, regional and national level. Meticulous footnotes indicate an impressive array of sources, including official correspondence between different professionals, city planning documents, architectural guidelines and letters to authorities from persons with disabilities. The documents are supplemented by interviews with architects, city planners and persons with

disabilities, although the precise number is hard to discern in the short methodological overview. Content from documentary films about disability shown on GDR television and a small number of public and private photographs enrich the document analysis by relaying personal experiences of negotiating social and physical barriers. The majority of perspectives nonetheless come from rehabilitation specialists, city officials, doctors and architects. The life stories of persons with disabilities receive less attention, meaning that the book reads more as a history of city planning and architectural barriers than the everyday life of persons with disabilities in the GDR.

The book provides valuable data on different dimensions of disability in the GDR, including the agency of individual persons with disabilities, local activism, self-help groups, the 1981 International Year of Disabled Persons and the role of television documentary films in exposing disabling barriers. At the same time, the text is very cautious in interpreting disabling barriers in the GDR. Winkler explains in the introduction that Disability History regards the built environment as an expression of a wider cultural-political narrative that spatially excludes people deemed to be ›not normal‹. Yet, the book presents its material in a largely descriptive fashion. The empirical chapters thus include considerable detail about specific ramps, parking spaces, apartments, corridors, garages, lifts and public spaces without identifying shared elements in the cases or offering a dedicated comparison between developments in Halle and Halle-Neustadt. It would be helpful to know the conceptual and methodological reasons for this approach to sources and analysis. The book ends with the broad and somewhat self-evident conclusions that people with physical impairments in Halle and Halle-Neustadt were ›disabled‹ by the built environment and that the attempted solutions varied in line with the two cities' different urban and transport designs. With such rich data, this seems a missed opportunity to analyse the barriers to accessibility and mobility in the GDR more deeply.

The hesitation to interpret empirical material means that negative aspects of disability experiences in the GDR are not always critically questioned. Although the use of quotation marks implies that Winkler does not agree with the GDR's labelling of some children as ›uneducable‹ (*bildungsunfähig*), adults as ›unable to work‹ (*arbeitsunfähig*) and its high rate of institutionalisation, a Disability Studies approach would explicitly thematise these practices as evidence of social control, exclusion and ableism and link them to the book's topic of inaccessibility. Greater use of concepts and literature from Disability History and Disability Studies – both emerging fields in German-language research – could support such interpretations of the data.

On the positive side, the book explains GDR-specific factors that shaped accessibility, including the individual and collective actions of persons with disabilities, housing shortages, government ambitions for generous social welfare provision, and greater professional interest in reducing barriers. Geographical and temporal contextualisation would nevertheless be beneficial, even if reading the study as a microhistory of accessibility in two East German towns. This could include recognition that disabling barriers and ableist understandings of disability were features of all modernist societies, be they capitalist or state socialist, to reduce the risk of presenting disability in state

socialist countries as unique and separate from wider historical trends. The influence of rehabilitation traditions, productivist concepts of disability and the high use of institutional care from early twentieth century Germany is also relevant to understanding the dynamics in the GDR, as explored by Dirk Bunzel in a 2007 article for the *Journal of Historical Sociology*.

Overall, the book is pioneering for documenting experiences of disability in the late GDR. Its data juxtaposes official messages about disability with bureaucratic realities and disabled people's frequent encounters with barriers. It is a valuable resource for colleagues with various research interests: disability in state socialism, everyday life in the GDR and the construction of inaccessible built environments. The primary sources in the book illuminate the interplay of political, societal and professional knowledge, state power and individual agency shaping disabled people's lives in the GDR. The proviso is that it falls to readers to weave the data into broader conclusions and thus generate Disability History in its full sense.

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