

## Urlaub Macht Geschichte. Reisen und Tourismus in der DDR

by Hasso Spode, Berlin, BeBra Verlag, 2022, 208 pp., €22 (cloth), ISBN 9783898092012, €17.99 (e-book), ISBN 9783839301609

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To cite this article: Sina Fabian (2023): Urlaub Macht Geschichte. Reisen und Tourismus in der DDR, Journal of Tourism History, DOI: [10.1080/1755182X.2023.2181495](https://doi.org/10.1080/1755182X.2023.2181495)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1755182X.2023.2181495>



Published online: 19 Feb 2023.



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## BOOK REVIEW

**Urlaub Macht Geschichte. Reisen und Tourismus in der DDR**, by Hasso Spode, Berlin, BeBra Verlag, 2022, 208 pp., €22 (cloth), ISBN 9783898092012, €17.99 (e-book), ISBN 9783839301609

Hasso Spode, director of the tourism archive in Berlin, has so far mainly focused on tourism in Nazi Germany and in the Federal Republic. In his latest book, he turns to East Germany and provides an overview of its tourism history in 16 concise chapters. The book is written with a wider readership in mind and Spode even promises that knowledge about the GDR is not required to understand the book. The book is primarily based on existing literature and on published primary sources from political institutions such as the FDGB and East and West German ministries and focuses on the general development of tourism in East Germany. Spode is critical of the nostalgic memories of holidays in the GDR often found in popular and mass media representations, and he takes aim at these nostalgic myths by pointing out that travelling and tourism were highly politicised and tightly controlled by the state, even before the building of the Wall.

As common in Socialist countries, holidays were organised to a large extent by the Free German Trade Union Federation (FDGB). Spode frequently compares FDGB's offers to holidays in Nazi Germany which were organised by *Kraft durch Freude* (KdF; 'Strength through Joy'). Both offered prestigious cruises, for example. In the GDR they were praised as luxurious holidays for the 'working people' (*Werkstätige*), yet passengers with 'connections' and high-ranking party members composed the majority on board. Despite the meticulous selection of seemingly loyal passengers and surveillance by state security (Stasi), more than two hundred passengers took the opportunity to flee to the West during the cruises.

As with almost all tourism branches, the state lost money by heavily subsidising it. The SED nationalised many of the remaining B&Bs and hotels in popular tourist destinations in order to bring them under state control. Some hoteliers were even imprisoned. In addition, the FDGB also built new prestigious accommodations (*Ferienheime*). The goal was to offer affordable holidays especially for the working class. Men and women who were particularly loyal to the party or who worked harder than their colleagues (*Bestarbeiter*) were rewarded with a holiday. Despite some shortcomings, the FDGB was successful in providing one million holidays by the mid-1950s. However, more white-collar than blue-collar workers went on holiday, despite the former being a minority in the 'workers' and peasants' state'. Bed capacity stagnated in the following decades and the demand for holidays was always larger than the state could satisfy. In addition to the FDGB, Publicly Owned Enterprises (VEB) also provided holidays for their employees on a large scale. Together, they accounted for a third of all holidays in the 1980s.

Camping was the most popular form of individual tourism. Campgrounds were owned by the state, however, and campers had to register half a year in advance for a campsite as demand was much greater than supply. Holidaymakers who longed for some distance from the state and from collective holidays often chose to camp. Following Spode, more than half of all holidaymakers organised their vacation at the Baltic Sea in the late 1980s independently. Aside from camping, privately owned hotels and B&Bs, vacation homes or stays at private homes made holidays away from the state possible. Spode also includes a short chapter on naturism which became a wide-spread phenomenon in the GDR. After being against it at

first, the regime quickly branded the relaxed attitude towards sexuality as a socialist achievement, which stood in contrast to the prudish 'West', especially the Federal Republic and the United States.

While West Germans took pride in their high travel numbers, Spode points out that the percentage of the population who went on at least one holiday per year was higher in the GDR than in the FRG. There were two major differences, however: First, East German holidaymakers stayed predominantly in the GDR, while the majority of West Germans enjoyed foreign holidays from the late 1960s. Second, the Baltic Sea, the GDR's most popular tourist destination belonged to the border area which resulted in a massive presence of security forces and strict rules for bathing in the sea. Swimming was only allowed during daylight and it was forbidden to swim further than 150 meters from the beach. GDR citizens could also go on foreign vacations but their choice of foreign holidays was limited to socialist countries which were propagated with the slogan 'friendship among nations' (*Völkerfreundschaft*). Bulgaria and Romania were popular destinations given their warmer climate and the advantage that families and friends from East and West Germany could meet there under the guise of simply holidaying. Cities like Budapest were also popular because it was easier to get Western consumer goods there than at home. However, GDR citizens were subject to intense surveillance by the Stasi and unofficial collaborators (IM) when travelling abroad.

Spode also includes a chapter on restaurants and hotels in the GDR. Their operations were affected by shortages of food and beverages to a large extent. In line with the overall tourism infrastructure, there was once again not enough capacity to accommodate GDR holidaymakers. Restaurants as well as hotels preferred foreign customers due to their greater purchase power. The FDGB rewarded stays in one of the few luxury hotels to especially loyal or hard-working citizens. They also attracted famous foreign visitors, such as Willy Brandt, Helmut Schmidt, and Fidel Castro. It goes without saying that these hotels were also centres of intense surveillance by the Stasi. Due to the shortages and surveillance, East Germany was never a popular destination for longer stays by foreign visitors. The GDR, therefore, concentrated on short trips with a focus on tourists interested in the cultural and architectural attractions of places like Weimar, Berlin, and Potsdam.

Spode points out that the state was successful in offering cheap holidays for the majority of the population. Some were even fortunate and received the privilege of a luxury cruise or a stay in a five-star hotel. The overall costs, however, proved to be too much. Despite heavily subsidising the tourism industry, shortages and shortcomings were ubiquitous. Many East Germans complained about not getting a holiday at all, about run-down accommodations or about not enough or bad food. Thus, the state could not fulfil its promise to take care of people's need to recover from their daily work.

Spode provides an excellent overview over almost every aspect of tourism in the GDR on less than 200 pages. The book benefits from the author's vast knowledge on the history of tourism. He frequently compares travelling in the GDR to tourism in Nazi Germany and in the Federal Republic by pointing out differences and similarities. He situates the history of tourism in East Germany in its wider political context which helps explain the regime's priorities regarding tourism. The book also shows what it meant to holiday in a dictatorship: no-go areas and constant surveillance. Thereby, Spode sets the record straight and successfully counters nostalgic narratives about holidays in the GDR. This is a big plus, given that the book aims at a wider (German reading) audience. The book can, however, also be used for courses on the history of the GDR and on socialist tourism.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/1755182X.2023.2181495>

