

Andrea Rottmann. *Queer Lives Across the Wall: Desire and Danger in Divided Berlin, 1945–1970.*

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2023. xiv, 247 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Photographs. Maps. \$36.95, paper.

Samuel Clowes Huneke

George Mason University
Email: shuneke@gmu.edu

doi: 10.1017/slr.2024.450

On Tuesday, October 25, 1955, a group of queer Germans gathered at Boheme bar in the Kreuzberg neighborhood of West Berlin to celebrate its third anniversary. Decked out in all manner of exuberant costume, Andrea Rottmann relays in *Queer Lives Across the Wall*, “guests enjoy[ed] drinks and conversation, swaying to the music of the jukebox, crowding the dance floor” (65). It is hardly the kind of scene you would expect to find in 1950s Berlin. After all, the notorious paragraph (§) 175 of the penal code, which prohibited sex between men, was still enforced on both sides of the Cold War border, and conservative family politics remained the order of the day in both East and West Germany.

But, as Rottmann highlights in her new study of divided Berlin, the 1950s and 60s were, in fact, decades when lesbian, gay, and trans Berliners lived vivaciously, even as they continued to face state-sanctioned persecution. Relying on an array of state and activist archives as well as oral histories, Rottmann’s work unearths rambunctious queer subcultures in Germany’s once and future capital. Her work thus asks us to reconsider the decades between the end of World War II and the decriminalization of male homosexuality in East and West Germany in 1968 and 1969, respectively.

The book moves through a series of waystations of Berlin’s queer subculture, building on other recent histories of queer life in Berlin by Jennifer Evans and Robert Beachy. The four chapters focus on queer homes, bars, public spaces, and prisons, respectively. These are microhistories that, like most histories of gender and sexuality, remain “committed to privileging queer voices over those of the state” (15). At the foundation of Rottmann’s analysis of queer life in these early postwar decades is her argument that “gender was a crucial aspect of queer lives in Germany” (3). With this formulation, Rottmann signals that hers will not simply be a book about queer men—as histories of sexuality all too often are—but rather one that also focuses extensively on queer women as well as on trans and gender-nonconforming people.

The book’s stories, drawn from its wide archive, are marvelous and do, indeed, reveal both the extent of queer life in 1950s–60s Berlin and that gender played an important role in how queer Berliners fashioned their senses of self. Close attention to visual sources—photographs in particular—brings this submerged queer scene to life for the reader. The best chapter, in my view, is the fourth and final one on queer experiences in prisons. Expanding on the work of Regina Kunzel, in particular, it explicates a number of specific queer experiences in Berlin’s prisons in order to argue that “women’s prisons appear as spaces in which queer relationships were lived, where queer subjectivities became visible and were formed” (135).

This is a book full of rich, interesting, and new information about queer life. But, at times, it stumbles analytically, drawing conclusions unsupported by the presented evidence. In Ch. 2, for instance, Rottmann argues that “those whose gender was non-normative, the feminine men and transvestites, were in danger, whereas normatively masculine men had less to fear” (88). Her key evidence for this claim consists of “two oral history interviews [which] demonstrate this range of experiences” (88). Contrasting the “normative masculinity” of one Fritz Schmebling with “feminine Orest Kapp,” Rottmann suggests that Schmebling enjoyed a far

better “bar-going experience”—and that he “had less to fear” (88). Yet, Rottmann does not inform her reader that Schmebling had been convicted under §175 in 1957, a conviction that made it difficult for him to find work, even years after the law was reformed. Far from illustrating how normatively masculine men had it easier, Schmebling’s experiences undermine Rottmann’s argument.

Similarly, Rottmann argues in Chapter 3 that “queer East Berliners in particular came to associate the [Berlin] Wall with death” (110). While I have no doubt that some did, the book presents no compelling evidence for such a sweeping, generalized claim. In fact, the sources used to discuss the Wall’s meaning are East German propaganda and a short story published in the Swiss homophile magazine *Der Kreis* in 1963 along with the debate it spurred in letters to the magazine’s editor. But neither the propaganda nor the story and letters—of which Rottmann admits, “East German voices were not represented in the discussion” (129)—offer insight into the thinking of queer East Germans themselves or what associations they might have had with the Wall.

Thankfully, these interpretive missteps only occasionally distract from what is otherwise an interesting new history of queer Berlin, one that widens historians’ gaze beyond sexuality and the experiences of gay men. In so doing, it points to future research on lesbian, trans, and gay everyday life in postwar Europe.

Bojan Aleksov. *Jewish Refugees in the Balkans, 1933–1945.*

Leiden: Brill Schöningh, 2023. xlii. 389 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. €107.47, hard bound.

Maria Todorova

Emerita, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Email: mtodorov@illinois.edu

doi: 10.1017/slr.2024.451

At one point in his book, Bojan Aleksov evokes W. G. Sebald and his fusion of historiography and poetry, “combining the reality of observation and what is always the functionality of representation” (328). *Jewish Refugees in the Balkans* is an exemplary work of historiography suffused with the poetry of empathy. This welcome book makes at least three critical contributions.

First, it intervenes in the rich Holocaust literature by identifying a serious lacuna whereby an important aspect of the Jewish past is absent, reproducing Balkan marginality: “Cynical as it may sound, the existing research seems to suggest that if you escaped through Paris, your experience is more valuable than if you escaped through Tirana” (xxi-xxii). Aleksov not simply fills in this historiographical void; he writes about middle-class people escaping the Reich who had been rejected in their immigration bids to western Europe and the Americas and fled to the poverty stricken Balkans where many “were saved either by mostly illiterate peasants or by Communist-led Partisan resisters” (xxiv). The numbers of the non-organized Jewish migration to the Balkans are difficult to ascertain, but only Yugoslavia became a transit or exile country of over 55,000 Jews between 1933 and 1941. This figure seems small but when compared to the 24,000 in neutral Switzerland, Europe’s richest country, it becomes considerable. This book is, in fact, about Jewish refugees in Yugoslavia, and the few hundreds in Albania. The author is well informed about Jewish victimhood and survival in the Balkans, but excising Greece (with minor exceptions), Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania (the latter two the main gateways to Palestine) renders the title problematic. This is not a criticism. A work on a German village is sold as European history, research on England as global, so it is understandable to wrap this valuable study in a broader Balkan receptacle.